

BOOK REVIEW
OF
LHASA, THE OPEN CITY
BY
HAN SUYIN

A COMPILATION OF A SERIES OF PROGRAMS
ON
RADIO FREE ASIA
TIBETAN SERVICE
BY
WARREN W. SMITH



LHASA, THE OPEN CITY

Han Suyin

Lhasa, The Open City: a Journey to Tibet was published in 1977.¹ It is an account of a visit by the author to Lhasa in October-November 1975. The dust jacket of her book says that her visit to Tibet was the first by a visitor from abroad since 1962 when Stuart and Roma Gelder were there. It goes on to declare the objectivity of Han's account: "This book will clarify many issues about Tibet which have remained obscure, and also show how the Tibetan people are now actively participating, at all levels, in the running of their own autonomous region. Han Suyin's is a book for those wishing to discover what Tibet is really like today."

Han Suyin was born in Henan, China in 1917 of a Chinese father and a Belgian-Flemish mother. She was educated in China, Belgium, and England. She wrote mainly in English about Asian topics, especially the Communist revolution in China. Han Suyin wrote 10 novels, the most famous of which was *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, nine autobiographical works, and seven historical works, the most well-known of which were biographies of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Her works have been described as not only leftist but as pro-Chinese Communist and, in the case of her book about Tibet, as pro-Imperial Chinese. In the introduction to *Lhasa, the Open City* she acknowledges a debt to her predecessors, Stuart and Roma Gelder, and thanks the Chinese Government, who she says looked after her so well and made available so much material "without in any way trying to convince me or to change my own views."

Han Suyin proclaims a special interest in Tibet because her father's family originated in Sichuan. She writes that to the Sichuanese, Tibet was no strange land. Her family had engaged in the tea trade with Tibet and she herself was familiar with Tibetans who came to Chengdu for that purpose. She says that she was in Sichuan in 1941 when a Tibetan delegation came to Chungking "to seek the approval of Chiang Kai-shek for the investiture of a new Dalai Lama. ... Tibet being a part of China, the authority of the Chinese government was required before any high functionary, a Dalai Lama or a Panchen Lama, could assume their functions and be officially installed."

Han has considerably confused her history here, as well as repeating Chinese propaganda about its authority over Tibet. The Dalai Lama was confirmed by traditional Tibetan methods in Lhasa in 1939, with a Chinese representative pretending to officiate. Perhaps Han is confusing this with the mission the Tibetans maintained with the Nationalist government in Chungking. The Tibetans characterized their mission as an embassy, while the Chinese construed the members of the mission as Tibetan representatives in the Chinese Government and as evidence of Chinese authority over Tibet.

Han Suyin's title is meant to proclaim that Tibet, and Lhasa, were no longer closed places to foreigners: "I know that yesterday's secret, hermetic Tibet is gone forever. It never was a fabulous Shangri-la. Not for me. Nor for my father or grandfather. Least of all, for the Tibetans themselves." After trying to go to Tibet in 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution was beginning, she was finally allowed there in 1975. She flew from Chengdu to Lhasa, where she was met at the airport by her Chinese and Tibetan guides and interpreters. Her itinerary and interviews were arranged by a Madame Chen, from Shanghai, who had been a resident in Tibet for 15 years. On the drive to Lhasa from the airport she was informed by Madame Chen: "There are three great lacks in Tibet: fuel, communication and people. And there were three great abundances before: poverty, oppression and the terror of the supernatural. The three later caused the three former."

As they approached Lhasa, the Potala came into sight. Han commented that it looked as if it were floating in air, majestic and awesome in its perfection. "For the next ten days, my eyes would turn to it, pink morning, white-hot noon and amethyst evening, to watch it watching the valley at its feet, until I had explored it, and turned away from its monster beauty with rancor and nausea." Even in Lhasa her impression was that there were too few people: "So few, so few the people! And for this lack of people, in this great space that is Tibet, with 1,220,000 square kilometers, over twice the size of my province of Szechuan, who is to blame? To answer this, a look at history is necessary."

Han Suyin tells the story of Tibetan history from an entirely Chinese perspective. She imagines that the Tang Dynasty princess Wencheng brought not only Buddhism to Tibet but almost all culture and arts. She mistakenly thinks that the Jokhang was built for Wencheng when in fact it was built for Brikuti, the Tibetan king's Nepalese queen, while the Ramoche was built for Wencheng. Han compounds the error by saying that it was built by Chinese craftsmen, but the reality is that the Jokhang was built by Nepalese craftsmen and in the Nepalese style. She attributes the lack of worshipers at the Jokhang to Tibetans' voluntary abandonment of Buddhism in favor of socialism, not to Chinese prohibitions. (There was a steel fence in front of the Jokhang at the time that prevented Tibetan worshipers from entering.) She absurdly claims that the Fifth Dalai Lama was the first to receive that title, in 1650, from the Manchu emperor, the previous four becoming Dalai Lamas retroactively!

The author imagines that the Tibetan population during the Tibetan Empire period was 10-12 million and that the population subsequently declined due to the deleterious effect of Buddhist monasticism. The idea that Tibet had such a large population during the empire is popular among the Chinese, who perhaps need to rationalize how the Tibetans could regularly defeat Tang armies in battle, but has no historical basis. Tibet's theocracy, she says, "resulted in the most terrifying exploitation and impoverishment of the Tibetan people. It kept them in total ignorance, terrorized them into total submission. The result was a swift decline in the population." She says that Buddhism, not recent Chinese repression, was responsible for the decline in the Tibetan population, and that if there had been a genocide in Tibet it was due to Lamaism, not Chinese communism. She imagines that "the imperishable order of things in Tibet produced suffering, misery, and another 100 years of it would have caused extinction."

In her description of Lhasa, Han concentrated on the filth, disease, and beggars. She mistakes the meaning of the name Lhasa as "City of the Sun," rather than "Abode of the gods." Lhasa had been cleaned up and improved, of course, she says, and, despite reports to the contrary, no temples in Lhasa had been destroyed, even if their function had changed. Perhaps Han Suyin hoped in this way to discredit the reports that temples and monasteries in Tibet, not just in Lhasa, had been looted and destroyed. Of course, she did not venture outside Lhasa and said nothing about the destruction of monasteries there. Even within Lhasa and its immediate surroundings, however, she was incorrect. Within Lhasa the Ramoche (Wencheng's temple) was damaged and unrepaired at that time, while Kundeling, Meru, and Shide monasteries were almost totally destroyed and unrepaired. Both Gyuto and Gyume, the Upper and Lower Tantric colleges, were damaged. Drepung and Sera, both just outside Lhasa, were considerably damaged. The huge Ganden monastery, 20 miles to the east of Lhasa, was totally destroyed.

At the Potala, Han noticed skull bowls and thigh bone trumpets, which she said the Tibetan curators were reluctant to explain, while the Chinese kept a discreet silence (most Chinese were hardly reluctant to discuss the atrocities of feudalism). She abhorred the Potala prison and the stories she was told of the prisoners held there and the tortures inflicted at the nearby court of justice. The Han Chinese, she was told, were unable to do anything about these atrocities until the Dalai Lama fled into exile. Only then were the prisoners released from the Potala prison (and China began to fill up its far larger prisons and labor camps with thousands of Tibetans who had resisted Chinese rule). Han Suyin's impression of the Potala, having seen the inside, was that she could no longer be entranced by its exterior beauty because "it was an evil, parasitic monster, despite the glamour and the romance with which it had been invested for so long."

On the obligatory visit to Drepung, Han found that there were then only 300 monks, in contrast to the 700 the Gelders had found in 1962 and the 2800 who were there when Anna Louise Strong visited in 1959. The absence of any child monks in 1975 she imagines to be entirely because of the decline of religious belief and the absence of poverty. Shown a painting of the Fifth Dalai Lama, she comments that he had "the face of a fanatic, but an astute, ruthless one." She also visited Drepung's museum collection of torture implements as well as exhibits about the 1959 rebellion. She comments: "Schoolchildren come here, to look at the cartoons of the Dalai Lama and the nobles, cabinet ministers and monks, who took up arms to defy changes, and lost."

She also visited the Museum of the Tibetan Revolution, where she saw the recently completed *Wrath of the Serfs* display. She comments that women figured prominently in the display, especially noting the serf woman being tortured in one scene, saying that she seems to have been the leader of a serf revolt in the 1920's. Han compares her to Joan of Arc, and imagines that she, too, was burned alive. A serf revolt in 1920 is a creation of Chinese propaganda, having no basis in Tibetan history. Han was, of course, unaware of a real Tibetan Joan of Arc, the Tibetan nun known as Nyemo Ani, who took advantage of the factional rivalry between Red Guard groups to lead a revolt against the Chinese in 1968. Nyemo Ani and several of the leaders of the revolt were finally captured and publicly executed in Lhasa. At about the same time, four Tibetan women leaders of

the women's march in support of Tibetan independence in March 1959 were publicly executed.

Han Suyin conveys a most uniquely fanciful account of the reasons behind the 1959 revolt. According to her, reforms in Tibetan areas outside what was to become the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) led to a serf rebellion against their masters in those regions (not against the Chinese!). Because the liberated serfs realized the exploitative nature of religion, they ceased going on pilgrimages to Lhasa and stopped sending money to monasteries in Central Tibet. Instead of sending their sons to monasteries, Tibetans sent them for schooling in China instead. This aroused the concern of the lamas and feudal lords, who fomented revolt against the Chinese, first in eastern Tibet and then in Lhasa. A delay of reforms for six years within the TAR was announced in 1956 but the serfs and slaves of the TAR, seeing that their counterparts in eastern Tibet had already been liberated, refused to wait and rose up against the serf system. Han echoes the typical Chinese argument that serfs within "Tibet," or the TAR, were clamoring for "democratic reforms" because those outside the TAR, in Chinese provinces, already had them, or, as Han says, "How could one half of the Tibetan population be liberated, and the other half remain serfs and slaves?"

Han Suyin also repeats the false claim that the Chinese allowed the Dalai Lama to escape: "On April 2nd the Dalai Lama reached the frontier with India; the exact spot, and time of arrival, was broadcast by Radio Peking. Throughout his fifteen-day journey, the Chinese knew exactly where he was, and how he proceeded. No attempt was made to pursue him." She quotes Zhou Enlai as saying that the Chinese did not want to endanger the Dalai Lama's life by attempting to "rescue" him from his "abductors." She also says that no attempt was made to detain any Tibetans who attempted to flee to India after the revolt. This contradicts the testimony of many Tibetans, and especially of those who witnessed massacres of Tibetans attempting to flee to Central Tibet from Kham and Amdo between 1956 and 1959.

Han repeats the fundamental Chinese argument that the issue of Tibet was about class exploitation, not national exploitation or oppression of Tibet by China. This fact, she says, plus the wisdom of Mao and the PLA's strict adherence to CCP policy in Tibet, had prevented the issue in Tibet from becoming one between Hans and Tibetans: "Had the PLA come in as an alien ruler, imposing change however beneficial but estranged from the local people, it would have failed. But there was patience, and consummate psychology, in the army's behavior. In every sector I studied, I could see the evidence of active, even enthusiastic cooperation elicited from the Tibetans themselves." Han excuses any "excesses" (by Tibetans) committed during the repression of the revolt and the subsequent Democratic Reform campaign as natural, given what the Tibetan serfs had endured at the hands of their rulers. She rejects any claims that the Chinese themselves committed any excesses. She accepts that Tibetans themselves demanded and achieved the reforms and were in charge throughout and says nothing about Chinese repression of the revolt and the killings, exile, and imprisonment of tens of thousands of Tibetans.

Han Suyin admits that there was some chaos in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution, along with factional clashes due to confusion over the correct political line. She says that remnant reactionaries also attempted to create trouble during that time. However, by "persisting in Chairman Mao's line," the situation quickly returned to normal. She says nothing about any cultural repression or destruction of cultural monuments. Instead she emphasizes that in the past five years (1970-75) the respect for Tibetan autonomy had resumed: "Far from repressing 'national aspirations' therefore, Tibet is quite exemplary in its promotion of active, young and vigorous Tibetan cadres at all levels. The emphasis placed on autonomy as a truly democratic process of ethnic representation, within the larger unity of China, has been very perceptible in the last five years." The only destruction from the "juvenile clashes" that took place during the Cultural Revolution she mentions is one broken window at the Lhasa Primary School.

Han Suyin concludes her panegyric to the wisdom of China's Communist leaders and the success of their Tibet policy by saying that Tibet is "ebullient, and directed towards its own future prosperity. One can only reflect on the wisdom of the leaders of China, who saw clearly that the best unity is not monolithic cultural conformism, but diversity. There is no fear, no cowering servility, but an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, which is very impressive."

Given Han Suyin's willful self-deception, one wonders whether to place this book among her works of fiction. The predominant tone of the book is one of Han Chinese chauvinism tempered by benevolent concern for the poor backward Tibetans. Han Suyin is part Chinese, part Western author and journalist and part leftist apologist for the Chinese Communists. Because of her Chinese heritage she is very defensive about any suggestions of Chinese colonialism in Tibet or Chinese exploitation or oppression of Tibetans. Like almost all Chinese, she believes that Tibet has "always" been part of China; therefore, she rejects the idea of Tibet as a separate country or even as a territory of exclusive inhabitation by Tibetans despite Chinese promises to allow autonomy. She imagines that the Chinese, or the Han as she consistently says, were in Tibet only to help the Tibetans but she sees nothing wrong with their staying there to fill up the practically empty land. She recognizes so little difference between Han Chinese and Tibetans, or Tibetan Chinese, that she imagines that Hans resident in Tibet for a few years become indistinguishable from Tibetans, due to their ruddy complexions acquired from exposure to the sun and adaptation to the altitude.

As a writer in English, Han seemed to consider it her life's work to be to interpret the East for the West. However, as a Chinese and a leftist she was considerably sycophantic in regard to the Chinese Communists. Her biographies of Mao and Zhou are both dismissed by many critics as essentially hagiographic. Han shares the characteristics of the Western political pilgrim to communist countries who sees only the achievements of socialism and obscures the failures because of the belief that socialism will correct these in time. However, Han Suyin is more biased because her Chinese heritage causes her to share an attitude of chauvinism toward Tibetans whom she considers as less civilized than the Chinese and in need of being civilized by the Chinese. She, and most Chinese, regard this attitude as benevolent and fail to comprehend why any Tibetans

would reject Chinese assistance. Tibetan rejection of “liberation” by China is always credited to class opposition to the liberation of serfs, never to Tibetan national opposition to rule by the alien Chinese.

Han Suyin therefore lauds the benevolent concern of her fellow Chinese for the liberated Tibetan serfs. She imagines that she is sympathetic to their former condition and to their attempt to better themselves after liberation, but she never imagines that what she was told could be influenced by fear or intimidation, or by the self-interest of those who had made a living out of relating their stories or by collaborating with the Chinese, or even by distortion by her Chinese and Tibetan interpreters. She has absolutely no interest in the fate of any who supported the revolt or who opposed Chinese control over Tibet. Her book does not even reveal the existence of any such Tibetans. She glosses over the destruction during the Cultural Revolution as if it were simply a small deviation in an otherwise always correct policy. She denies that there was any destruction of religious monuments in Lhasa, with the implication that this applied to all of Tibet, when it was not true even of Lhasa. In any case, as was true of Anna Louise Strong and the Gelders before her, she does not mourn the "natural" demise of religion.

Han Suyin's book, published in 1977, was one of the last to appear from that period when only sympathetic journalists were allowed into Tibet. Shortly thereafter, in the early 1980s, Tibet opened to foreigners who were much less sympathetic to Chinese claims to have liberated the Tibetans from themselves. The accounts of those such as Han Suyin, who wrote that everything was fine in Tibet and that Tibetans were happy subjects of China, were exposed as being far from the truth. The cultural destruction of the previous period was obvious to visitors even in the 1980s, particularly the destruction of hundreds of monasteries and religious monuments, the ruins of which could be seen all over Tibet and in and near Lhasa as well if one knew where to look. If there were any remaining doubt that the version of Tibetan reality promoted by the Chinese propagandists and their sympathizers was false, it was dispelled by the anti-Chinese demonstrations and riots of 1987-89.

Despite the relentless efforts of the Chinese propagandists and of such journalists as Han Suyin, Anna Louise Strong, and the Gelders, their version of Tibetan reality was eventually replaced, at least in the outside world, with a version closer to the truth. Some of those same Tibetans who convinced outside visitors that all was well in Tibet in the 1960s and 70s told tales in the 1980s of Chinese cultural destruction, brutality, and oppression. Many Tibetans, in the atmosphere of greater freedom of the 1980s, told of repression of all freedom of speech and thought during the 1960s and 70s. The fallacy that refugees' accounts could not be believed finally fell victim to the correspondence between what they had said and the accounts of visitors to Tibet and Tibetans themselves from the 1980s.

1. Han Suyin, Lhasa, the Open City (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977).