

EDITORIAL

Festschriften can be an embarrassment for the persons who receive them—a sense of delight is often accompanied by an amount of discomfiture. Although it will definitely embarrass him, this volume for Elliot Sperling, at least in my mind, is not meant to celebrate him, to felicitate a landmark birthday in his life or to coincide with a future retirement from his academic post. After all, a thinker and writer never retires. This volume is instead a ‘bond of affinity’ (*dam tshig?*) from colleagues and friends in our field of studies for no formal reason. It is given without fanfare. It is offered with a deep sense of motivation, crafted by individuals on a shared path.

This book has been conceived with a spirit of intellectual freedom, the same one that animates Elliot and his thinking, research and writings. There were no guidelines, stylesheet or recommendations of any sort for the contributors. Authors have been given *carte blanche* to work in a completely personal manner: from the length of their contribution to the choice of transliterations or phonetics; this also applied to the organisation of their bibliography, notes and references, and even extended to the way in which authors cite their place of work or affiliation. I hope that this principle of complete liberality and respect for individual idiosyncrasies is apparent throughout.

This idiosyncrasy is also reflected in the topics chosen by the authors featured here, who have taken this volume beyond my original plans. I had tentatively suggested that this *festschrift* might focus on the three main fields of work in which Elliot specialises: Tibetan History, Sino-Tibetan Relations and Tibetan Current Affairs. Yet, articles—in Tibetan, English and Chinese of any length and style, with a preponderance for history—has wholeheartedly trespassed into other disciplines, including Bon, Indo-Tibetan studies, anthropology, linguistics, and Islamic studies on Tibet. They deal with remarkably different contexts and make use of a variety of treatments. The motivations that led contributors to offer such a diverse range of works reflect Elliot’s own wide-ranging interests.

Writers operate in absence. They retreat from mundane engagements in order to work. Elliot is an exception to the rule, for he has combined his scholarly research and writing on a vast array of documents in different Asian languages with his involvement in Tibet’s current affairs as an acute commentator. He has left an imprint during the many years he has dedicated to his areas of interest. His research and writings on the history of Tibet (both old and current) with particular reference to the Sino-Tibetan relations and the study of Khams are standards in these areas of study. His insights into the current affairs of Tibet have benefited from his studies on Tibetan and Chinese cultures like few other political writers dealing with the issue. His views have been always communicated with a frankness that can only be disputed if seen from the viewpoint of ideological antagonism in the exercise of politics. His ideas on how best to stand vis-à-vis the destiny of Tibet in these decades has led scores of Tibetans to consider him a charismatic ideologist, whose remarks are appreciated and made their own.

His ‘showing the way’ is also reflected in many years of teaching at the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University. His aim has been to go beyond the simple passing of knowledge pertaining to the cultures he teaches to his students. Instead, Elliot has looked to develop a mindset in his students that gives them a firm footing on the path of good scholarship. Elliot’s concern for languages and their mastery has given him and his students autonomy in research and a fluency in their abilities to consult the literature—something that has been a personal trademark, shared with the school where he has been affiliated with both as a student and teacher.

Stepping back to his beginnings, Dharamsala’s role as a training camp in free thinking, aspiration to justice and commitment is the reason for the inclusion of a picture of this locality, taken by Elliot in the early seventies, on the book cover. Dharamsala has been the site for many of our generation’s first direct encounter with Tibetans and their culture, a formative starting point. It has left a mark upon many researchers and definitely upon Elliot, who is keen to remember the deep-seated influence it has had upon him. This place and its people still mean much to him despite the persistent contradictions and unsolved problems.

One’s own memories of the many shared occasions in the life of friends are personal and will stay in the respective hearts. Expressions of scholarly appreciation may smack of stereotypedness, so instead I prefer to say here how this volume came into being, leaving aside personal anecdotes or a jotting down of a brief *rnam thar* of our man.

Soon after I became convinced by my idea to have a volume for Elliot, I decided to involve Gedun Rabsal in the project. He is a long-time associate of Elliot’s at the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University. Friendship and mutual respect unites them to the point that I thought I could not undertake such a venture if Rabsal was not by my side. I thank him for his considerable encouragement and good advice. Rabsal asked me to coopt Nicole Willock onto the project. She is an old student of Elliot’s and wanted to collaborate in any enterprise that would result in dedicating a volume to him. I am grateful to her for her practical support and constructive ideas from the outset of the project to its end.

When, at an initial phase, I felt that the volume was going to happen, I asked Tashi Tsering Josayma if he wished to be involved. It took him an instant to tell me that he was going to publish the volume at AMI. I then thought of Jean-Luc Achard for an online version with RET. It took the time of an email reply to know that he too was enthusiastically on board.

Almost every scholar Rabsal, Nicole and I asked to contribute accepted heartedly and indeed produced a piece, a sign of the dedication everyone has for Elliot. Altogether, the articles are a forum of recent advancements in international scholars’ research. This volume for Elliot is also the contributors’ book. I am indebted to them for their care, intellectual worth and dedication. A thank you also goes to those who have been unable to contribute—very few though—on account of pressing commitments. And no less gratitude is for a few persons who did not contribute owing to a feeling of humility.

Thanks are also due to the two publishers for their commitment to the production of the volume. I cannot avoid a disclosure of family matters here, despite privacy being always commendable. My wife Ciccì Visconti has been a driving force through all phases of the work, assisting me in so many ways that she is in fact the ghost editor of the volume. She has also located the funds for publication. Tashi Tsering Josayma is the other ghost editor, because he has gone through all the Tibetan language papers.

The work by Tashi Gyamtso, the AMI graphic designer of the volume, and Ashwini Bhatia, who helped in matters visual, should also be acknowledged.

Closing these lines with a personal dedication to Elliot would amount to an exercise in self-indulgence. I end here omitting it, but not without another thank you, one due to those who have supported contributors in preparing their piece and are mentioned by them in their respective works.

Roberto Vitali
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