

Surviving the Dragon

A Review by James Alexander Thom

It's a rare book that teaches you not only something important that you should have known, but also many things you never imagined you'd get to know. *Surviving the Dragon*, a memoir by Arjia Rinpoche, Director of the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center here in Bloomington, is such a book.

This is a very personal memoir, but its stage is so vast and full of world-shaking events, that it is also a book of history – history still ongoing. And its author's spiritual dilemma both shapes and is shaped by his country's recent history.

The "Dragon" of the title is communist China's 1950 invasion and occupation of Tibet. This mountain fastness was ruled by a religious hierarchy practicing an isolated form of Buddhism called Lamaism. About a fifth of the population was of the clerical order and all education in the country was done in the monasteries. Thus it was inevitable that nonreligious Communism would clash with the old way. Most of what we Westerners know of that struggle we've learned through the efforts of the famous Dalai Lama who wrote the foreword for this book.

Arjia Rinpoche, like the Dalai Lama, is deemed a reincarnation, a member of one of the noble families. Like him, he is a refugee from the Dragon. But he defected from Tibet forty years later than the Dalai Lama and so has much more to tell about life and conditions there under Chinese domination.

His story begins when a search party of monks seeks out the two-year-old in his province near Mongolia, knowing that the reincarnation of a previous abbot has been born. He has been designated by one of his mother's dreams and other signs. In a colorful procession, he is carried to the Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai Province to be sanctified, coddled, and taught the elaborate tenets he will need to know as a lama. This mystical selection process, to the accompaniment of bells, horns, drum, and incense is worthy of a whole book in itself, but it's only the beginning.

He could hardly have been brought into that sanctum at a worse time. When the boy lama was eight, Chairman Mao's "Great Leap Forward" began: his effort to turn all China's population into an anthill of workers whose industrial output would challenge the capitalist West. Tibet, a land of sheep and yak herding and a little farming, was no natural place for such change. The monks, keepers and teachers of all that was holy and meaningful to Tibetans, were suddenly denounced as a useless, parasitic elite, "exploiters" of the working class, and a massive destruction of the system commenced. Monks were beaten, tortured, disgraced, and herded away into labor camps. All Tibetan education was suppressed. Famines swept the country. The network of families desperately tried to keep the culture from being erased.

The regimes of successive Chinese presidents moderated such persecution to varying degrees, and the lamas were allowed to return and repair the damaged monasteries, but only as token religious leaders.

By Arjia Rinpoche's administrative skills and diplomatic sensitivity and his closeness to the powerful Panchen Lama, he moved upward through positions of responsibility in that unsteady détente between religious Tibet and godless Communism, year after year, until, by 1997, he had become, in effect, the deputy governor of his province. But in that same year, the Chinese government tried to force every monk to denounce the exiled Dalai Lama and sign a "patriotic agreement" with the government.

"Every decision, every action," he writes, "required a choice between two evils: to take direction from the Communists but use my influence on behalf of Tibetans, or to stand on principle and suffer the consequences." The "Middle Way" he'd been taught as a lama's guide path was no longer navigable. To try to resign from his many administrative positions would have led him into a bureaucratic labyrinth and ruined his spiritual balance. There was nothing to do but disappear from Tibet.

Defecting from Communism is a perilous undertaking for even a lowly citizen. The intricacies of engineering the escape of a high official could make another book in itself. Anyone who helped him would be jeopardy. Getting travel documents without setting off alarms, getting through Beijing Airport unrecognized, even with a newly grown mustache and without his robes, would be minute-by-minute suspense.

Among the many abilities of this exiled lama now living among us Hoosiers is his writing skill. Everything from his description of the vast uplands, to Mao's effort to wipe out all literature except his own book. To the wonderful flavor of ordinary rice after long hunger, is vivid and meaningful. (Clear images are also conveyed by the author's pencil drawing his family and his hand-drawn map of Tibet.)

Most stunning to this reader is the author's candor. Without whining or self-justification, he tells of doing important things despite his own principles – abetting China's anti-Tibet policies, participating in rituals orchestrated to undermine his beloved Dalai Lama – acts that lesser biographer would probably deny or omit. This obviously is a book written by a man determined to tell the whole truth because he knows particularly well that the horrors of totalitarianism can't be told with half-truths.

The value of truth is affirmed by the Dalai lam's warm Foreword to this book. Both understand. Tibetans, the author says, have no naïve "belief in deliverance by some supernatural powers. Instead they have a practical wisdom acquired from their centuries of experience with invaders."