

Tricycle Talks

Episode #73 with Marie Myung-Ok Lee

“Remembering the Forgotten War with Marie Myung-Ok Lee”

May 11, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In contemporary American culture, the Korean War is often referred to as the “Forgotten War,” but according to Korean American novelist Marie Myung-Ok Lee, the war is still very much alive for those who lived through it—and their descendents. In her new novel, *The Evening Hero*, Marie examines the forgotten history of the Korean War and the ensuing displacement and loss that so many Korean families were forced to endure. Weaving together an exploration of Korean religious traditions, contemporary political commentary, and a critique of the commercialization of healthcare, the book follows the story of a middle-aged Korean American obstetrician, Yungman Kwak, as he navigates a changing world. In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Marie to discuss Korean rituals of honoring one’s ancestors, the generational impact of wartime trauma, and her travels to North Korea.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with writer Marie Myung-Ok Lee. Hi, Marie. It’s great to be with you.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Hi, James. So happy to be here.

James Shaheen: Thank you. So we’re here today to talk about your new novel, *The Evening Hero*, which follows the story of a Korean American obstetrician grappling with memories of war in a rapidly changing world. Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: It had a lot of inspirations. I’ve been working on it for 18 years. One of the first flashes of inspiration I had was when we were taking our son, who’s very medically



fragile, to the doctor, and he just offhandedly mentioned a case that his friend was involved in. His friend was an OB/GYN who had to help a woman who was in crisis. She was bleeding out of her pregnancy, and he managed to stop the bleeding by doing a hysterectomy, and she later sued him successfully for a loss of fertility. That made me think about what life would be like if you're doing the right thing, but somehow in a court of law, they're able to prove and then it was making me think of, what if there were racial implications, like you're Asian and there were certain stereotypes about that. And so I started writing that, along with my favorite book of all time is George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

James Shaheen: Ah, I love *Middlemarch*. And *Mill on the Floss* too.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: So it's everything I hope that this book is. It's funny. It's about village life. It's also about a doctor trying to do the right thing who accidentally kills someone. And so the melding of these two things kind of got me going, and then more about a medical malpractice case, it was actually more satirical about startup culture because Dr. Yungman Kwak's son is also an OB/GYN, but he's really going to work at the Mall of America. It was actually a lot funnier and more satirical like *Middlemarch*, but with the elections in 2016, I took a step back and I felt that I wanted to be more direct about Yungman's story. There was so much talk about bombing North Korea, and it made me think about how in my small town, my parents are actually migrants originally from North Korea, but most people didn't know that. It just made me think about how easily people in our town were very into this bombing narrative without realizing that this human being—my father was the anesthesiologist in town, so that means he's probably touched every single person with birth, surgeries, accidents, and so forth. So it kind of morphed into this huge book about this man who seems like this little doctor, but he's got this huge weight of history behind him. Even though he's at the end of his life and he's retired, he has this huge decision he has to make. Can he still have this kind of growth at the end of his life, or will he just glide into retirement, which would be the easier decision?



James Shaheen: There’s still a little bit of humor in it. For instance, his name is Yungman Kwak, he’s an obstetrician, and his name is easily mispronounced “quack.”

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Yes, exactly. I also feel like Koreans in general are humorous people, so it’s impossible to keep the humor out of it. You see a Korean zombie movie, there’s still always going to be a little bit of humor, as opposed to straight horror. Koreans are funny.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it’s interesting because at the beginning of the book, you see this Korean American doctor, and you don’t suspect the weight of history is on him until you read the backstory. But we’ll get to that in a moment. You’ve shared that this novel took 18 years to write, and your TikTok handle is `daily_writing_makes_book`, which I thought was very funny. Can you talk a little bit about your writing process and all the research that went into the book?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Sure. I’m the kind of writer who once I get an idea, if I’m going to do it, I have to be all in. For instance, this guy’s an obstetrician, so when he’s going to do the surgery, is he going to hold a scalpel like this or like this? I feel like I can’t write it unless I can be embodied in what’s happening. The first two years actually were straight research including trying to get into a hospital. I was a professor of creative writing at Brown at the time, and I was trying to do these sneaky things to get into the hospital. They did let me in once to watch a surgery, but they had the legal person there the entire time, kind of watching everyone, so it was very awkward. In the meantime, I was traveling down here where my friend is an OB/GYN at Woodhull Hospital, which is public, so they’re a little more casual. I ended up helping a midwife deliver a baby, and it was very fun. And then finally, through my work at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race in the Americas, there’s a public health program and I managed to meet this guy who said there was a new head of OB/GYN and he’s not a doctor, he’s a PhD and he loves literature. So this guy knew exactly what I had to do. In fact, he got me an ID, and I got



a white coat. I was embedded with the third-year medical students doing their OB/GYN rotation. I pretty much went on their whole rotation. But there were just other things that—so Yungman is North Korean, and at one point I realized I’m going to have to go to North Korea. The goals kept going and going. But eventually, weirdly enough, in 2008, I was able, through some very weird circumstances, to go to North Korea.

James Shaheen: How did that happen? I mean, that’s not an easy thing to do.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: No, it was not. And it seemed like it would never happen. A bunch of Brown students in the East Asian Studies program who were doing Chinese said, “Hey, we found a fixer who will take us to North Korea, and we need some faculty to come with us.” So of course, I volunteered, along with a person who does Japanese history who was a white man. This was also the time when Kim Jong-Il was launching what’s called the Taepodong, which is one of his giant missiles. So that guy just said, “I’m out. There’s no way.” The State Department actually told us not to go. And also as a Korean American, North Korea does not allow journalists or diasporic Koreans to go because obviously, the fact that we don’t live in North Korea is counter to the fact that it’s the greatest place to live on Earth. But these students were clever enough that instead of getting our visa in Beijing, they got it at a much smaller outpost in Shenyang. And then when they were saying we need this person’s Chinese characters and her names so we can look up her family, blah, blah, blah, so of course I’m so beady, and I was writing it down. They said, “No, stop. We’re just going to say you’re traveling and if they don’t just let you in under our group visa, this whole academic group won’t be able to go.” So that gamble paid off. So we were on a group visa that didn’t have my Korean name, and then actually, while we were at it, I actually brought my mom along. My father had actually died before he was able to go back. He also was a doctor and had tried to go on a couple of missions to North Korea. But each time in Beijing, the white doctors were allowed to go, and he was never allowed to go. And so his last time, he actually had to fly back to Beijing, then he flew to



Seoul, where I was living as a Fulbright scholar. He was just so sad. And so I just kind of had always carried that with me. So even despite the State Department saying you can't go because if something happens, we can't do anything for you, I had to go.

James Shaheen: So you've compared the importance of writing each day to the role of repetition in Buddhist rituals. Can you say more about that?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Well, one thing that's very important in Korean Buddhism is ritual, and a lot of it is the idea of tedium leading to some kind of enlightenment. There are all sorts of jokes about cleaning out the bathroom and how that will lead you to enlightenment. But there is a certain idea that when you do something every day, it is the same, but then when you do it enough, you see that it's not the same. And so for me, that means having a new way to observe things that I think that I know. I think that might be the largest part. And then there's the whole idea, which might not be just as Buddhist, I think it's more my feeling of ancestors and ghosts, is showing up every single day. I really literally write every day, and a lot of it is about checking in. It might just be changing a word or so. But I really feel that the work is a living organism and needs to be engaged with every day. And then you keep adding pages, and eventually, you get the thousand pages that this book was.

James Shaheen: One thing about ritual that I was thinking of, I was speaking with a Japanese Zen priest the other day, and his teacher told him early on, “Do 108 full prostrations every day for 108 days, and then you'll really know this practice.” So there's a certain embodiment that takes place with repetitive, ritualistic action.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Exactly, and it's not like you're going to do 10 push-ups. It really is having to be present for each one. It can be annoying, and then once you do it, once you get through the annoyance, which is very much like the process of writing, the middle part is the



worst. Starting is easy. Ending is easy. But the middle part where you're still trying to figure out what you're doing is difficult.

James Shaheen: Right, so the title of the book, *The Evening Hero*, is the translation of the main character's Korean name, Yungman Kwak. Can you share more about the significance of naming in the book, particularly for characters moving between languages and cultures?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Sure. The weird thing is I didn't really know at the time unless you know the Chinese characters underlying someone's name, the character "yung" can mean a lot of things. It can mean dragon; it can mean pure. And so I just heard that name in my head, and later what I do is I check these things with a friend who knows a lot more about this. What's funny is he was taking me to task a little bit. So Shik does mean vegetable, so there's a joke that his brother's name is evening vegetable. It does mean that in Chinese. It's unlikely someone would actually be named that. So we were having slight arguments about artistic license and so forth. He was a little bit I'm not sure I would spell young that way, blah, blah, blah. But then later, he wrote back, and this is a little bit where I like to get into the idea of the ghosts or the ancestors. He said he was looking not for my book but for something else he's doing and he's looking at these oracle bones. The oracle bones with the character for yung had a woman with an X inside her and then a male character outside that, and he said under one rendering, you could look at that as the word for gynecologist. The idea of the title, *The Evening Hero*, or that they even call him that came much later, but it became so significant and resonant. I feel more like it was there all the time and I had needed to dig it out because what I'd had as a placeholder was my father told me his nickname in college was Hong Kil Dong, which is the word for Robin Hood. That kind of made me think of someone who could become a hero later. That was Yungman's nickname for a while, but it wasn't quite right. So then when the evening hero came out, then everything kind of settled. Is he going to be an evening hero? There's a certain Walter Mittyish

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tone to the book where he's just kind of this bumbling guy whose wife is really mean to him and what's going to happen?

James Shaheen: His little brother's name is Yungsik. Why evening vegetable?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Part of it is the idea of the joke, and then part of it is the idea that names are so important. My name, for instance, Myung-Ok, means brilliant crystal, and my sister's name is Chung-Ok, so she's like pure crystal, and then my brothers are Chung-Yong and Chung-Wan. So that ties us all in a generational, not just in our family, like there's a certain almost formula that the patriarch picks, but then also when I meet other writers like Nora Okja Keller, I could just be like, “Ha, you're my sister, you're my generational sister.” So it was kind of the tie and then also the fact that Yungsik is always secondary. The first son is always the first. He's the prince. He's the person that everybody relies on for everything, the name and everything, so I just thought having him have a much dumber name, especially for audiences that might not understand the nuances of that, that would just be a reinforcement of that.

James Shaheen: Well, as a younger brother myself, I identified with him. So you mentioned a little bit about your name. What about the story behind your name and how you present yourself as an author?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Well, the funny thing is it wasn't a sudden ethnic awakening. So my two first names, which are on my birth certificate, are Marie Myung-Ok Grace Lee. When I was publishing earlier, I used to publish under the name Marie G. Lee kind of to honor my mother, and then at some point, it turned out there's a very famous, very wealthy writer named Marie Lee, who writes the Cape Cod Skull mysteries, and at one point in books in print before everything went digital, they actually mixed the two of us up, so I was getting her royalty statements, her fan mail.

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James Shaheen: Her royalty checks?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Man, I wish. So that was just kind of a problem. So at one point, when I was publishing another book, someone said, “What do you want to do?” It kind of converged with the idea that I was a Fulbright scholar in 1997–98 when I was doing research for my first adult novel. We don’t really have a lot of family, but I spent most of my time with the extant family that I had. Marie in Korean, they would call me meoli, which is a homonym for head, which was super annoying to me when they would call me that, and then my husband’s name is Karl, and so in Korean they call him call, which means knife, but meoli call means haircut. So I just got really sick of those jokes, and then also, for the first time, having people call me Myung-Ok and just hearing that all the time, first because it’s easier and secondly, because I just got sick of them calling me meoli. Because we grew up in a really white area, my parents never used our Korean names. In fact, I had to ask them what my name was when I was in high school because I didn’t know what it was. But now it’s become really special to me. My Chinese friend, I guess it’s pronounced ming, she has the same first character, so she found these rocks with the characters, and so there’s just a certain idea of an Asian self that I ignored for very long that is really resonant. And then also, I used to be a rockhound, and I used to love quartz so much, and my dad used to take me to these rock shows, and he never said, “Your name means brilliant crystal in Korean.” And so it’s just weird how I’ve always been drawn to crystals. I just have crystals everywhere. And so I just feel like this has always been a part of me, I guess.

James Shaheen: So you grew up in a primarily Caucasian area, more or less like the protagonist and his wife living in an all-white world in Minnesota. So you identify with this character, to some extent anyway. You’re not first generation, but there’s some identification there, I would guess.



Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Oh, definitely. Yungman is a lot more, let's say, himself and has his own interesting observations and kind of counter things that he does where I feel like the way we grew up, probably because my parents, when they first came to the country, they were actually in Jim Crow Alabama in the 50s. So that's their first introduction to American racial politics, where Korea is apparently the most homogenous country in the world, so they don't have any idea what they're doing. They grew up under Japanese colonization. So very much how we grew up was that white people must be right, we have to emulate this, we have to be like this, where it was kind of fun for me to write a Yungman character where he's always like, "Why are white people doing this? Why do they wear their shoes inside?" And also the whole idea of Christianity. When he's growing up in Korea, to get food from the missionaries, he has to say this weird mumbo jumbo over his food to get it, where that's just kind of weird to him, or drinking the blood of Christ. That's all really weird to him.

James Shaheen: That's funny. Many characters in the novel are living in the aftermath of the Korean War, and in the US, we don't often hear about the full extent of the atrocities of that war. As you write, "Even a war that's declared done, dead, forgotten can still be alive every day for those living it." Can you share some of what you've learned about the impact of wartime trauma on generations of Korean families?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: So as you probably know, a lot of people call it the Forgotten War, wherein it's not forgotten by the soldiers who were there, including the American soldiers. It's not forgotten by people like my parents. You know, seeing what's happening in Ukraine has brought back a lot of things that my parents said. For instance, my mother had a harrowing trip from North to South Korea in about 1945 after World War II ended and the partition was happening, but she had a fairly untouched time during the war. But then she just talks about how she never got to finish college, where I feel like, "Oh, well, so what? You're alive." But people don't understand what it's like to one day just be dooty dooty do and then suddenly, there's tanks,



and you're fleeing for your life, and even if you don't get hurt, it's just completely changed the trajectory of your life. My father used to drag us to the, the one time we were in the Netherlands, he dragged us to the Anne Frank Museum and just had some very insane obsession with it. But I didn't realize he spent a whole year of his life hiding behind walls to not get conscripted and that he almost starved to death and he only had a Bible to read. We were growing up in the Midwest going, "What's for dinner? I don't like this." I'm finding it really interesting that they're actually finding with Holocaust survivors and their descendants that, I don't know, if they develop some kind of aversion to apples because something happened to them while they were eating an apple, there seems to be experiments that suggest that the next generations will have this aversion. I am finding with people of my generation and younger, I was born here, all my siblings were born here, but we do have this feeling of our parents' trauma that causes, if I can speak frankly about it, there's a lot of families that I know, including ours, where there's been physical abuse and so forth. A lot of that has come, I believe, from unprocessed trauma. So because my mother had to make these split-second decisions that changed her life, so basically, when she went across the DMZ, she just thought she was helping her aunt get across the border. She never saw her parents again because they closed the DMZ like the next day, but for her, it became this panic disorder. I have so many memories of these crazy things happening like her driving down the wrong side of the road. For us, we all have this similar kind of anxiety. But me in particular, because I started meditating when I was nine, not sure what I was doing, but I had this continuous practice where I would meditate, and I didn't know what it was. I would just sit and try to get myself in this bliss state. My parents actually yelled at me when they saw me doing it. For this article I was doing on alpha waves, I had to have what's called a QEEG. It's a very detailed EEG of your brain. My son has autism, so they kind of compared our brains. They said, "You know, you have the craziest brain." My brain works very quickly, so you can see I speak quickly, so I have high alpha, which can be related to intelligence and being able to think very quickly. But at the same time, high alpha is almost always correlated with high beta. Beta is what causes anxiety. So that's why for my son, he also has high alpha and tons of high beta, so his brain is on fire. He can't think



because his alpha is actually faster than mine. They said, “Your brain is so weird. It’s flipped around from what most people have. You have a ton of alpha right here, but the rest of your brain is super low beta. We’ve never seen anything like that. You must be the calmest person ever.” I was like, “No, I’m not.” I am just completely wound up. I’m type A. But I do feel the daily practice of that has literally physically been able to change my brain because the salutary cooling beta is dominant in my brain, and I’m trying to think what a mess would be actually without it, with the unprocessed trauma of my parents because I am very high, strong, and but I’m very functional. And they said with that profile, I would make a great sniper. They do a lot for the Department of Defense. Isn’t that wonderful? And I said “Yes, I’m Buddhist. I don’t think I’m going to do that.”

James Shaheen: So one of the through lines of the book is the question of how to properly honor one’s ancestors in a changing world. That’s so important in East Asia. Can you talk a bit more about Korean rituals of ancestor worship or honoring one’s ancestors? I say this because many people during that war were separated, and that became impossible, and they had to make do in different ways.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Yes, there are real protocols that you’re supposed to follow when you bury someone. You always orient their head towards home. You keep all the bones together. So my grandfather, whom I never met, had died during the war, and so we had to disinter him so we could move him to a better place when I was there in the 90s, and the care that they took to make sure there wasn’t one single bone fragment. The whole idea of the Korean dead body is that all the pieces have to be held together, so there’s no cremation and so forth. But then, of course, with the war, there were so many mass graves, nobody knew where anybody was. What’s been really interesting for me is the dominant group of people who immigrated were Christian, and part of it is people who are Christian tend to know English or have these kinds of pathways where they would have the resources to be able to immigrate to the US even though Korea is a



minority Christian country, and it's primarily Buddhist and then a bunch of other things. Buddhism tends to flow into animism and shamanism, and everyone's pretty cool with fortune telling. If you're Christian, you're not supposed to do any of that. People won't go to temple and then go to fortune teller. Back to my friend who read the oracle bones, this sounds really crazy, but I was walking down a stairway in Harlem. It was just a stairway in a park, and it's not very used. One day, I looked down and there was a coin, and it was a Korean won from 1988. I was telling my husband that clearly the ancestors were haunting me and sending that to me. And so my husband says a grad student must have dropped it or something. But no one's ever found a coin, I've never found a dime in this place. So I had to show Heinz. It was so interesting because it's 1988. He had all these ideas of what it was. The number eight is very lucky, so 88 is double luck. He also said 1988 was during the Olympics. And so he said this was a clear message for me from the ancestors that I'm supposed to be this voice to get the stories out. To circle back, one of the things that was so wonderful about this is that I made a commitment to myself where a lot of times even Korean diasporic authors will make these mistakes like there's a children's book that's very famous and it gets Buddha's Birthday wrong. It has Buddha's birthday in December, where I felt like everyone in Korea knows it's in April. So I felt like I'm going to make sure I'm not going to do this with the war. Everything has to be verifiable, so to speak. So they are things like biological weapons that show up, and I was actually talking to an author who did a book on FOIA, and some of the stuff he found was trying to figure out if there were biological weapons used during the Korean War. He was looking at my book, and he said, "How do you know all this, like the powder and the feathers and all that?" and I said, "I don't know that. But I talked to people and a lot of people remember that." And not only that, but when I watch Korean movies, like Bong Joon-ho, who did *Parasite*, did an earlier one that was deeply metaphorical of the Korean War called *The Host*. On the outside, it's a silly kind of *Godzilla* movie where the American army wants to dump all this formaldehyde into our sacred Han River, which was based on a true story. They did, but it created this big monster that was going after everybody. There is a scene where they are making these announcements going, "Everything's fine. Everything's



fine. Stay in your homes,” and there’s this junk coming out of the sky and you see people falling down and having seizures, just like I have it in my book, because that’s what people talked to me about. In Korea, this is just really part of the cultural memory. That’s one of the reasons it took me so long is everything in the book, none of this is my wild speculation from the mass graves to biological weapons or a lot of the stuff that happened with the US where you think, “Oh, they were there to help the Koreans,” where they just slaughtered people. Now, that’s why that Pulitzer book, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri*, won the Pulitzer. But that was just one incident. That was one incident where they had enough documentation to write a book, but this happened so much, and I don’t even think people realize. When I went to North Korea, all the students were looking at my mother going, “Oh, she’s going to be so emotional.” But I just thought “Kids, you don’t realize the Allies bombed 99% of North Korea and 90% of South Korea.” There was no infrastructure. The military graphs were so shocked, they said it was a lunar landscape with smoking chimneys, like it was not a human landscape. So of course my mother didn’t have any emotional reaction. They had to rebuild it. It was all Stalinist architecture by the time we got there.

James Shaheen: That’s interesting. So many of us don’t know the details or the brutality of that war, and yet, nowadays, people know about *Squid Game* and *Parasite* and K-pop and these sorts of things. It must be interesting for you to see the country embrace all of these exciting things coming out of Korea and still not know what happened in the 1950s.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Oh, definitely. You know, I’m happy for it because when I was growing up, I was either a Chink or a Jap. No one even knew what Korea was. Korea has come to prominence as a developed country with cultural power, but at the same time, I feel a little bit like we skipped a step, particularly with *Squid Game*. So much of the commentary is like “It’s so brutal. Koreans are awful. They’re just so into brutality,” versus seeing this amazingly original cinema. People missed how metaphorical it was to US influence in Korea, just so many of the



motifs. But the beautiful thing about it is the director didn't care. They didn't care if people in the West were going to understand that. I mean, even the girl from North Korea, her name is Kang Sae-byeok. If we're talking about names, what's interesting is that her name means dawn. It's a Korean word for dawn because North Korea stopped using Chinese base characters because North Korea has become its own thing, and it's not going to do any of the traditions. Everything is pure Korean whereas in South Korean culture, there's a Chinese base word for everything and a Korean base, but North Korea is so Korean based and so even not even being able to see that just made me feel like wow, people are really missing so much of what they're trying to say about the partition. Do most of these viewers saying “Oh, these Koreans are so brutal, this is just brutality for fun,” do they even realize the US was the one that partitioned Korea? Does anyone know that? Does anyone care?

James Shaheen: Right, the book explores many types of loss, including loss of place. So many Korean immigrants lost places to return to or a place where they can honor and remember their families. Can you share more about the interplay between displacement and grief? And again, I mean, all of this is in the context of a war that we waged that we're largely unaware of. So I think the book really brings that to the fore as you just said. All of these things really are coming out of that war. So what about displacement and grief and no place to return to because after all, it's almost impossible to go to North Korea even if your own parents are from there?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Right. And it isn't the same place for them to return to either. I think of it a lot now as an adult, because when we were growing up, we were just completely Midwestern, and so we didn't miss anything. People seem surprised when I say I didn't even try kimchi until I was in college or maybe after college. But you have to remember that because of the racist laws, Asians were not allowed to immigrate from Asia until 1965 with the Hart-Celler Act, so it never really occurred to me too much about my parents not even being able to eat Korean food because there was no Korean grocery around. And then when there was one, we



would make a yearly pilgrimage to Minneapolis, which is about four and a half hours, see the one family we knew, grab this tiny thing of kimchi, bring it back. We were not allowed to touch it because my mom thought it was too odiferous. She really actually didn't like my dad eating it because she was afraid of what the white people would think. To be this deprived of this food that's so essential, as a kid, I didn't really think of it. I was kind of like, "Oh, kimchi smells. Yuck. Let's just keep it in the back of the refrigerator." So I'm growing up like inculcating that into my DNA where at the same time, after his last failed trip to North Korea, when he came to Seoul, he wanted to eat North Korean-style cold noodles. I'm really good with spicy food, and it's impossible for me to eat. The worst thing is it's not only so spicy, it comes with this top skate, which is really prickly, and then I remember going, "I'm going to die." It comes to like hot beef tea, so I was kind of chugging this going, "No, it's hot beef tea." But my dad, just seeing how he just absorbed it and just thinking to me, trying to understand what he's lost just by watching him trying to eat this food. I remember my uncle, who's South Korean, didn't understand why my dad wanted his one meal to be here. We never really think what if one day you didn't see your family ever again, and you were never able to eat your favorite food? That's not something that we think about. As a kid, I just feel sad to some degree thinking, "I'm bored. Every day is like another." I think my parents, given what they've been through, they would have killed to have a couple of years like that because the end of the war, the colonization, the partition, and then the Korean War happened five years after, and then their immigration when they were, because of the laws, undocumented immigrants. I think their whole life has been pretty traumatic.

James Shaheen: I can't help but think right now when you talk this way about your parents about Yungman's son, Einstein, who's thoroughly American and has sort of embraced this world of highly commercialized medicine. In fact, he ends up investing or working for a company that has mall outlets where people receive their medical care in a highly transactional world of



medicine. So that cultural rift between Yungman, who experienced the Korean War, grew up in Korea, and came to the US, and his son, who seems as distant from it all as any other American.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Part of the impetus for this also was completely serendipitous. Because of that badge, I got an email saying, “Dr. Lee, do you want to learn how to monetize your practice? Come see us in Las Vegas.” Sure enough, I got on a plane and went to Las Vegas. And then when they found out I wasn’t a doctor, I actually got almost physically booted out of the conference. It was Bugs Bunny style. This other doctor who was apparently a rival doctor was being booted out at the same time, and so we were just looking at each other super sadly sitting on our butts. He said, “Come to my conference.” So two weeks later, I was in some super fancy Four Seasons in Tucson watching these surgeries, and the term “retailicine,” which seems super funny, is actually from that conference.

James Shaheen: Oh, really? I thought you had invented that.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: No, I wish. I invented the Organ Trail and Dome Depot, but not retailicine. That’s how weird our world has become that you thought it was satirical, but I attended a clinicians’ conference where this was on a PowerPoint.

James Shaheen: You also raise questions about parenthood and how to instill values in children without imposing a fixed narrative upon them. Would you be willing to share a little bit about your own experience of parenthood, particularly raising a child with severe disabilities?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Sure. Everyone always makes fun of the Korean study culture, but I don’t think they understand that for someone like my father, because he went to the Harvard of Korea, that saved his life. Later, the Eighth Army ended up occupying the Seoul National University campus. Seoul National University also appears in the book. That’s how he met the



Americans and someone from the World Health Organization who helped him to immigrate. His studying literally saved his life, his knowing English better than everybody else. He became a liaison officer because they just took the top five people in this class, but he spoke English the best. So all these things made him feel if we were going to keep up with white people, we all had to go to Harvard, and that was just this given where to the outside, it looks silly. It's like Tiger dad's stuff, but that's what I understand now. This was like an act of love for him. This is the way he knew how to parent the best, kind of how Yungman is trying to parent the way he knows the best and is not so great sometimes. I kind of felt like I was sort of following the narrative. At first, I didn't get into Harvard, so I had that problem, and then I went to a different school that was not Harvard, so my parents kind of didn't care that it was a little bit good because they thought I'd already ruined my life, so they were paying a lot less attention to me. They didn't drive me to college, like they did for my sister when she got to Harvard. So I was a little bit more left to my own devices, including that my parents didn't want me to be a writer. In fact, they were quite against it. I did work as an investment banker for a bunch of years, amassing money for my career but also appeasing them. So when I had my son, it looked very much like this is what you do when you are a person. You get married, and I also married really late, and then I have my kid. And then my father shows up with a Harvard onesie for my infant son and a Harvard rattle, and here we go, we're doing the next round of what you do when you have tiger parents. I did have ideas that I wanted our son to be bilingual and this and that, but then it turned out when he was 18 months old, he was diagnosed with cancer, and then that kind of crisis obscured a bunch of other medical issues he had, and then he also has autism and intellectual disabilities, which he still does. That, more than anything, actually pushed me over from being Christian and kind of Buddhist (I was attending a Korean church at the time) to just being fully Buddhist. I think part of it was it helped me a lot with my mindset of, "Oh, God will fix this," or "You must have done something terrible." There's just this very weird theology that wasn't helping me deal with what was happening. I saw it more clearly with my husband because he always wanted to have children, and I saw it more clearly when you have these plans and they do



not go as planned, how devastating that is and how difficult that can be emotionally and how easily you can kind of get stuck in a depressive rut of being like “Oh, this isn’t supposed to be like this.” I could feel myself kind of going into this rut, and it really was leaning more deeply into being Buddhist and just kind of being present and learning how to be present for my son. I guess it’s kind of going back to like what you brought up at the beginning about the repetition, like being present for my son every day, no matter if he was hitting us, smearing his poop around, just showing up, being present. It did eventually result in certain epiphanies. I have learned that I am a really good parent to him. I started out being really unsure of myself and needing the experts and finally realizing the experts were wrong, that I know my son, I’m a good parent to him, and these wonderful things, because I’ve been able to buck what people want me to do, including institutionalize him, have opened up this whole world of joy. In fact, my husband and I were just talking about this this morning because at school, he made this goofy picture, and he’s smiling, and they pasted on his picture as an astronaut. But I was telling my husband how we didn’t have any pictures of him smiling from when he was 9 to probably 13, and now he’s just so joyful. And a lot of it has been because we’ve accepted him for who he is, and he understands that now too.

James Shaheen: That’s nice. You talked a little bit about your spiritual journey. Almost a decade ago, you wrote an article for *Tricycle* called “Losing My Religion,” where you traced your journey from Christianity toward what you called your mixed-breed spirituality: pantheist, Buddhist, Korean animist, nature worshiper, Christian. Can you share more about your own journey and the religious communities and practices that have shaped your thinking?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: I think I’m always like, “Oh, I’m such a directions follower.” I’m always like, “I meditate every day, but sometimes I only do it for two minutes. I’m a bad Buddhist,” or I don’t read a lot on it. But now that I’ve relaxed into it more, I’m just understanding, I was shamefacedly telling this to my friend whose family has a monastery in



Japan, and she just said, “Dude, these monks micro-meditate all the time. It’s a thing.” And I just thought, “Oh, really? That’s interesting.” And then I was telling my other friend how sometimes my plants talk to me, and I’m kind of into that. I just feel inanimate things talk to me. And he just said, “Come on, there is a very primal religion in Korea that’s exactly that and that has a little Buddhism mixed in.” Again, it’s just such a different deal from when you grow up and there’s this God who’s watching you, and you worship the God, and as opposed to today, I feel like I want to talk to Guanyin a little bit, or this Buddha. Buddhism to me is just more mixed into what I do every day, and it’s also mixed into me talking to my plants. I don’t necessarily discount the idea that the oneness that I can feel through my Buddhism and my plant worship and animism is the same thing as what Christians might call the Holy Spirit. It all might be the same thing, or what metaphysicists call energy. But I’m actually now at a place that I’m really enjoying because I don’t feel that I have to explain it or actually understand it. It’s just like Justice Potter, the Supreme Court Justice, said when they asked him about the definition of pornography. He said he knows it when he sees it. He couldn’t define it. And I’m just really feeling happy in that place. In Korea, my aunt is your typical Presbyterian, and I just had all this weird Buddhist iconography in my apartment, and whenever she came in, she’d have to hide it and put it away. She was really superstitious about it. I hadn’t seen that kind of idea until I started going to church with her, and they really would preach, “You have to save your family from the fortune teller. Physically restrain them if you have to. You shouldn’t touch this. Catholics are evil. It’s a pagan religion,” and just seeing that other side of it illuminated things about how she sees the world, and I respect it. And at the same time, it made me feel more open about the fact that I like the way I see my world too. I like going to temple on Buddha’s birthday, but you can’t even really tell who’s Buddhist. Everyone is carrying their lanterns. You can do whatever you want to do. And there’s something about not necessarily that it’s individual. It’s kind of like this individual collective thing. I don’t think people realize too. In Korea, one of the big threats is that instead of the boogeyman coming to get you it’s the Buddhist beggars because part of the practice is they have



these bowls, and they have to go get alms. That’s the thing that people threaten their kids with, they’re going to give you to the Buddhists, not the boogeyman.

James Shaheen: It’s funny, the monotheistic traditions’ God is a very jealous God. He will have no other gods before him. And yet that’s why it can strike Westerners as odd when they’re looking, say, at Japan or Korea, where people may be Buddhist, but they incorporate Shinto ritual and so forth. In *The Evening Hero*, in your novel, it takes place in a complex religious landscape with Christian missionaries, Korean Presbyterian congregations, which there’s some humor there, shamans and healers and Buddhist death rituals. It was a very rich world.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: And Yungman himself is kind of like, “Eh.” A lot of times he’s like, “All of that can just go to hell.” He does his own thing.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So in addition to being a writer, you also teach at Columbia University. I’m curious to know how the pandemic and global crises of the last few years have impacted what you’re seeing in the classroom. What have you noticed about the types of stories that your students are interested in telling?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: I think one of the things is that the students are very stressed. I can’t imagine what it would be like in such a formative time to have so much of your time suddenly being stuck on Zoom, and then also, I think the uprise in anti-Asian violence, which I saw coming long before COVID really hit because part of it is in Asia, because we have this very collective culture, everyone masks during cold season because you don’t want to give your someone a cold. You’ll feel bad if that happens. So it’s just normal. If you see any Korean soap opera, someone will be wearing a mask at some point. I was wearing a mask, and I just saw people looking at me very funny in the Columbia neighborhood where I thought, “Oh, I live in New York, it’s the most tolerant place in the world. We’re all professors. Everyone’s really into



multiculturalism.” And then when COVID started, people would run away from me or just glare. I mean, I really was not used to that, and then there have been some violent incidents on campus. My older colleague got body slammed two hours after she was on TV talking about anti-Asian violence. To her credit, she went back on TV to talk about it. It was very interesting, because one of my younger colleagues, this had happened to him when he was out with other Asian colleagues, and he just thought it was some kind of mistake. It’s hard to pin it to anti-Asian violence because I feel like so much of this has been gaslit, like you can’t prove it or they’re not using slurs. So that’s been a huge reckoning for us, and it’s also been a little difficult because as professors, they want us to talk about it all the time. We’re processing it, it’s traumatizing, but we feel like we have to talk about it at the same time, and it takes up our time. And then what if we don’t get tenure? It’s been a very mixed bag of emotions besides the isolation.

James Shaheen: A friend of mine’s kids, I watched them grow up, and they grew up feeling perfectly safe and they belonged, and everything was fine, and then this wave of anti-Asian violence swept the country. All of a sudden, one of them was spat on on the subway, and it was shocking. But they woke up to realizing, “Well, maybe we’re living in a world that we didn’t quite know we were living in.” So it is very confusing for them, let alone being confusing for much older people.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Right, and we’re kind of tired of people saying, “Don’t do this, don’t do that.” For a while, I used to react to anti-Asian violence by being very violent myself, like someone coming up in their car, and I would hit their car and have these altercations.

James Shaheen: Marie, you don’t look like somebody who does that.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Hey, I have a black belt in taekwondo, by the way. But actually, in the taekwondo code, you’re not supposed to be starting fights. But the point being that there is no



good way. It really is about addressing the anti-Asian violence. For a while I was thinking I have a full-length punching bag, and I've been practicing. But people are like, "No, you have to just stand down. You're going to cause more violence." But no, there's no rhyme or reason. The woman, Yuna Lee, who got murdered, she took a cab home so she wouldn't get pushed in the subway like the other person got pushed two weeks earlier. There is no right way for us to be. It's more like people who are not Asian need to step up when they see violence happening, and we need to address structural inequality and racism. That's what it is. It's not on us, but we still do have to protect ourselves, so I don't stand near the edge of the subway either.

James Shaheen: Absolutely. You know, there are a few questions I skipped over, but I'd like to go back to them for a moment. In the novel, Yungman's hospital is closed, like many small town or regional hospitals. It happened here in Manhattan too. In my own neighborhood, they closed down a hospital to build condos. So as medicine becomes more commercialized, we're seeing this happen. It's not profitable, so the community loses its hospital. What was it like writing about medicine during the pandemic?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: So I had a little bit of a jaundiced eye about medicine, as you probably saw in the book. Some of it had to do with for-profit medicine and the way that they monetize everything. Now they have pre-diabetes so they could use more drugs and so forth. But one thing that has changed for me to some degree is I'm quite skeptical of many medical treatments because I know where they come from and that they are profitable. But the pandemic did change a lot of the way I've looked at the medical profession, seeing how heroic a lot of these doctors are. I mean, my gastroenterologist got reassigned, and they all had to work in the ER, and nobody even knew what they were doing in terms of PPE and so forth. And so I've evolved a little bit because politically, I tend to be progressive, that's part of my identity, I know everything that's bad about medicine, but at the same time I did back up a little bit and realize the medical community is important and some people do go into it for the right reasons, and they really are



quite heroic, not just doctors but the staff. I hope that kind of infused itself in the book. And I do remember, when I was working at Woodhull, one of the midwives said, “Hey, put your book down. You’re going to like this. Come on, come on, come on.” A Latino couple was giving birth, and she let me put my hands on the baby as it was coming out. She put her hands over my hands. I wasn’t literally—but because I was Asian, they thought I was the doctor. They were all excited. To have that experience when you actually see the baby go from a fetus to breathing. It was so helpful for me to be like, “Yeah, this is what Yungman likes to do. That’s why he does it.” Honestly, I didn’t know why I made him an OB/GYN, except that I wanted it to be something essential, like what my father did. Being an OB/GYN is a very difficult profession. You do surgery, but you don’t get any respect because you’re primary care. That fits all my categories for fiction.

James Shaheen: Well, Yungman strikes me as a very moral person and at the same time bereft of his culture and also compassionate, but at the same time, he starts to confront the hollowness of the American dream, I think. Is that fair to say?

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: And he’s kind of a jerk sometimes too.

James Shaheen: Yeah, he can be. He can be, but he really does fight for his patients, and he really is fully present for them. Yeah, he can be a jerk to his wife, to his son, but we can all be. But he’s a very compelling figure at the same time. You end up feeling for him.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Right. And I do think that he is coming up against the idea, again, the Middlemarchist idea. He wants to do the right thing. He wants to help people. He has all this training. What can he do? And then working at the mall depilating pubic hair becomes the closest thing he can do, and it’s not great.

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Episode #73 with Marie Myung-Ok Lee

“Remembering the Forgotten War with Marie Myung-Ok Lee”

May 11, 2022



James Shaheen: Right, but he does find Doctors Without Borders, he does go to North Korea with his wife, and it answers his need to be of service and to be a doctor for all the right reasons and at the same time to come full circle and honor his ancestors or his family.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Right. But then we also see that Yung-ae, because of the war, because of her pregnancy, was never able to be a doctor as well. Part of the book is really about the consequences of war. This was just never going to happen for her.

James Shaheen: Right, she is his wife, I just want to make that clear since we hadn't mentioned her.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Thank you, Yung-ae is his wife, and she never gets to live the life that she wants to lead or that she has been prepared to lead because of history. That's happening all over the world right now.

James Shaheen: Well, Marie, there's so much in the book, and not only is the character development wonderful, but it certainly teaches us about a part of our own history, our own collective history on the Korean peninsula that many of us simply don't know. So I'd like to thank you for that.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Thank you for saying that. That's how I'm hoping people are going to read it.

James Shaheen: Oh, good. Then I read it the right way. I always wonder about this. So Marie Myung-Ok Lee, it's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Evening Hero* out this month. Thanks, Marie.

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Marie Myung-Ok Lee: Thank you so much. It’s always a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for reading the book so closely and wonderfully.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Marie Myung-Ok Lee. We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!