

Tricycle Talks
“Living Between Worlds”
Episode #98 with Amy Yee
March 12, 2024



Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Amy Yee: A comment I got from some people who hadn't read the book, they would say, “Oh, your book is about refugees, it must be depressing.” And that made me realize that's what some people associate with refugees. I think that many of the stories in the book are inspiring, and that's ultimately what kept me on track to write it. So there is a lot of sadness and tragedy, but there's also incredible resilience and inspiration. I think in these days we need that.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Amy Yee. Amy is an award-winning journalist, most recently with Bloomberg and previously with the Financial Times. She has reported from more than twenty countries, and her work focuses on social change and cultural identity. Her new book, *Far from the Rooftop of the World: Travels among Tibetan Refugees on Four Continents*, follows the stories of four Tibetans over the course of fourteen years as they forge new lives in exile in India, the United States, Belgium, and Australia. In my conversation with Amy, we talk about her fateful encounter with the Dalai Lama that sparked her interest in the stories of Tibetan refugees, how the Tibetan communities she encountered preserve their cultural heritage in exile, what happens when a religious tradition takes root in a new environment, and how she hopes the book will contribute to larger conversations around forced migration. So here's my conversation with Amy Yee.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with journalist Amy Yee. Hi, Amy. It's great to be with you.

Amy Yee: Great to be here. Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: Our listeners can't know this or know the difference, but I'm sitting in the same room with Amy, so it's a real treat. So Amy, we're here to talk about your new book, *Far from the*

Tricycle Talks

“Living Between Worlds”

Episode #98 with Amy Yee

March 12, 2024



Rooftop of the World: Travels Among Tibetan Refugees on Four Continents. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Amy Yee: Yeah, the book is narrative nonfiction, so it's meant for a general audience, and it starts in March 2008. At the time, I was a journalist for the *Financial Times* based in India, so I was already living there and working, and in March 2008, my editor asked me slash told me to get to a press conference that was happening in Dharamsala in India, which is in the northern part of the country and where the Dalai Lama lives in exile along with thousands of Tibetans. I was actually in the south part of India the day before and quickly had to get up to the northern part within 12 hours to get to this press conference. I was in Bangalore, actually. So I was late to the press conference because I had to go back to Delhi and then fly to Amritsar near the Pakistan border and then take a five- or six-hour Jeep ride up the mountain roads. So I was late to the press conference and was literally running into it. There were no seats left, so I had to sit on the floor.

After the press conference, the Dalai Lama could see me very well. So he made a beeline toward me after the press conference and was so excited to see someone who is ethnically Chinese. I'm Chinese American, born in the US, but he was really excited and came over to me and said, “Chinese?”

And I just said, “Oh, I'm American,” but he was really excited, and then he kind of pinched my cheeks like a grandfather would and then said to me, this is in front of the press conference full of journalists and photographers, and he said to me, “China and Tibet, we must discuss. It's between us, and you must tell them.” And then he hugged me. That photo went out on Reuters and Associated Press and went out in newspapers around the world, and that was completely unexpected, and that was the very beginning of my first minutes in Dharamsala.

So that's the start of the book, but I didn't write the book because the Dalai Lama told me to, and some people have said that, and so I just want to say that's not why. The reason I wrote the book



was while I was in Dharamsala for the next week or so reporting and writing for the newspaper, I was really amazed at the town and the people there, and amazed by what I was seeing of Tibetans in exile. They were marching peacefully in the streets, holding demonstrations, candlelight vigils, all of this.

In Tibet itself, the reason why there was this press conference was there was tumultuous unrest and violence happening. There were protests that had become violent. And so China's government was forcefully cracking down. And so that's why this was big news of the day and that's why this press conference was happening. It was the worst violence and unrest in greater China since Tiananmen Square in 1989. So it was a big deal. And then back to my first few days there, I was just completely amazed at what I was seeing. Tibetans protesting peacefully and demonstrating in the streets of Dharmasala, holding signs about human rights, and if you did something similar in Tibet, you would be arrested or worse. And that's what we were seeing happening in this parallel universe in Tibet. And I was really fascinated with this display of Tibetan culture and identity. Again, that would be repressed in the homeland itself, but really fascinated with that and how Tibetans in exile, especially ones who were born in India, who had not been to Tibet, preserve that and keep it alive. So that's something really interesting to me as someone who's Asian American.

James Shaheen: So this all started with an article you were going to write for the *Financial Times*.

Amy Yee: Yes, during that week I wrote several articles. So, you know, as a reporter for a daily newspaper, you're just constantly working and writing, so I think that week I wrote a few articles and then I had thought I would go back and maybe write a magazine article. And then I thought, sell, maybe this could be a book because I looked around for a book exploring these issues of Tibetans in exile and culture and identity. And there's one very famous one from the 1980s by



John Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of the Snows*, if I'm getting the title correctly. But that was from 1984 and it's a bit more academic.

James Shaheen: Well in this book, all these years later, this book follows the story of three Tibetans living in exile, and you trace their lives across four continents and nearly two decades. So can you tell us a bit about their stories? How did you meet each of them, and what caused them to leave Tibet?

Amy Yee: So the person we meet in Chapter One in the book, his name is Topden, he left Tibet as a young man, and he was a monk from boyhood. And he and his cousin decided that they would go to India, and they thought they could study Buddhism more freely. I don't know how much they thought about it, but it was a feeling they had. I don't think Topden realized when he left as a young man, he might have been like 19 or 20 or even 18, I don't think he realized he would never be able to go back and that would be the last time he would see his family and his mother. He left a note for his mother saying he would be back soon, and that hasn't happened since he left. So he went to study in the south of India and was at a monastery there, where the biggest monasteries are.

And then Norbu, who we meet in the second chapter, was also a young man when he decided to leave Tibet and go to India, and his circumstances were different. He had been a boy of maybe 14, 13, possibly. He was a bystander near a protest in Lhasa and there was a big government crackdown. So he was swept up by the police, even though he wasn't participating in the protest. So he was imprisoned for three months, and he was interrogated and he was beaten. And when he came out of prison, he was blacklisted so he couldn't go to school. He also couldn't work. If he tried to find some kind of work, he said that authorities would come and stop him. And so this family was quite upset about this. His mother was crying a lot, he said. And so his brother told him, “Maybe you should go to India because what prospects do you have here?” So he left and it



was a really hard transition for him when he came to India. But by the time I met him, he was working as a chef in Dharamsala.

The third set of people, it's a couple, Deckyi and Dhondup, and I met them later in the year, not in my first days in Dharamsala. And they fled to India in the winter of 2008 as a direct result of what had happened in March during those protests that I mentioned. They had helped a monk friend photocopy some flyers. I think they said human rights, something like that. And there was a big government crackdown, still arrests were happening months after those protests, their friend was arrested. And as soon as they heard that he was arrested, they decided to leave. And I had asked them, I said, was it hard to decide to leave? Because they had carved out a decent middle class life for themselves, which is not easy for Tibetans. And they didn't have any connections either. They came from humble, ordinary backgrounds. And they had a nice house, Dhondup drew me a little map of the two story house and was definitely missing it when I met him when he was living in Dharamsala. But they said their fear was so great that they knew in an instant they had to leave. So they clandestinely arranged for someone to take them to the Nepal border so they could cross over. So I met them not long after they arrived in India, but I didn't know their story until a while later.

James Shaheen: Yeah, they had a nice middle class house, a television, all the modern amenities and you ask them, “Do you regret having left?”

Amy Yee: That's right. Yeah. So I asked that question of different Tibetans, and people had different answers. But when I asked Deckyi and Dhondup, Did you regret that because you photocopied 50 pieces of paper and you lost everything, your family, your home, your jobs. Deckyi miscarried when she was crossing over. They lost their baby and they haven't had children actually. And so I said, “Do you regret that?” And she said, “No, we don't regret it. We did something right. We did something good for Tibet.” And both she and Dhondup were very quick to say that.



James Shaheen: So while living in exile, all of these people managed to maintain cultural ties to their homeland. So how do Tibetan communities preserve their cultural heritage and identity in exile?

Amy Yee: There are many ways. One of the biggest ways was through the education system, the Tibetan education system in India and also in Nepal and also Bhutan, I think, but there are at least 80 Tibetan schools across India and they teach in Tibetan language. They also incorporate Tibetan history and geography, culture, and arts into their curriculum. And this is essential. In Dharamsala, the flagship school is called Tibetan Children's Village, which people refer to as TCV often, and, you know, it looks modest, but I think it's just such an important part of the preservation of the language and the culture. It's actually the focus of the fourth chapter in the book, although you may not realize it because it's sort of woven in. But I realized how important education was when I got to see the Dalai Lama speaking to a group of Tibetans who had just arrived from Tibet. And he does this with every group of Tibetans who arrive, so there's a bond between them. And he talked about the importance of education, which maybe one wouldn't expect. But he implored them and told them to study, to study hard, education is the most important thing. And so it really crystallized for me how important education is and was. It was the Dalai Lama's priority when he came into exile in India from 1959. It wasn't to start a monastery, it was to start a school. So that was one of his first priorities.

James Shaheen: You know, you imagine from generation to generation that that connection would become attenuated over time. But these communities in exile have adapted to their surroundings and often there's some degree of cultural blending that takes place where the culture is in many respects retained and at the same time it blends with the new host culture. So can you say more about this dynamic? What happens when a religious tradition takes root in a new environment? And it's interesting that I ask that because so much of what we do at *Tricycle* is about that.



Amy Yee: I think there are many ways this manifests itself. So there isn't one answer, but Tibetans who grow up in India, some of them, maybe many of them, feel quite an affinity with Indian culture too. And many of them may speak Hindi or another local language. There's a chapter where I'm in Karnataka in the south again. And a Tibetan woman I shared the auto rickshaw with, she's speaking Kannada, which is the language of Karnataka, fluently. And there's going to be some blending of culture, and it will vary from person to person. So it really depends on who you're asking.

There is another Tibetan that I met in Sarnath. Sarnath is a Buddhist holy city. The Dalai Lama was giving a teaching for a week. And there's a young Tibetan man who grew up in the north of India, and he said he felt like he was 40 percent Tibetan and 60 percent Indian. And that may be unusual, but for him, he said that pretty definitively. And, you know, it's sort of a humorous thing. There's no exact percentage. The answers could be quite different, and how people relate to the local culture in India will be different where they happen to live, like the experience of living in one of the settlements in Karnataka will be different than living in Darjeeling in the north. So it does depend, but there may be, you know, blending of culture, hybridization, but Tibetan culture and identity is part of it, for sure.

James Shaheen: And that continues from generation to generation, or we'll see, right?

Amy Yee: Yes, we'll see. I mean, the experience of someone who's Tibetan American in New York City is going to be different. I did go to Australia where one of the Tibetans I mentioned, he got asylum there. So Norbu got asylum in Australia. So I got to visit him and got to see the Tibetan community in Melbourne and Sydney, and it's a smaller community, but from what I could see, there's still retention of Tibetan culture and language. There are weekend schools for the children that I saw in Sydney, learning language, learning music and traditional dance. And I've seen that in Chicago as well and in New York. How well it's implemented depends, again, on the place and what structures are there, but there's definitely a big effort. It may not be as



immersive as living on a Tibetan settlement in India or in Dharamsala and going to the Tibetan children's village school, but it seems like there's still a connection.

James Shaheen: Right, it was nice to get to read a little bit about how it plays out in Australia. So I'm also curious how writing this book has changed your understanding of cultural and religious identity, including how it is formed and how it adapts over time. And also, I wonder, did you find your relationship with your own identity changed at all over the course of working on this project?

Amy Yee: I think our notions of identity shift and change, and I think for many people that can happen, you know, on a daily basis, according to what environment they're in. Your identity in your workplace or office may be different than it is at home. So accordingly, I think these notions can shift and change on a larger scale. Let's say for Topden, he's the monk who left Tibet to go to India. He ended up living in India for twenty or more years, and he speaks Hindi quite well. He feels an affinity for India. He actually ended up immigrating to the US. That's a big spoiler. But he has said that when he encounters Indian people in the US, he starts speaking to them in Hindi and then they feel this connection. And he goes to the Indian grocery stores in Queens to get his dal, so he has an affinity for Indian culture. There's a point in the book toward the middle where he starts to fall in love with an Indian woman.

Anyway, of course, people will adapt and shift and change according to their environments. Of course Topden is still Tibetan, but there's another layer as well. And then your second question about myself. I think one of the most interesting, surprising, wonderful things is that even though I'm ethnically Chinese, I'm Chinese American, I never encountered any hostility from Tibetans that I met in India. And as you heard from my very first interaction with the Dalai Lama, he literally reached out to me because I'm ethnically Chinese. And actually, Tibetans I met in Dharamsala and then in other parts of India were warm and welcoming. I don't think I could have written this book if they had been otherwise, really.



At the time when this first happened, I didn't think much of it because to me, I'm just me. I'm not the face of China's government, at least how I see myself, but other people can see me that way. And I've encountered that in other places where I've worked, let's say in Africa or in Europe, people will associate me with the government of China. And I really have nothing to do with that. I mean, I have a lot more responsibility to the US government where I can vote and pay taxes and grew up here. But Tibetan people didn't do that. So they didn't conflate me as an individual with the actions of a government or a country. And that is kind of unusual when you think of how many conflicts there are in the world and how easy it is to attribute something bad that's happening and you're looking for someone to blame.

And so it's pretty easy just to associate someone who looks like what you think your enemy looks like and blame them. And the Dalai Lama, he intentionally reaches out to Chinese people, and he has said, and this is in the book throughout, he says, “My faith in Chinese people is still there. My faith in the Chinese government is getting weaker and weaker, but I still have faith in Chinese people.” Actually, this is so interesting. Sometimes Tibetan people would be excited. They came up to me in India and thought I was Chinese from China, and then they would be disappointed when they found out I was American, a little less interested, a little less interested. I don't know how to explain it, but that's something that was surprising. It's just so counter to what you might think. It's pretty remarkable.

James Shaheen: You know, you also describe your encounters with Chinese democracy organizers in India. So can you tell us a bit about the relationship between these activists and Tibetan communities?

Amy Yee: Yeah, and then a lot of different kinds of people in my reporting in Dharamsala and other parts of India and then elsewhere in the world. There were quite a few Chinese democracy activists I met, especially in 2009, which was the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan exile. This is a big milestone for Tibetans.



And they were there to help commemorate this event, and the Dalai Lama for that day on March 10, 2009, he actually had many Chinese democracy activists on the stage with him. I mean, at the time it didn't faze me, but looking back now, I think that's pretty remarkable. Again, think of all the different conflicts in the world and with a leader of a country that's being besieged have people from “the other side” with them. I mean, it's really interesting, right? But the Chinese democracy activists I met, they see themselves very much allied with Tibetans because they want similar things. You know, they want human rights. They want people to feel safe, to be able to express themselves, to be able to move freely, think freely. And so one of the activists I met, his name is Chin Jin. He lives in Australia now. He sees himself completely allied with Tibetans.

James Shaheen: It was kind of funny. He's on the stage raising his voice and essentially yelling in contrast to the Dalai Lama is rather understated and quieter.

Amy Yee: Yeah, the approach is, the approach is different. The approach may be different. The sentiments foundationally are similar, very similar.

James Shaheen: You mentioned the word spoiler a few times, and I think that our listeners might wonder, spoiler, is it that sort of book? And I just want to say, the narrative writing is very strong, and you really do wonder, how did they find themselves having to leave Tibet? And what does happen next? And so it reads very much like a book that could have spoilers. But anyway, I just want to congratulate you on the strength of that narrative writing. It's a really easy book to read, a very engaging one.

James Shaheen: You mentioned the 50th anniversary commemoration, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to read a passage from that section of the book on page 107 here.

Amy Yee: This takes place on March 10th in 2009, and this is such a momentous date for Tibetans. And so this passage takes place later in the afternoon after the big ceremony in the morning with the Dalai Lama and I crossed paths with Samdhong Rinpoche, who was the prime



minister of the exile government at the time, and he's an older man. We just then had a conversation, which you can do if you just bump into the prime minister of the exile government. I think he was in his 60s or 70s at the time. And in March 2009, the atmosphere was extremely somber because it was a year from the protests and there had been a really harsh and tight crackdown in Tibet and there was a communications blackout. No one knew what was going on. There was anxiety about whether there would be more violence like the previous year. Samdhong Rinpoche told me that and expressed that. But then I asked him more about his personal perspective.

Samdhong Rinpoche seemed to visibly relax when I asked what the fiftieth anniversary of Tibetan exile meant to him. He sat up a little straighter and for a moment his fatigue vanished. In the exhibition at the Tibet Museum, there were photos of Samdhong Rinpoche from over the years. One showed him as a much younger man, his face not yet gaunt and strained. Some of that vitality returned for a moment.

“My memories of my life spent in Tibet are more clear than memories of yesterday,” he declared nostalgically. Samdhong Rinpoche looked into the distance and smiled. “I remember the colors and shapes of trees in our monastery and the friends we debated with. The last fifty years have seen tremendous change, unbelievable change. So I'm satisfied in many ways. The last fifty years have been the darkest in our history, but Tibetan culture has spread to all corners of the world. His Holiness is respected all over the world. That is a great achievement. We have modern education and at the same time traditional education. We must be satisfied.”

In spite of his weariness, Samdhong Rinpoche was hopeful about the future. “The rigidness of Chinese leadership will also change. I hope the next leadership will be more open and transparent,” he explained. “Sooner or later, China will have to be more democratic. Then the Tibet issue will be properly resolved. We have not wasted the past 50 years. We have used them properly.”



James Shaheen: Thank you. So could you share a bit about the resilience of the Tibetan people in the face of such oppression and loss? How did the Tibetan communities you encountered maintain a sense of hope?

Amy Yee: I mean, I think I just saw this in so many ways. The peaceful resistance was very much alive and vibrant when I was there in Dharamsala and elsewhere that I've seen around the world. So that's happening. And I've gotten questions about, "Oh, we don't have Tibet in the news much these days." And I'm like, well, news responds to crises, as I know from being a journalist, and it doesn't mean these things aren't happening. So the resistance is still going on and the advocacy and the campaigning, that's been happening. And then in terms of how people have coped with their personal experiences and setbacks and losses. I mean, I can only just say my observations of people, they were somehow able to take it in stride.

And so Norbu, for example, I didn't know about his loss of leaving Tibet and his family until later, and I didn't realize how deeply not being able to see his family had affected him, meaning I couldn't tell, like he seemed very cheerful and jovial and friendly every time I was with him. But there was one morning when I had just gotten off the 12-hour overnight bus from Delhi and I had to just go for a walk. And it was like 6:30 in the morning. I decided to go to the kora, which is the holy circuit that you walk in Dharamsala, some people may know. And I was surprised to see him there too. And we were both surprised to see each other. And it turns out that he does that every morning. And I was like, Oh, that's cool. I mean, he was this youngish man who looks like a hipster. So it was a little surprising to see him. But then later he told me he goes to do that every morning because he's praying so that he could see his mother one day. And then later when I saw him again in Australia, he was still trying to do that.

He told me he was trying to get a visa to get to Tibet to see his aging mother, and he had become an Australian citizen, and he still was denied a visa. So, you know, he had lost so much, and when he described what he had lost, he did it in a very measured way. And at one point, when he was telling me about losing his family, never being able to go home again, and this was when he



told me about his arrest, and then he was blacklisted as a teenager, he said, “Since then I lost my chance.” And it was just such a poignant way to describe what had happened to him. I mean, he didn't say “This ruined my life and I lost everything.” It was such an understated way to say what had happened to him. So I don't know how to explain it. I should probably ask him, but being able to take things like that in stride.

And then I met so many other people who had been tortured in prison for years in Tibet. And when I met them, for example, Ama Adhe, who is this very pivotal figure, I think she died fairly recently. I think she was in her eighties. So when I met her, she was in her seventies. She was an older woman. She'd been in prison for 29 years, I think. And if you meet her, you don't get that sense. She was working at the reception center in Dharamsala where Tibetans go when they first arrive and was helping people. And she seemed very cheerful and friendly. Again, no sign of animosity towards me, even though she's seeing a Chinese face, right? No sign of animosity at all. And she said that she wasn't mentally well for a while, but through the Dalai Lama's teachings and encouragement, she was able to let go of her anger. So that's all I can say. I don't know exactly how she did it.

James Shaheen: So did you find that Buddhist practices and teachings influenced how they related to loss and exile?

Amy Yee: I would think so. And again, we never explicitly talked about it with people I interviewed. I didn't say “How has Buddhism affected how you're dealing with trauma,” but maybe I should in the future. But I think these ideas of interdependence and impermanence, I think they are important. And, you know, something notable about interdependence is that it's not just you, and that's just my like lay person's understanding. Sometimes the way we in the West understand things that happen to us, it's about me, I'm the victim, and then I don't know how to explain this, but Tibetan people seem to see it as a larger part of something else. It's not just about them. It's not necessarily like a self-centered perspective, and this is slightly tangential, but I remember a comment that some Tibetans in Dharamsala made to me. I had said something



joking about the twelve-hour bus ride from Delhi, which goes up and down these mountain roads.

James Shaheen: By the way, the travel stories are great. I could feel myself on those buses and trains and I remember, but they weren't just exhausting, they were also pretty interesting.

Amy Yee: They were interesting and quite an adventure. But I had mentioned the bus ride and they can be dangerous sometimes. I mean, the buses do fall off the mountain road sometimes because the driver falls asleep or they don't change the drivers usually. I mentioned something like, “Oh, you know, you could die on this bus ride.” And they were like, “We're not worried about that. If that happens, that just happens.” And they were serious. They weren't being ironic or joking. And that might say something about a Tibetan mentality. Like this is just going to happen.

James Shaheen: So though the book highlights the gritty realities of life in exile, it's also filled with humor and celebration. Could you share a bit more about the role of humor as the practice of resistance and survival?

Amy Yee: As a reporter, I'm just writing what I'm observing. So I didn't have a particular agenda at all. And so I'm just writing. When someone says something funny, it's just there. And sometimes people would say things that were humorous all the time. I don't think they were consciously like, “Oh, this is a form of resistance or something.” It was just part of their worldview and their mindset. So this is the last chapter, and again, it is a spoiler because Topden and I are in New York City. And he had immigrated here. And we're in the Natural History Museum, which New Yorkers know it's this iconic museum with the dinosaur skeletons. And there are also animal dioramas of different countries, and they have a Tibet section. So there's a diorama of the Potala Palace and Tibetan traditional costumes. And there are animals, and we were looking for the yak. And we looked all over for the yak. And I said, oh, of course there has to be a yak because it's so essential to Himalayan culture. And we looked around and there was



no yak. And then Topden, he's so funny, he said, Oh, there's no yak. Where's the complaint box? And he was joking and we had a laugh about that. But yeah, so perhaps the Natural History Museum should have a yak.

James Shaheen: I never thought about that, but there is no yak. After years of going there, I don't remember a yak.

Amy Yee: They should have a yak. But that was so funny. So Topden would say things like that. I mean, there were just many humorous moments. So this has to do with more of the celebration as well, but I got to see a Losar celebration in Melbourne. Losar is the Tibetan New Year, which is a big day of the Tibetan calendar. And when I was in Dharamsala in 2009, the Tibetan community decided not to celebrate Losar to show solidarity with their compatriots in Tibet who were going through so much turmoil and anguish. So it was like a blackout of Losar. So then fast forward, I think, seven years or six years to Melbourne, and I got to see Losar in Australia. And it's summer in Australia at that time. It was quite a party. You know, it was in a community hall in this neighborhood, I think, called Collingwood. I didn't know what to expect, and I walk into this community hall and it was like Tibetans and all their traditional garb from different styles of dress from all over Tibet.

And then people were making momos and there was a traditional Tibetan dance. But then at some point the DJ said, “It's time to disco.” And it was time to disco. And everyone was whooping and dancing. “Gangnam Style” was really popular at the time. And so everyone started doing the horse galloping dance. And it occurred to me that, you know, probably some of the Tibetans doing “Gangnam Style” had actually galloped across the Tibetan plateau on real horses. And there was a Tibetan man dancing with his boots and kind of a cowboy hat that might've been Australian but looked Tibetan as well. But, you know, he was holding a Foster's beer, you know, so Australian. That was just a joyous thing to behold. And it definitely makes you smile. It's not humorous per se, but it's something that I recall very fondly.



James Shaheen: You also write about the huge celebrations at Australia Day where Tibetan monks were marching alongside Star Wars club bands.

Amy Yee: That’s right. Yeah, so this is another example of that blending of culture. So Australia Day is January 26, and it can be a little controversial, kind of like Columbus Day here. So I think the Australian government is trying to make it more of a multicultural day. So a Tibetan man I had met invited me to join the Tibetans as they were marching in the parade. So I go down to the CBD in Melbourne, which is the Central Business District. I was looking for the Tibetans and there was just a sea of humanity, like every possible ethnic group, special interest groups. So there were Thai dancers and their outfits and then Filipino drummers and acrobats. And then also the Star Wars fan club, so people wearing their Star Wars gear, and then skateboarders club, the Doctor Who fan club, like everything you could imagine. And then I was looking for the Tibetans and then I saw someone carrying the Snow Lion flag, and then I could see them in the sea of humanity and join them. So, you know, it was this lovely example of people showing their culture and their heritage, but such a mix of all different things. And I interviewed a Tibetan man in the parade. He had recently come from India and originally from Tibet, but he said he was so proud to be in the parade and be Tibetan, but also becoming Australian now too. But he said, “It is a sheer honor.” And so I think I made that the subtitle of the chapter as well. So it's just like a beautiful thing to see.

James Shaheen: You know, you said that you wanted to focus on stories of ordinary Tibetan people in exile as a way to make these larger questions of human rights and forced migration more concrete and more human. Can you say something more about this decision? What are your hopes for how the book contributes to the larger conversation around exile and forced migration?

Amy Yee: Yeah, so just on ordinary Tibetans, there are a lot of books about the Dalai Lama and then a lot of the higher profile leaders in the Tibetan community write memoirs or autobiographies or their biographies of them. So I tend to focus on underreported stories of people, and that goes across just any kind of journalism I do, actually, and that's become more.



galvanized within the last ten years. So that's what I've been doing in the US for the last couple years. It's what I was doing in Africa. So focusing on people whose voices don't get heard.

Ordinary people are the vast majority, right? And so they're most representative, even though we can't stereotype too much. But here are a few examples where you get a portrait of what this looks like. So, that was important to me, and I didn't realize at the time when I started writing it how much I try to focus on ordinary people in general, especially people whose voices don't get heard.

And then in terms of what I want the book to achieve, I don't have a particular agenda, but I can say that it took a very long time to get this book published because it was really hard to find a publisher. And the thing that kept me going was that I really thought that the stories of the Tibetan people I met, like Topden, that they had extraordinary stories, and I felt like they should be heard and remembered and shared. I would say that's the thing that kept me going because there were many obstacles and a saner person would have given up, actually. So I had a lot of doubts about myself, but I never doubted that their stories should be heard. And so it would keep me motivated and galvanize me. I can say that for other kinds of journalism I've done, whether it's in Bangladesh or Africa, you know, there are a lot of obstacles to get any article published. And I would just think about that person I interviewed at the base of the volcano in the Congo or whatever, and think that that person's quote should be heard. And so on a larger scale, that's how it felt with the people in the book.

James Shaheen: You know, Amy, you're a journalist. You've written for the *Financial Times*, *Bloomberg*. I mean, this is your profession. And usually we think of journalists reporting on people from whom they have some degree of distance. And yet you became friends with these people. You came to love them. And you just mentioned, I mean, the spoiler's been done, he came here to New York and you and Topden went to the museum together. So how do you navigate those dual roles of both journalist and friend?



Amy Yee: That's an interesting question, and some journalists who have moderated some of my talks, they've asked that because they're really interested in the boundaries. So as a reporter, if I'm reporting on something like politics or a government figure or someone who's a public figure, in that case, you're going to have some professional distance. And then in the case of the Tibetans who I followed over a long period of time, and I didn't expect this to happen, by the way, that I would keep following them for so long, I don't need to stay as objective because it's not now about politics or an agenda. It's about what's happening to them. And so I'm just observing what's happening to them personally. And then also the way I write about it in the book is you know where I stand, so I'm not just this omniscient narrator, I'm with them, and you know sometimes how I'm feeling about something they're saying. So it's a different kind of narration. It's still journalistic, but it's not necessarily like the reporter newspaper role of reporting on big events or public figures. My duty is to get some insight into the intimacy of their lives. I will say I do keep in mind that they are humans and people, so I've definitely asked them at times, “Is it OK for me to write about this?” So I have said that sometimes, and that's why I did change their names, just to keep some privacy and confidentiality for them for their personal lives.

James Shaheen: One last question, and this does come up in the book. It's broached in the book. We look at China and Tibet and think of Tibet and China as these mortal enemies, these sworn enemies, which is not how the Dalai Lama looks at it. But in fact, there's a very long history here, a history of cultural exchange and influences and counter influences. How often were people looking at that bigger and longer history?

Amy Yee: I think it's integrated. Again, I never explicitly asked a question quite like that, but Tibetans I met in India and Australia who are from Tibet, they didn't necessarily see a Chinese person as an enemy or an adversary. And I asked Topden in the very first chapter, within the first few pages. We're watching a basketball game because he loves basketball. And I said to him, “So you don't dislike Chinese people? You're not afraid of me?” And he was like, “I'm not afraid of



Chinese people, I'm not afraid of you. We don't like the government.” And then he's like, “Can I watch the basketball game now?” So I don't know quite how to explain why that is, but that was the case. In Australia I asked that question of a former political prisoner, he's a Tibetan I met in Dharamsala and I bumped into him on the street in Sydney. We were so surprised to see each other. And I also asked him later, I said, “So you don't feel afraid of Chinese people? You don't dislike them?” He's like, “I don't dislike Chinese people. In fact, when I was in prison, I was friends with Chinese people.” That's what he said to me because who are the other people in a prison in China or Tibet? There are probably going to be some Chinese people. So it was again extraordinary that they didn't conflate me or a person with a Chinese face. I don't quite know how to explain it. I should just also add that there's a lot of shared struggle between ethnically Han Chinese people. I mean, they have suffered immensely as well. I mean, maybe in a different way than Tibetans, but about 47 million people have died in China since 1948 or 1949. And so, yeah, people might not talk about it or think about it that way, but there's a lot of suffering across China as well.

James Shaheen: Amy, anything else you'd like to add before we close?

Amy Yee: A comment I got from some people who hadn't read the book, they would say, “Oh, your book is about refugees, it must be depressing.” And that made me realize that's what some people associate with refugees. I think that many of the stories in the book are inspiring, and that's ultimately what kept me on track to write it. So there is a lot of sadness and tragedy, but there's also incredible resilience and inspiration. I think in these days we need that.

James Shaheen: Well, that certainly comes through in the book. So Amy Yee, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Far from the Rooftop of the World*, available now. Thanks again, Amy.

Amy Yee: Thank you so much.

Tricycle Talks

“Living Between Worlds”

Episode #98 with Amy Yee

March 12, 2024



James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Amy Yee. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate.

We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think.

If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts.

Tricycle Talks is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!