



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **Professor Emily Yeh Advocates for Environmental Protection for Tibetan's Cultural Legacy**

Professor Emily Yeh is a Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she researches the nature-society relationship in political, cultural and developmental relations in the mostly Tibetan parts of China. Although she majored in electrical engineering and computer science at MIT, while interning in China, she realized that her understanding of sustainable development needed to be further explored. Her first visit to Tibet proved to be life changing, and Yeh has committed her career to advocating for environmental justice for the Tibetan people. In this conversation, Professor Yeh discusses her climate justice work for Tibetan herders, her experience at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and how climate change is impacting Tibetans' ability to keep their culture alive.

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Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and

present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today I'm delighted to welcome Professor Emily Yeh. Professor Yeh is a professor of geography at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she conducts research on nature society relations and development, mostly in Tibetan parts of China. She has written about political ecology of pastoralism, conflicts over access to natural resources, vulnerability too, and knowledge of climate change, the cultural and ontological politics of nature conservation, and the conjunctional production of environmental subjectivities. She regularly teaches classes on political ecology, development, environment and society, geography, contemporary China, and research design, and has served as president of the American Association of Geographers in 2021 through 2022. Welcome, professor.

Emily Yeh: Thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Fred Lawrence: Emily, when I'm on campus and probably when you've been doing your campus visits as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, one of the questions I get asked a lot by students is to help them think through what the path is going to be from campus to their careers, and they seem to think it's a very linear path. Now, your path has not exactly been a linear one. You attended MIT, majored in electrical engineering and computer science, got master's degrees in those similar subjects, and yet you have spent your scholarly career in the field of geography. So if you would, tell us a little bit about your childhood journey, how that gets you to MIT, and then what happens after MIT that leads to geography.

Emily Yeh: Yes, thanks. I do get that question a lot from anyone who looks at my CV. I grew up in an immigrant family. My parents' generation were pretty much all scientists and engineers, and as a kid I did a lot of math competitions and I went to a public school that was focused on science and engineering. I will say that I feel very fortunate given what I do now, that there was also excellent History and English and so forth, and I had an interest in writing the whole time, but I was very much sort of reared to think about science or engineering as the path that was laid for me.

I had an uncle who taught at MIT. I had a cousin who went there a few years before I did, although he ended up becoming a political scientist. So I went there and wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. Electrical engineering was a very common major and I took a few classes and I thought, oh, this is okay, I can do it. But as I was doing that, I did some summer internships and realized that I really actually wanted to do something that felt socially relevant. But again, I think I had invested enough time that I decided to continue the degree.

And then for my master's, I enrolled in a program called the Technology and Policy Program, and what it really was was a program for people who had done engineering

and physics and other sciences who wanted to make a difference in society, but didn't quite know how to make that transition. That really allowed me to explore. I took classes at the Kennedy School. I took language classes through Harvard.

Fred Lawrence: The Kennedy School, the Public Policy School at Harvard University?

Emily Yeh: Yes, and I also took a class in the urban studies department at MIT, which was taught by someone who had done his research on rural development in Sub-Saharan Africa, and this was very eye opening for me that one could actually do that as a career, and I decided subsequently that I wanted to go where he had done his PhD and that was the Energy and Resources Group at UC Berkeley. In the interim, I also went to live in China for a year after my master's degree. I was an intern at the China's Agenda 21 Center, which was the institution that had been set up after the 1992 Rio Conference, the UN Rio Conference-

Fred Lawrence: The first UN Climate change conference, which really launches the whole field, doesn't it?

Emily Yeh: That's right. And so China had set up a center for sustainable development essentially, and as part of that, I really grasped onto this idea of sustainable development as something I wanted to work on.

Fred Lawrence: And yet obviously there was a pull back there, and that period in the early nineties is a particularly exciting time in terms of the issues you were interested in China, isn't it?

Emily Yeh: Yes, it was looking back, a time of great transition in terms of liberalization and this transformation out of a high socialist period into a market economy. It was shortly after Tiananmen Square. I will admit freely that when I went, I really did not know any of those things. I just went because my parents told me to, but I got very fascinated once I was there with everything I was seeing, which was very different from anything I had seen before. And I went to Tibet quite accidentally as a tourist and really it was very different from anything I had experienced before, the cultural landscape as well as the physical landscape.

Fred Lawrence: So you first went to Tibet as a tourist. If at that moment I'd taken you aside and said, this is actually where you're going to spend a major piece of your scholarly focus, would you have said, not a chance, or would you have said, yes, that actually makes sense?

Emily Yeh: I think when I first went there I would've said, not a chance, because what I do now was very much I think, not something I understood was a possibility for someone to make as a career. But after I had been there a few times, I mean, I really fell in love with the place and it is still one of my favorite places, but I didn't know how to make that happen, and so a lot of my subsequent PhD program was slowly grasping at this field that I work in now where I got a foreign language fellowship and was able to

spend that time to study Tibetan, something I had not imagined was possible. And then living in Lhasa for a year studying Tibetan really solidified my passion for the place and also my determination to make something happen there for me.

Fred Lawrence: Which is causing which? Do you think being there got you interested in thinking about issues of nature and society and political power and environmentalism, or did you bring that lens to bear on Tibet?

Emily Yeh: That's a great question. I think the two evolved together. I had been interested in college in environmental activism, but again, it was just a side interest of mine, rather than being the focus of my academic studies. Living in China, I accepted this internship with the center because I was interested in sustainable development, but being there really helped me, I think, deepen a conceptualization of what I thought I meant by sustainable development, and even some of the problems with the term sustainable development and thinking about human environment relations in different terms. So I think it really co-evolved. I was interested in the environment. I was very much struck by the environment there - erosion issues, forests, very different kind of ecosystem that I hadn't really seen before - and then coming back to do coursework and thinking about human environment relations, politics, and power through what I had seen.

Fred Lawrence: So let's talk a little bit about the politics and power piece of some of these environmental issues. How would you describe the role of natural resources, conflicts, and political power?

Emily Yeh: Yes, so I guess I would start by saying, when I'm talking about politics and power, I mean that very broadly. Sometimes when we hear the word politics in the newspapers in the U.S., we think only about electoral politics, and so that certainly matters. We can certainly see many examples here at home of electoral politics, party politics around declaration of nature reserves or drilling or whatever, but I mean it a little bit more broadly, so differential access to relations are shaped by relationships of power. Some people have more access than others. Some people get to define what needs to be protected or what needs to be exploited or what needs to be used in certain ways, and that can happen at multiple scales. It can happen within households, for example. Divisions of labor, who has control over how many livestock to keep or what to do with the income from that, and it can happen through culture and so on.

So in terms of natural resource conflicts, one of the first pieces of work I did as a graduate student was to come to learn that there were lots of conflicts between households, between communities, and even provinces over grassland rights among Tibetan pastoralists, and the typical narrative might be, oh, maybe there's a conflict because there's not enough grassland. Or maybe those two tribes of Tibetans just have had a long ongoing conflict, and so they need better rules or regulations.

But if you actually start to look at the reasons why these conflicts occur, they have a lot to do with the way property rights were established by the state, and they have a lot to do with the ways in which these areas were incorporated into the People's Republic of China and territories drawn. They also have a lot to do with the imposition of fencing and actually division of more privatized property rights into what used to be more collective. And so there's power relations in terms of big politics of Tibet's incorporation into China. There's politics over property rights, and then there's some politics over who gets to resolve these conflicts.

Fred Lawrence: More recently, in 2022, you were part of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt, which if I have it right, nearly 200 countries were represented on the 30th anniversary of Rio de Janeiro. How did you come to be at that and tell us a little bit about what that experience was like?

Emily Yeh: Yes, it was absolutely fascinating. I've been interested in climate change for a long time. My interest started with concerns about climate justice for Tibetan herders, but I had never been to one of these conferences, and I joined a project focused on event ethnography of different aspects of the conference, of the parties. So I went with one of my doctoral students with a focus on trying to understand China's role at the COP, thinking about the question of climate justice. How does China's negotiating position perhaps advance climate justice on at one scale, while maybe also blocking efforts to climate justice on another scale? Anyone who wants entry into the negotiating spaces needs to get a badge through an observer organization. There are many, many research and independent NGOs that do have a certain number of badges, and so I was able to get one through a local non-governmental environmental organization here. It was fascinating. It was a little bit depressing, I will have to admit.

Fred Lawrence: I was going to ask you, what were your expectations going in and were they met or not met and how?

Emily Yeh: I didn't know quite what to expect, and I was surprised by just some of the mundane aspects of the conference. So for example, I focused on the negotiating sessions and I heard many sessions start with things like, my delegation did not get the email on time, so we did not have a chance to read through the documents. So we don't have-

Fred Lawrence: Pretty prosaic stuff.

Emily Yeh: And that's not unexpected, and that's what ethnography is about, where you see how the sausage is really made. But still it surprised me how in some cases things didn't go very smoothly. Also, sometimes it was very interesting to try to figure out why certain countries took certain negotiating positions. There was one session where some countries were asking the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the scientific body, to undertake a comprehensive look at adaptation, and I thought that seems harmless enough. And the U.S. and Canada were very vocally against that. They

would say things like the IPCC is its own thing and we can't tell it what to do, and to this day, I don't know exactly why that was the case, but I have some speculations.

But one of my favorite examples was this footnote where there was a session on loss and damage, which was the big issue at last year's COP, and there was a document about it, and there was a little footnote that says, loss and damage does not mean legal liability, and so many developing countries delegates and negotiating groups said, we disagree with this footnote, because they didn't want it to exclude legal liability.

Fred Lawrence: They feel that it should at least plausibly lead to liability.

Emily Yeh: Exactly. And then the U.S. negotiator said, I agree with my colleagues that this footnote should not be there. It should be in the main text. So there were those sorts of things that were just very interesting. There were a lot of fossil fuel representatives there. There were more corporate pavilions than I expected. So that was something that was surprising. And then I was honestly, a bit depressed by some of the negotiating positions, which said, we don't want the cover text to mention any kind of fuel source. We only want to talk about parts per million. And this is very clearly a way for countries to say, we want to keep extracting fossil fuels. We're just going to use carbon capture use and storage underground. So those didn't leave me with great hope.

Fred Lawrence: Right. At the end of the day, if that's not going to change, that's got to put a limit on what's possible coming out of these conventions and reports.

Emily Yeh: I think one other difference from previous COPs is that the green zone, which is the un-credentialed or unbadged part, is usually, as I understand it, very full of resistance and activism, and because it was in Egypt, it was very muted. So I think having that other element would've made it feel maybe more hopeful in seeing the energy of those really, really pushing for-

Fred Lawrence: And future convenings will be in other countries where the approach to offsite demonstrations or opposition might be very different. One of the lectures that you're giving as a Visiting Scholar is entitled "Climate Change Injustice in Tibet: Impacts and Adaptation", which really brings several of our themes together: climate change, which I think we think of as well, both as a global issue, but obviously as a local issue and then bringing that to bear on your particular research in Tibet. What is your analysis on climate change injustice in Tibet?

Emily Yeh: So I think of justice and injustice along multiple lines: distributive, procedural, recognition, those are the main categories. So distributively, the issue around the world, and we can see this in Tibet as well, is that the people who have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions and who have benefited the least from those sorts of economic development that has resulted, are also most often the ones who are most harmed by the effects of climate change and who have the fewest resources to adapt to it. So you have a bunch of distributive inequities coming in there.

In the case of the Tibetan Plateau, some of the ways in which climate change has affected it is in terms of more extreme events. So on the Tibetan plateau, that takes the form of snowstorms, more extreme, more severe snowstorms, which cause livestock loss. Snowstorms are not new on the Tibetan plateau, but they're expected to become more frequent and more severe, and some of the traditional adaptation or coping mechanisms, which really involve mobility and flexibility, have been taken away through changing property rights. There's also expanding lakes on the Tibetan plateau because of melting glaciers and permafrost that has covered people's grasslands. These lakes are also saline because they're closed basins, and so you have expanding radiuses that cover grassland that herders need, and also further affect the soil quality.

Fred Lawrence: So even though these are not on the ocean where we think of salt water, this actually is saline, is salt, which is going to have a major impact on the grasslands, I would think.

Emily Yeh: Yes, that's right. And what it does, is really work together with other forces, other political and economic policies that are also pushing people off the land where they have ties to their traditional territories. One of the points I try to make as well is that climate change never happens in a vacuum, right? It's always happening together with a whole suite of other social-political factors, and so in the case of the Tibetan Plateau, it's affecting livelihoods, but it's also very much combining with assimilationist forces to dislocate people from their traditional ties to territory, to their sacred mountains, their sacred lakes, their ancestral homes.

I go through in that lecture a number of issues of climate change impacts in terms of injustice. They also include declining grassland quality, and then I turn to adaptation, and this is important because adaptation is clearly something we need. And yet we do see examples around the world where some policies that are enacted in the name of adaptation, actually end up being neither adaptive nor helpful to local people. So one of the issues is that a program to completely resettle people away from the grasslands has been also called a Climate Adaptation Policy. And so I draw on some work by colleagues who are ecologists that show that if you completely remove grazing in rising temperatures, you actually are harming the grasslands more than if you had rising temperatures with some grazers.

Fred Lawrence: The so-called adaptation is actually hurting more than it's helping.

Emily Yeh: Yes, absolutely. So that's true ecologically. And then of course, socially you have complete dislocation of people away from their skills, moving them to a different linguistic environment. You get subsidies that don't catch up with inflation, changing diets, changing health outcomes and so forth. So it's quite maladaptive.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us about the Shielding the Mountains Project.

Emily Yeh: That was a project that began in 2004 when I met, quite by accident, a couple of Tibetan environmentalists at a conference. So the typical story of Tibet that is told is

one of oppression and repression, and there's certainly a lot of it. But at that time, when I met these environmentalists, I was really struck by how creatively they were engaging their own communities in new forms of environmental protection work, and how they were using their encounters with Chinese environmentalists and transnational projects run by Conservation International, WWF, TNC, to connect their way of thinking about the non-human world with biodiversity conservation projects. It was a project of examining the kinds of work they were doing, like patrolling areas against hunters, cataloging species, planting trees among other things, and the ways in which they were thinking about those in terms of a variety of Tibetan terms and ideas and Buddhist practices, and making that connection with contemporary environmentalism.

And so Shielding the Mountains is one, it's also called Sealing the Mountains, so it's one practice that has a very long tradition in different parts of the Tibetan plateau, and people were saying, well, we didn't use to call it environmental protection, but that's in fact what this was, and so you can see that our practices are worthy of scientific consideration. But it was also a way for Tibetans to maintain a legitimacy for their cultural practices in a broader political context where most Tibetan activity is seen as superstition and subject to state repression, and so making those linkages was also a way for people to make space for their own cultural expression.

Fred Lawrence: Raising the ability to make a claim on what otherwise might be too easily dismissed.

Emily Yeh: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: I'm sure many of our listeners today are quite familiar with issues of climate change, environmental science, maybe even some particularly in the geographic areas that you've been working with in and around Tibet. But for some, this is all of interest, but new. I wonder if you could give us a couple of book suggestions to help build our reading list, some for those who are new to the topics, and some for those with some level of background who are looking to advance their knowledge.

Emily Yeh: Yes, sure. On the issue of climate change writ large and new ways of thinking about our climate crisis, for people who are looking for maybe a fun read or who are new to the topic, I've been reading Amitav Ghosh's, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, and yes, I really enjoy the very wide range. He starts with the Dutch colonialism and the nutmeg and goes all the way to thinking about the contemporary climate crisis and issues of terraforming, how western views of land can be seen to underpin our contemporary climate crisis. But he's just a wonderful writer. So I think I like that one.

Fred Lawrence: And it's all your issues of culture and climate and history and different societies affecting one another all come together, isn't it?

Emily Yeh: Yes, that's right. He really brings many, many different strands of what's at the forefront of our contemporary crisis together. For people who, this is not about the



Tibetan plateau, but it is a book that I read recently that I really enjoy about climate adaptation and some of the issues I mentioned earlier, about injustices and climate adaptation. Geographer Kasia Paprocki has a book called, *Threatening Dystopias: The Global Politics of Climate Change Adaptation in Bangladesh*, and this one shows how even though Bangladesh is a champion of climate justice at the conference of the parties, for example, how within the country, a lot of what's been recommended for climate adaptation is shrimp aquaculture. But shrimp aquaculture is something that peasant movements have been resisting for decades, because some of its effects of salinization actually are the same bad effects as climate change.

And so some of the things that have been attributed to climate change could plausibly be the result of some shrimp aquaculture, and it really dispossesses people of the land and causes them to move to the city. So that, I think, is just a very succinct reminder that climate change doesn't happen in a vacuum, and climate change adaptation policies really have to understand the context that they're happening in.

Fred Lawrence: We are so grateful this year to have had you as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. I know in some of your lectures, you rather provocatively say, let's talk about the weather, and people have no idea what you're about to take them through. But what you take them through is political power and political economy and culture and environmental science, and all of the issues that make your work as vibrant and important as it is. Thank you for bringing that to life through your scholarship. Thank you for what you do as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, and thanks so much for joining me today on Key Conversations at Phi Beta Kappa.

Emily Yeh: Yes, thank you so much for the conversation. I really enjoyed it.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media & Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our visiting scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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