

History in Focus

10. The Commodification of Tibet + A Look Ahead

Wednesday, January 4, 2023

Daniel Story

Happy New Year, and welcome to *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. A bit later on, we'll chat with *AHR* editor Mark Bradley about what he's looking forward to in the next few issues of the *AHR* and at the 2023 American Historical Association Annual Meeting, which takes place in Philadelphia, from January 5th to the 8th. But first...

Twin Peaks audio mentioning Tibet.

Daniel Story

We talk with Ohio State historian Lydia Walker about her article, "The Political Geography of International Advocacy: Indian and American Cold War Civil Society for Tibet," which examines how advocacy for Tibetan refugees led to a kind of humanitarian commodification of Tibet in the popular imagination of the West. I'm Daniel Story, and this is episode 10.

Lydia Walker

I am Lydia Walker. I'm an assistant professor in the Ohio State History Department. I'm an international historian of twentieth century decolonization and the Cold War in regions that we now call the global south. And the article that I'm very excited to discuss today is titled "The Political Geography of International Advocacy: Indian and American Cold War Civil Society for Tibet."

Daniel Story

So, Lydia, I wonder, what you reckon are some of the reference points or popularized ideas that the average American or Westerner might have about Tibet?

Lydia Walker

Yeah, so I was a '90s child. So, for me, it was really the Tibetan freedom concerts...

MTV VJs Kurt Loder and Tabitha Soren reporting from the 1996 Tibet Freedom Concert in San Francisco. Loud music from The Smashing Pumpkins can be heard in the background.

Lydia Walker

...and I would imagine maybe new age spirituality, and, of course, Chinese oppression. The question of Tibet gets wrapped into, sort of, spirituality and humanitarianism. And I think that portrayal continues. I don't really watch TV, I'm a boring academic, but I noticed that the book in Twin Peaks that the FBI officer carries around is like a travel guide to Shangri La.

Twin Peaks audio associating Tibet and Tibetans, in dire circumstances and in need of aid, with the metaphysical.

Lydia Walker

There's this kind of ongoing representation in media that really plays on the very same tropes that I try to untangle and historicize in my article.

Daniel Story

So my gut would say that that general popularized understanding of Tibet doesn't overtly link it to the Cold War context that you write about. So I wonder if you could take us back into that moment when the Tibetan issue came to be defined?

Lydia Walker

So 1947 is, uh, Indian and Pakistani independence and partition. Partition was a huge refugee crisis. The new independent government of India did not want international oversight, did not want the Red Cross. And the departing British colonizers also did not want international oversight. So that's 1947. 1949 is the end of the Chinese, uh, Civil War and the victory of the People's Republic of China. And Tibetan elites are really worried about what's going on here. We have a very young Dalai Lama - I think still a teenager - and he's a really important figure. He both benefits and is limited by the, uh, commodification processes that I articulate in my article, but it's very important to realize that the savvy politician he's become was not necessarily who he was in '49 or '59. In the article, the real action begins in '59 rather than '49. There's a lot happening in the 1950s. You have the Convention on the Status of Refugees in 1951. And then, 1959, when Tibetans arrived in India, is World Refugee year.

Audio from 1959 news reel showing Tibetan refugees arriving in India.

Lydia Walker

So the early 1950s, and really, the end of the Second World War, the issue of refugees and displacement globally is tremendous. So to be a refugee in 1959 is quite different than it had been a decade prior. You supposedly have all these, kind of, international structures and forums

for dealing with it. But India is not going to let them in. For, for Tibetans, those structures aren't in place. The Indian government is really trying to have it both ways—allowing the creation of the central Tibetan administration in Dharamsala but not actually allowing Tibetan petitions to the United Nations to go through the Indian delegation. Those actually go through the US delegation. So there's always this set of internal contradictions to Indian support for Tibet.

Daniel Story

So into this delicate situation comes two committees which you write about, the American Emergency Committee for Tibetan Refugees, which was headed by the broadcaster and longtime Tibet supporter Lowell Thomas, and, on the part of India, the Indian Central Relief Committee. What can you tell us about the emergence and work of these groups?

Lydia Walker

The Indian Central Relief Committee is run by the Kripalanis, Sucheta and J. B. Kripalani. Sucheta is a member of Nehru's governing Congress Party, while J. B. is actually a political foe who's very critical of Nehru's alleged oscillation towards China. Their leadership of the Indian Central Relief Committee gives Nehru a direct government connection, in Mrs. Kripalani, but the appearance of separation by having someone who's a political opponent, Dr. Kripalani, also running it. The American Emergency Committee gets tax exempt status incredibly quickly. Days after the Dalai Lama escapes to India, they're ready, and the donations start to flow from them to the Central Relief Committee in India. What I tried to do in the article was to demonstrate, through the pictures and descriptions of the pictures, how money was raised, the kind of language that was utilized by the Indian Relief Committee and the American Emergency Committee, these two committees that collaborated supporting Tibetan refugees, how they describe Tibetans, and the things that they're willing to do for Tibetans versus the things they're not willing to do for Tibetans. It was really about getting money to Tibetan refugees and supporting camps. The American Emergency Committee purchased a lot of pharmaceutical drugs and medicines and also had a lot of in-kind donations.

Daniel Story

So is there a connection to be drawn between our popular conceptions of Tibet today and the advocacy work of these committees?

Lydia Walker

I'd be hesitant to draw straight lines. The historian answer to everything is it's earlier and it's more complex. And that is always a bit of a cop out, but there is real truth to it. You could go back to sort of Victorian image making around the East more broadly, Highland Asia, and

Buddhism, which are, of course, all very different things and apply to very different peoples but often get conflated around Tibet. So you kind of have to pick your moment. And from my article, I picked 1959 and the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan exiles arriving in India - of course, going back to 1949, and the publicization of the issue of Tibet to a Western American audience. So 1949, the Tibetan regime around the Dalai Lama invites Lowell Thomas, an American broadcaster, to come to Tibet. So it had been very difficult for foreigners to come to Tibet; they needed to be invited. Um, if, and it was an, so it was difficult, uh, in terms of just the politics of it, but it was also difficult logistically - a very physically brutal journey through the Himalayas. And Thomas broadcasts this. And this is really important for how the issue of Tibet comes to be understood in the United States for decades to come. Before this, he had turned, uh, T. E. Lawrence into the celebrity, and he had also supported the Wilson administration during the First World War, sort of selling the war back to the domestic American public. So '49, he then shoots a film, and you get the sense of the commodification of Tibetans - uh, you know, the Dalai Lama sitting on a chrysanthemum throne. It's very kind of classic Orientalist language.

Audio from Lowell Thomas' film, Out of this World, describing a "mystic land" of Tibet

Lydia Walker

If you watch the film, you would have no idea that Thomas got there because the Indian government facilitated his journey. The film played as, "Oh, the Tibetans there, they're so naive. They think we're representing the US government. But, of course, we're just American broadcasters, just getting the story out." I think that's a really important moment for kind of outlining this perception of Tibetan naivete, but they're not actually. You know, they view Thomas as an agent of the American government, and that's why they invited him. And he kind of is. My interpretation is that he doesn't really consider himself that, but if you look at who he's corresponding to and the projects he then subsequently becomes involved with - and had been involved with previously - this is not a naive supposition. This is a long way of saying it's not just 1959 or 1949, but you have to pick your origin moment and then untangle how these conflicting forces unspool.

Daniel Story

So whether we look back to 1949, or to '59, what was the sum total of this advocacy work? And how did it play out?

Lydia Walker

The argument of the article is that this advocacy turned Tibet into a humanitarian commodity rather than a nationalist claim. But what are these processes? I mean, the literal is the pictures and that you need to take pictures and circulate images in certain ways in order to fundraise. It's also the scripting of events - how members of the American Relief Committee want to present the Dalai Lama. They want to present him as a deity and sort of play on him as a religious figure, but this is for a theoretical audience that knows little to nothing about Buddhism. So this is about the images, and the presentation, and the scripting of these events. And this is something that Tibetans themselves carry out. When you lack other forms of sovereignty, the hard stuff is this kind of performance. It's also a repertory that Tibetans utilize for making claims in public, accessing international publics, getting support - both political and financial - from those publics. These issues are ongoing, and how Tibetan elites are navigating them, the structures in place that they're utilizing, haven't changed. I mean, is that a symptom of not having your own country? I would say yes. But people use what's available to them, and they're quite practical and also strategic in that utilization.

Daniel Story

Right. So it's an imperfect approach, but it's the approach that's available.

Lydia Walker

Yeah. And I think, in the article, I, I uh, quote, a, uh, Tibetan intellectual who's responding to it - I think, in the later '60s - in a, uh, sort of newsletter that's published by the Central Tibetan Administration, and he really doesn't like what he sees, how it's affecting Tibetan society with kind of a new stratification between Tibetan elites who know how to participate in this sort of aid economy versus most ordinary Tibetans who are not. I'm a historian; I'm not here to say that something is good or bad. I'm here to show the complexities within these things like humanitarian aid that often get portrayed in very simplistic fashion. I think it's about hierarchies of power. And when you lack power, you do the best you can with what you have. And that doesn't mean that the tools you're using aren't double-edged and don't sort of come with their own limitations. But it also doesn't mean that not having them would make things any easier. The article is about the process of commodification and trying to pull back, sort of, all those elements and make sense of them. And it's something I'm ambivalent about myself because sometimes I'm concerned that writing about the commodification, are you perpetuating it? That's a question I grapple with in my own work. I haven't figured it out yet. And it may well be that it's the kind of puzzle you don't figure out, and you just sort of have to sit with and keep working on. And the attempts to do that is what generates scholarship.

Daniel Story

Thank you very much, Lydia, for talking with me about this.

Lydia Walker

Thank you so much for having me.

Daniel Story

That was Lydia Walker on her article, "The Political Geography of International Advocacy: Indian and American Cold War Civil Society for Tibet," which appears in the December 2022 issue of the *AHR*. Up next, we'll hear from *AHR* editor Mark Bradley.

Daniel Story

So I don't know if we'll use this, but I am curious to ask you, Mark, how long has it been now that you have been editor of the *AHR*?

Mark Bradley

This is '22; my first issue was September '21.

Daniel Story

Right.

Mark Bradley

But the reason that there's all this hesitation is just that, to do the redesign, we essentially needed an 18-month lead time, so it's felt like longer than I have.

Daniel Story

I see. Yeah. And, and how's it going?

Mark Bradley

Well, in many ways, I think it's just going really well. I mean, there, there is a newly-redesigned *AHR*. It hasn't, you know, looked different in 50 years, and now it looks very different. And there is, uh, you know, History Lab, which is a radical departure from the kinds of things the journal used to do before. You know, we've rethought the way in which we're doing reviews - feature reviews but also individual reviews. Um, you know, so it just seems like, substantively, there's, there's a lot that, that's changed, and has been, has been pretty exciting.

Daniel Story

If only you didn't keep getting pulled into the podcast segments, everything would be going just swimmingly, right?

Mark Bradley

Well, I actually think one of the things that's been really exciting that's happened over the last year is the podcast and the way you've taken them forward, Daniel. You know, it's not, it's not what the podcasts looked like before this kind of big redesign came. And, um, as you know, in fact, you're the one that's been kind of figuring some of this out - that the people who are starting to find the podcasts, there are more and more of them, as time goes by - on this sort of more narrative focus that you've taken and thinking about disaggregating issues and exploring different parts of those really seems to be something that's working well. So, um, thank you.

Daniel Story

Oh, thanks, Mark. I wasn't fishing for that, but I'll take it anyway.

Daniel laughs

Mark Bradley

Well it's all, I just had to write the annual report, um, over the last two days, so I just, kind of, have all these things sitting in my head.

Daniel Story

I see. Yeah. Okay, so I want to ask you, um, about, really, kind of two things, uh, around the theme of looking ahead. Um, and maybe let's start with, like, the most imminent thing first, which is the Annual Meeting. So we're recording this conversation in December of 2022. But the episode will actually come out on January 4th, the day before the Annual Meeting, I think, officially starts in Philadelphia. And, um, so I thought, you know, if anybody's listening on that day that the, the episode comes out, and they happen to be going to the annual meeting, this is your chance, Mark, to highlight, you know, a session, or two, or three that you might like to point them to, that they can actually take action on.

Mark Bradley

Well I'd like to point listeners to two sessions and also a walk. And I want to start maybe with the walk. So one of the things that people who come to AHA Annual meetings I'm sure remember is that the AHA sponsors a variety of walks that are locally based, um, and give people a sense of history of place. We invited, um, the Odeuropa group, who have been writing for the *AHR* History Lab over the last year, to come to Philadelphia and do a smells walk and to begin to meet, in fact, some of the people who would have been reading, um, the materials that they put together for us. And they agreed, and they decided that what they wanted to do

was a “smell of liberty walk” and that the “smell of liberty walk” would eventually take us all to the Liberty Bell. And at the Liberty Bell, they will be getting out a scratch-and-sniff card for each person who's on the walk. And they've had a perfumer try to recreate different valences of what they believe to be the smells of liberty in the eighteenth century. And so the walk is partially to help people understand the various complex valences that gets them to those sorts of smells, how that's done, but they'll be taking people through parts of Philadelphia that, in a sense, will be olfactorily represented, you know, in this card at the end. So it's really a fabulous way for people to see, on the ground, exactly how this kind of “smells history” works. And, um, they're 14 people as of today who are signed up. I think there's some more spots. So I would urge people to try if they can.

Daniel Story

Yeah. And I will be there to, uh, record this for the podcast, so...

Mark Bradley

That's right,

Daniel Story

if you show up...

Mark Bradley

And if you can't do the walk, if you can find the AHA booth in, you know, the exhibit hall, we're going to have more of the scratch-and-sniff cards there with, um, there's a QA code that takes you right into a pretty lengthy explanation for how they've sort of thought this through and put it together. They just shared that with me yesterday, actually. So there'd be a way that people could, kind of, do this on their own, I think, if they weren't able to do it within the - it's Sunday morning, and so some people may have scattered by Sunday morning, right? But there'd be ways to do it, otherwise.

Daniel Story

Very cool.

Mark Bradley

Um, so there are two sessions that are, um, directly connected to things that are going on in the History Lab that people might want to stop in for. One, in fact, is around smells. And it is a session that really - you know, you know, to be able to do the walk and the session together would be kind of ideal; it's a session that's going to be very hands-on in terms of what it means

to recreate historical smells. And so it's thinking about that both from the big data perspective of how one begins to create a kind of database of what a set of smells in a particular place at a particular time might look like. And then it's a conversation with chemists and with perfumers about the ways in which those might be recreated. And there's simpler and easier ways of doing this. And so one, it's uh, it's, uh, very much going to be a hands-on session in helping people think how they might take this back into their own work or into the classroom as they're working with students. Um, I think that'll be, um, really, really interesting. The other session that I would urge people to come to is, in a sense, a kind of dry run for a new feature in the journal, uh, coming next year, called the #AHRsyllabus project. The AHA has not done a lot, in fact, almost nothing at all with teaching in its 100-plus years of history.

Daniel Story

Do you mean *AHR* or *AHA*?

Mark Bradley

No, the AHA has done tons of stuff with teaching over history, the *AHR*, so the journal, has just not been a place where, um, teaching has been a space that has been open. And so we're trying to change that a little bit. And we did set up focus groups with about 100 teachers. And this was ranging from community college, high school, liberal arts college, R1s, regional publics, just to get a sense about what, what kind of intervention the *AHR* could make around teaching that would be helpful, right? There's a, there's a lot of sites available for teachers, and there's no reason to reinvent the wheel, in that regard. And what came out of these conversations was really interesting because it was very consistent across institutions that students and teachers were interested in kind of looking under the hood at the way in which history is done. And so the focus of the #AHRsyllabus project is really going to be around method - getting people into seeing how it is certain kinds of history can be made. So we're going to launch it in September with a set of modules, and, um, I think there'll be about four of them at that point. And then we've commissioned ten or twelve teaching modules that, again, are looking at questions of method. And we'll be doing one or two, um, per issue, you know, as long as the project goes. So the session at the AHA is bringing together some of the people who are involved in these - the first set of modules that we're going to do in September. And one is connected to an NEH-funded project through the AHA that, um, Sarah Weicksel, who's the director of research at AHA, is running. And it's a project that is trying to think about how to teach with objects. And NEH has allowed her to hire four, um, newly-minted PhDs who are working with her on a whole set of, kind of, teaching initiatives around what it means to be using an object as the, kind of, point of entry for a particular lesson. And so, our session, they're gonna reflect a little bit about the sort of larger dynamics of, you know, what does it mean to

teach with objects, and then introduce some specifics. And that's the kind of dry run to see how that goes with people, are those the right things to take forward for the module that they're developing for the journal. And, uh, there are a couple of other groups. Let me just say something about one of them because this is, um, something that you've been involved in down here. We, we have a relationship with *Sexing History*, which is a, a podcast, um, that's been around for a little while - um, really innovative, interesting podcast. And, again, as you know, we're co-producing an episode of that podcast. And the, the episode is about this really fascinating abortion clinic in Texas that's run by an evangelical minister. So just, you know, from the get-go, it's, it's got a lot of things that don't necessarily seem to go together in more traditional ways of telling pro- and anti-abortion stories. And they're putting together, again, a kind of archivally-, an interview-driven podcast that's exploring that clinic and the larger meanings of the clinic. They're going to take that work - that work, I mean, we're, we're going to put that out with our podcast. There's going to be, um, some discussion about how they went about doing their research for that project in the journal itself. But for the panel at AHA, and for #AHRsyllabus, um, they're going to use that as a way of teaching teachers and students how to make a podcast. And so, um, you know, embedded in it will be a lot of sort of practical notions about how one would go about it, but they'll use the specifics of that collaboration, um, in thinking about how to put it together. I think that, too, will be an interesting session for people if they happen to be in Philadelphia.

Daniel Story

Yeah, I agree, and I hope to be at both of those sessions. Um, yeah, so touching on the syllabus project, um, gets to my second question for you is - what are you, kind of, looking forward to, um, as you kind of look ahead, um, over the next few, uh, months, the next few issues in the journal, anything that you would like to, sort of, highlight as things, uh, for people to sort of be aware of or looking out for?

Mark Bradley

Uh, there are a couple of things, I think, in the Lab that I, um, would think people will, will enjoy seeing and also allow us to move in some new directions than we did in the first year. Um, we want the Lab to be a space that a whole variety of scholars can see a place from themselves to do work. And so that is around, um, the kinds of histories that people write. Um, that's around time period, but that's also about people's different positionality. They may be museum curators, they may be teaching in a liberal arts college or a research university. They may be community activists who are doing, uh, historical research of one sort or another. Again, a big diversity of people who are involved. But we're also keen to have really early career scholars involved in the Lab too. And we've had a little bit of that in the first year, but we're going to

have more of it in the second year. And I think one exciting project, in that regard is, UVA has a Jefferson Scholars Program. It's a nationally competitive program that brings together young historians who are working on twentieth-century US history topics of one sort or another. And they come, essentially, to UVA, um, you know, to finish up the writing of their thesis but also to be building, you know, professional communities and networks for themselves as they're doing that. There's a subset of the group of, um, scholars this year who are working on questions of poverty and the American welfare state. And so we invited four of them to put together a project for the Lab, and in a sense, to introduce the specifics of the kind of research that they're doing, but to try to put that in a shorter essay form. So these are 2,500-, to 3,000-word essays, that have a more public-facing tone to them, rather than the more sort of traditional kind of thesis topic. And then to step back and have some people who are well known in the field talk a little bit about what it is they're reading from those four younger scholars and to kind of help readers think a little bit about the kinds of interventions that they're making. So it's an important moment, I think, to be thinking about poverty in the American welfare state. So I think it's a very timely issue for us to be, um, talking about in the journal. But I think being able to talk to people who are just on the cusp of what look to be really, really important scholarly careers, it's good to be able to capture their work in the journal, as well. We're doing another version of that with a group of young curators and art historians from Southeast Asia. Um, we launched a series in the Lab this year called "Art as Historical Method"; it was in the September issue with the journal. And, again, it's trying to think about their contemporary artists for whom history is really, really important in the kinds of work that they're making. And what is their practice with history? And, again, how might we be learning from the ways in which they're deploying historical texts and projects? And so these four curators are going to be writing about, again, the group of contemporary artists in Southeast Asia - from Singapore, from Indonesia, from Malaysia, and from Vietnam - on particular works that engage history. Some of them are interviews with the artists, some of them are sort of deep dive pieces on an individual piece - to try to work us through some of that. We're also going to have a group of, um, this is a combination. So this is an intergenerational project of people who are working on contemporary indigenous artists, particularly Native American artists. And Brenda Child, who is at University of Minnesota, is anchoring this for us (Brenda has been doing a lot of work more recently on visual culture and on the arts); she is going to be writing, actually, about some Sámi artists from Norway and Finland. Um, but there are several younger people who are going to be writing for us. Patricia Norbert, who is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is, is writing a piece kind of rethinking Georgia O'Keeffe and what her positionality was with Native American culture that was such an important part of her work. And another younger scholar, Taylor Rose Pear, who's gonna be working on... Again, uh, uh, younger Native American scholar, um, Wendy Redstar, who's done really interesting work with these WPA cards that

were created in the 1930s, that were documenting Native culture, but, in fact, the people who were making the cards were native themselves; although, the people who were running the project were not. And so there are all kinds of interesting tensions that run through these cards in the projects, and that's been one of the works that she's, she's been interested in. So, again, thinking in that sphere, um, about the ways in which history is made.

Daniel Story

That all sounds really fascinating, and I hope that we can get some, or maybe all, of those projects worked into the podcast coming up. Anything else that you want to add? Mark?

Mark Bradley

Yeah, I think, you know, there's two directions that we hope to be developing over the next year or two. And it would be great to have, um, listeners, you know, be in touch about their own ideas around these things. But one is we wanted to have digital history have a bigger platform within, um, not just the Lab but the *AHR* more generally. We have a digital history project, um, that Kalani Craig, who is a faculty member at University of Indiana, Bloomington but also on our board of editors, has been working on around American empire. Uh, that'll be in the lab next year. But I think, you know, Kalani and I are really keen on trying to develop, as I say, a larger footprint for the digital in the journal itself. And as people who are listening, who are working on these projects have ideas, I'd be happy to hear. We're in conversation with a number of people about how we might develop that out and in one way or another. The other thing that I think we haven't done as well as we might in year two, and even in, err excuse me, in year one, and even in year two - um, I'm not sure how far we're gonna be able to go with it - is how do we make sure that the journal is not simply capturing work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. It's always been a struggle in the journal. But we are a big tent journal, and the idea is that we're representing the field from ancient history until the early twenty-first century. I'm going to have to be working with our board of editors, our area review editors, and just colleagues in general about how, in the Lab, we can be curating a bigger space for work that's early modern and before. Um, and so that's, I think, an important goal for us as we go into the next couple years with this.

Daniel Story

That sounds great. Well, thanks, Mark.

Mark Bradley

Sure, yeah, no, thanks for, thanks for asking.

Daniel Story

That was *AHR* editor Mark Bradley looking ahead at the coming AHA Annual Meeting and at the next round of issues of the *AHR*. Earlier, we heard from Lydia Walker on her article, "The Political Geography of International Advocacy: Indian and American Cold War Civil Society for Tibet," which you will find in the December 2022 issue of the *AHR*. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review* in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. Episode 10 was produced by Matt Hermans and me, Daniel Story. Audio-engineering support was by Myles Ryder-Alexis. You can find out more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. And, once again, a very happy new year to you and yours. We'll see you next time.