Across Many Mountains by Yangzom Brauen
Book notes by Raymond Huber

It is my greatest wish that I too find it within me to walk the path of my own strength – Yangzom Brauen

This is the true story of three generations of women all from one Tibetan family: the grandmother (Kunsang), the mother (Soman) and the daughter (Yangzom), who is also the author. Between them they embrace the most extreme cultures on the planet, from Buddhist Tibet to glamourous Hollywood - yet each women has retained a strong identity. It's a moving and gripping story of refugees, as well as a remarkable insiders' view of Tibetan culture.
The structure of the book emphasises movement: from generation to generation, country to country, culture to culture, and the inner journey of each woman. This transience reflects the Tibetan experience of change and oppression during the last century; and also highights many Buddhist beliefs relating to attachment.

Old Tibet
When Kunsang was growing up in the 1920s, Tibet had half a million monks (10% of the population) and 6,000 monasteries. It was a traditional, religious society ruled by aristocrats and clerics. There was no modernization, life expectancy was low and infant mortality was high. Despite this the people were largely contented according to the book – Kunsang did not feel deprived and says her early life 'was one of deep spirituality, peace, and self-imposed isolation' (p.17). It was the Tibetan's 'deeply rooted, unshakeable faith' that kept people going. Tradition and respect for age were also very strong. But the guiding religious ideology was 'less the scholarly Buddhism of the monks ...than a form of folk religion.' (p.97) involving appeasement of local dieties and superstition.

Chinese Occupation
Tibet's history pre-1900 is mentioned only briefly (p.38) including the fact that Tibet invaded China in the distant past. Tibet had centuries of independence and was also controlled by Mongolia and China at times; but after 1900, Tibetan independence was shaky at best (p.317). The Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, fulfilling a 1,200 year old prophecy that the 'Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth' (p.6). The Chinese soliders are described in the book as 'a herd of wild

beasts...systematically arresting, torturing and imprisoning Tibetans, especially buddhist monks and nuns, and aristocrats.'

Religion was the most important thing for Tibetans and the Chinese invaders were fiercely anti-religion (p.92) driven by Mao's communist beliefs. They were highly critical of the Tibetan religion for 'forcing' people to believe Buddhist doctrine; but the cruel irony was that they then forced the country to submit to Chinese rule – such as replacing the feudal system with communal land ownership (p.94). On the 10th of March, 1959, the Tibetans rose up against the occupation and the Chinese killed thousands of people. The regime then used fear and humiliation to control the population; the same tactics as the Nazis used in Germany. By the 1960s, 'not a stone of Old Tibet was left standing' (p.132). When the family returned to Tibet they found 'a country that had been robbed of its soul' (p.144). The Chinese had 'bled Tibet of its customs, supressing both the language and the culture' (p.236); 6,000 monasteries had been razed and sacred objects looted. Lhasa had become a thoroughly Chinese city.

The Chinese government calls it the 'Tibet Autonomous Region', the language suggesting it has a degree of independence. There has been a long struggle by Tibetans in exile and protests by monks within Tibet (including self-immolation). Such is the entrenchment of China that Tibetans are now divided over their goal: 'one group fights for complete independence from China, the other campaigns for Tibetan autonomy with the People's Republic of China.' (p.278). Yangzom calls these the idealist and realist positions. The Dalai Lama is in the 'realist' camp, desiring autonomy and religious freedom. There was another uprising in 2008 and China regularly restricts visits by foreign media and researchers.

Yangzom depicts China as a 'dictatorship' and laments that 'the world's politicians have taken no action' (p.300) despite 60 years of occupation. This seems to be largely true and she admits that it's because of 'China's incredible economic power.'

Buddhism

The book is a clear introduction to the basics of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism (p.312) relate to suffering and how to achieve enlightenment. This involves pilgrimages, meditation, praying to dieties; all of which influence karma and reincarnation. Buddhism teaches that we must free ourselves from all transient, earthly attachments (eg. by the mandala practice) and from the ego. 'Nothing exists of itself; everything is the product of human thought' (p.50). Kunsang's attitude to difficulties was that problems were simply people's thoughts projected outside of themselves.

Kunsang's beliefs are inevitably challenged by love. Are love and emptiness compatible? The book points out this 'inherent contradiction' for Tibetan Buddhists: they preach kindness, but compassion is often not put into practice by helping the needy (p.291).
The role of women is another sore point. Monks and nuns should be equal but in the spiritual hierarchy 'women are worth less than men' (p.34) because they are less pure. Therefore 'most Tibetan women wish to be born again as men.' (p.68).

Death

Death is a constant element in the early narrative; or the threat of it. Tibetan Buddhists believe in reincarnation.The soul is regarded as more important than the body: 'death is not final, but merely a transformation from one state to another.' (p.70). There's no guarantee of being born as a human and as a result there's a feeling that 'you must not waste your existence' (p.70).

They have elaborate rituals surrounding death, such as the 'sky burial'. (A rare moment of humour comes when they first see people sunbathing and joke that they might be dead). Perhaps this attitude developed because death was such a familiar part of life in early Tibet. Kunsang said that meditating on death 'gave her serenity that made everyday problems seem unimportant.'(p.47).

When Sonam's sister dies her name is forgotten because she's no longer a human being. This is in stark contrast to Western culture where the dead are remembered for as long as possible.

Kunsang

Kunsang is the dominant 'character' in the book and is increasingly endearing in her latter years. It's her influence and strength that shapes the destiny of the whole family. She became a Buddhist nun to 'achieve freedom and peace, unhampered by worldly objects' (p.14). The irony is that she's increasingly thrown into the affairs of the world. Kunsang's spiritual path is interrupted by love (p.59); and she sees her pregnancy and marriage as obstacles to her soul journey.

Kunsang was more interested in attaining enlightenment than in her place as a woman in society. As a nun she learned 'calm, concentration and kindness' (p.47) and she had an 'inner glow and strength' (p.47). She and Sonam are inseparable throughout and it's only at the end when he daughter finally moves away to New York, perhaps an indication of how secure life has become for them.

Sonam

Sonam's childhood was spent in a world of her own in a monastery. Then her family escaped from the Chinese over the Himalayas and her life became one of constant change and insecurity. Refugee camps were unsanitary and they were made to work on grueling road-building jobs. Their lives took a more positive turn at Stirling Castle run by Save the Children Fund. They found support, jobs and education. This also marks a change of tone from the unrelenting grimness and tension of the first half of the book. The warmth and compassion shown by Mr Sweeny are a welcome relief for the reader too. And Sonam's evolving relationship with Martin introduces a fresh emotional element to the narrative. Like her mother, Sonam's love is an unexpected arrival.

Sonam develops 'a sense of inequalities and injustices in society' (p.170) which clashes with her Tibetan values of obedience to authority figures. She has a 'deep feeling of powerlessness' (p.172). Of the three women in the book, she is the most skeptical and the most rootless.

Cultural Extremes

One of the most revealing themes of the book is the way we experience extremes of culture through the womens' lives; notably when Old Tibetan meets modern technology and values. There are amusing anecdotes about eating a restaurant meal (p.187) and flying in a plane (p.204), but it's the strangeness of orange juice compared to real fruit that best illustrates the 'cultural discrepancies' between the generations (p.206). The strongly Buddhist Kunsang is 'unshaken by even the strangest products of what we call Western civilisation'; but Sonam had been uprooted so many times that 'no one culture made any more sense to her than another.'

Life in their new home in Switzerland presents greater challenges: in cooking methods, attitude to child-raising, hygiene, cosmetics, politics and even left-handedness.

Although aspects of Tibetan culture seem primitive, the point is made that Western culture also has its dark side. Sonam is appalled by war, poverty, pollution and health issues (p. 266). In New York its a shock for her to see the lifestyles of the 'super-rich' brazenly alongside the homeless beggars on the streets of this most 'civilised city' (p.309).

The Author: Yangzom Brauen

Yangzom calls herself 'a child of the West' but with a spiritual approach to life. Her early life in Switzerland is lived in a kind of Pippi Longstocking world. She became an actress, model and political activist, and was arrested in Moscow during a protest against the

Chinese. She finds that strict Buddhism is 'too simple a solution' to the problems in her life and prefers to confront them head-on rather than passively accept (in contrast to her grandmother). Unlike her mother and grandmother, she would never want to live in Tibet. She has appeared in many German and American films and is active in the Free Tibet movement.

In an interview she said, 'My grandmother always told interesting stories ... however, when she hit 89, I realised how important it was to get them on paper, especially as the old ways are fading, with monks and nuns now outfitted with laptops and cell phones.'

Questions

1. What is our Western attitude to death compared with Tibetan beliefs? For example, the way we talk about death, funerals, and remembering the dead.
2. Steve Jobs said 'Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked.' Discuss this idea.
3. In Buddhism 'everything is illusion...everything is empty'. The scientific equivalent might be the empty, elusive atoms of the quantum world. Is either view of reality meaningful for you? Discuss.
4. Yangzom's family had extremes of cultural difference within three generations. Think about your own family background. How have your parents or grandparents influenced your direction or lifestyle?
5. 'Everyone has a family story worth telling' says Yangzom. Share a favourite anecdote from your own family genealogy.
6. Yangzom describes her family as a sandwich (p.206). Describe yourself as a type of sandwich based on your family influences.
7. What aspects of Tibetan culture in the book appeal to you? What aspects of our culture appall you? Can we shape our culture or are we stuck with it?
8. What impression did you get from the book of the current Tibetan political situation? Is it too late for Tibetan independence? Should Western politicians do more to 'persuade' China into allowing more freedom for Tibetans? How could this be achieved?

Further Reading and Viewing

Sonam's website: http://www.sonam.net

Yangzom's website: http://www.yangzombrauen.com

Tibetan news: http://tibetconnection.org

The Dalai Lama Story by Andrew Crowe (NZ author)

Seven Years in Tibet by Henrich Harrer: classic account of Old Tibet.

Cry of the Snow Lion: documentary.

Blindsight: documentary about the lives of disabled teenagers in Tibet.