

Today on The Lerner Podcast we talk to Shing Yin Khor, author of *The American Dream? A Journey on Route 66 Discovering Dinosaur Statues, Muffler Men, and the Perfect Breakfast Burrito*. Booklist gave it a starred review, saying, “Khor takes that ‘feeling of desperately searching for something better . . . ,’ and adapts it to their own ‘pilgrimage’ as immigrant and artist traveling historic Route 66 . . . in whimsical full-color detail.”

Plus, check our show notes for links to information on Route 66 Motels and Shing’s road trip playlist.

Here’s our interview with Shing.

So you drove from LA to Chicago, which is the reverse of how most people think of the route 66 experience.

It was initially an incredibly practical choice, which is that I live in Los Angeles. Driving to Chicago first and then having to drive back just seemed like it would really remove a lot of that initial exhilaration of setting out on a road trip. But I definitely wanted that feeling of you know, packing up and setting out versus traveling a bunch and then having to drive back.

Did it affect how you saw Route 66 at all?

I definitely think it did. So I mean, I live in LA, which it’s generally known as the endpoint of Route 66. So I was fairly familiar with the Los Angeles Route 66 narrative, and I had driven to Albuquerque, New Mexico several times before along large parts of Route 66. So being able to do a drive that was in a way reasonably familiar, for the first half of the trip, I think definitely gave me sort of a sense of comfort and confidence. But also the Los Angeles-to-New Mexico stretch really up until the border of New Mexico and Texas and Glen Rio is very touristy, touristy in the sense that you sort of get to see a lot of the history of Route 66, as well as a very intentional tourism of Route 66, as well as the tourism that’s been lost because of all the pathways, all the new roads that have taken over the original path. In a sense, I feel like I got a very specific experience of Route 66 in the sense that it felt very, I don’t want to use the word authentic, but I drove through a lot of communities that had a lot of--that was very dependent on Route 66 tourism and now are largely abandoned because they don’t they don’t have that anymore, while the more Midwestern part of Route 66 has a lot of other industry. Like I was driving through a lot of like flatness, but there were farms, there were greeneries. And after I got past New Mexico, there were large swaths of the original Route 66 that didn’t really even acknowledge the fact that it was 66 anymore. And I feel like if I had driven the road in reverse, I would have probably been a little bit surprised at how they’re almost wasn’t that much Route 66 to Route 66, if that kind of makes sense.

Yeah, it’s a cultural institution, so it makes sense that you saw those tourists posing on the road itself next to the sign.

Oh gosh, yeah, but definitely I would say that LA to New Mexico really leans into the Route 66-ness of it all.

So what did you listen to while you traveled?

Oh, I was super corny about it. And I definitely leaned a lot into music that I felt was very Americana. So I listened to a lot of like Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty. Lots of music from like, the 60s and 70s. Yeah, yeah, that sort of thing. Every now and then I can take a break and listen to some crime podcast. But when you’re driving alone, through large swaths of nothing, there is a limit to how many crime podcasts you can listen to.

Oh, yeah, I'm sure that really helps you not be paranoid staying alone at night.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Maybe not a big fan of all these ghost story podcasts while you're while you're camping alone.

Yeah, and I mean, I gotta say Tom Petty is the ultimate road trip music.

Yeah, I--what's weird is that I actually don't think I listened to that Route 66 song while on Route 66. I did make a decision to do--a car that I drive it's a Ford van. It's a large blue Ford van and I regret a little bit not taking that vehicle instead of you know, my 2000 Honda Fit. Because I feel like driving the Ford van cross country would have been--would have felt incredibly like American. It also does like six miles a gallon, so...

Oh, but you would have had more room to sleep wouldn't you?

I would have had so much more room to sleep. But I would have spent like four times more on gas.

So did you just kind of budget for it ahead of time or how did you work on that?

I budgeted \$50 a day for everything. That's \$50 for gas, lodging, which was often camping, and I knew I was going to do the trip incredibly cheaply. And \$50 a day for gas was not so bad because I was only driving about 70 to 100 miles a day. So I was going, I was going fairly slowly and not actually eating up all that much gas. And I knew I'd be camping and there were definitely days where I would just kind of give up and feel like I've been camping for five days, I am going to just get a Motel 6 and take a real shower and sleep in a real bed. So that happened with some frequency.

Yeah, there's something about a real bed that makes you feel human sometimes.

Oh, yes. Oh, there was definitely a moment when I was--I was driving back. Actually, I done the Route 66 drive, and I was in Denver, and it had been raining for several days and I'd been camping, and I've been on the road for about a month at this point. And I hadn't eaten any sushi. So I was sitting in a Motel 6 in Denver. And I ordered like \$50 worth of sushi from whatever sushi place would deliver. And I sat on my bed. And it was a sort of sushi order where they gave me four sets of utensils. I just spread out everything on my bed and I just sat there and I just ate like food that someone delivered to me on a soft bed.

So how did you get home after your travels?

Fairly directly, because I mean, I drove. But after about three weeks on the road with my dog, I think we were both kind of cranky, and we both really just wanted to go home. So we did the most direct drive that we could, which I think goes through Utah and Denver. And it was really nice. It only took me about a week to get home since I was driving significantly more than 70 miles a day, and I definitely stayed in hotels for the majority of that.

I can see why.

I was like, all right, I'm technically still on a budget. But you know what, you just gotta treat yourself.

So in Arizona, you saw sign for an American-owned motel and what impact did that have on you, as a Malaysian American?

I actually think that was a New Mexico. And that is something that has actually been evolving. Both in my research and in my head. Since I wrote--since I wrote the book. The book--the memoir is very much

about capturing my immediate emotions that I had at the time. And the instinctual reaction I had the moment I saw the sign was this is racist. And I actually didn't know the history of this yet at that moment. But like in my mind, it obviously meant to me this motel is American-owned, by which we mean this motel is run by white people. And I--I've talked to a few friends and a lot of them who are white immediately had a "Oh, of course, that's not what it means." While the vast majority of my brown and black friends are like, "Oh, we know what that means."

So I would say that there's definitely a difference between how it's seen. So after that I did do a little bit more research. The good thing, well, good bad thing is that I was right. The like proliferation of American-owned signs on motels was a direct reaction to the number of South Asians that had begun to own motels, especially in smaller towns, and especially around Route 66. For instance, I believe in my book, I said that Indian Americans are about 1% of the United States population, but they actually own approximately half of the motels in America. And around kind of that time, the term Patel motel began becoming used as a pejorative. So that--that all kind of created this huge mess of feelings. Where it's just like this is just an incredibly insulting, racist, xenophobic sign. And that's about as far as they get in the book.

Since then, I've actually done quite a bit more research into this and discovered some absolutely delightful things. One of them is that a lot of South Asian-owned motels (moteliers? hoteliers?) just kind of shrugged and be like, "All right, we're Americans," and put up American-owned signs, which was not the case for the motel I saw. That one was an abandoned motel that I looked into and there was definitely some history there. But it feels more and more like in recent times, that there's kind of been a reclamation of that term, which makes me happy. Also, I read that while it was largely still very much known as a--as a racist, dog whistle, I believe the Route 66 Association, like Motel Association actually decided not to list any motels that advertise themselves as that. So it feels like you know, it may be very much a racist, xenophobic dog whistle. But there are allies. And it is being recognized as such. And in addition, there's definitely some reclamation of that term as well.

Is there still a Route 66 motel association or it was that from the 50s?

Um, it's a recent--it was more recent, like in the 90s.

Oh, cool.

Yeah, I need to look it up. I do not have like the number--the news article in front of me.

Yeah, maybe we can--if you do find it, we can link to it in the show notes.

That sounds great. I'll look for it.

Do you have any travel tips for someone who's looking to drive Route 66?

You know what, I feel like I was a purist with my drive, and I stuck to the original route, as much as humanly possible, actually, basically for all of it. The only times when I didn't was when you know, there was like an older route and an earlier route and I would just pick one. I would say that that is not necessary. I spent a lot of time on incredibly unmaintained roads. I would probably--if I were to do it again, I would probably plot--I mean, I'm happy I did it that way. But I would probably plot a trip that was more location to location. Like I would plot out the things I wanted to see a lot better, instead of just kind of getting on the road and being like, yeah, sure, whatever it's got for me, this sounds great. I would also like to point out that I did this trip in early 2016. And I am an immigrant. I'm a brown person and I am a person that looks like a girl who is traveling alone. And there are some places that I wrote about

during my trip that came off as conservative, but were otherwise very friendly. And now I have multiple reports of many of these towns openly flying Confederate flags. So my travel tips, especially for black and brown people looking to drive Route 66 today, is to definitely do your research on these places because there are some places that I would not drive through today.

Okay, I saved my hardest hitting question for last. Where is the best breakfast burrito?

I've actually thought long and hard about this question. And I'm going to say the best breakfast burrito is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I absolutely refuse to say where because if I were to answer this question, many people would be very angry at me. And there isn't really a good consensus. It's definitely one of those things where everyone kind of has a preference, but I will narrow it down to location, and it's Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I deeply recommend that anyone looking for the best breakfast burrito, eat as many breakfast burritos in Albuquerque as they can.

Okay, if I'm ever Albuquerque. I will report back and--

Yes.

I mean, maybe you can tell me off mic too?

I can do that.

Okay, well, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast, Shing.

Absolutely. It was so wonderful to talk to you.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.