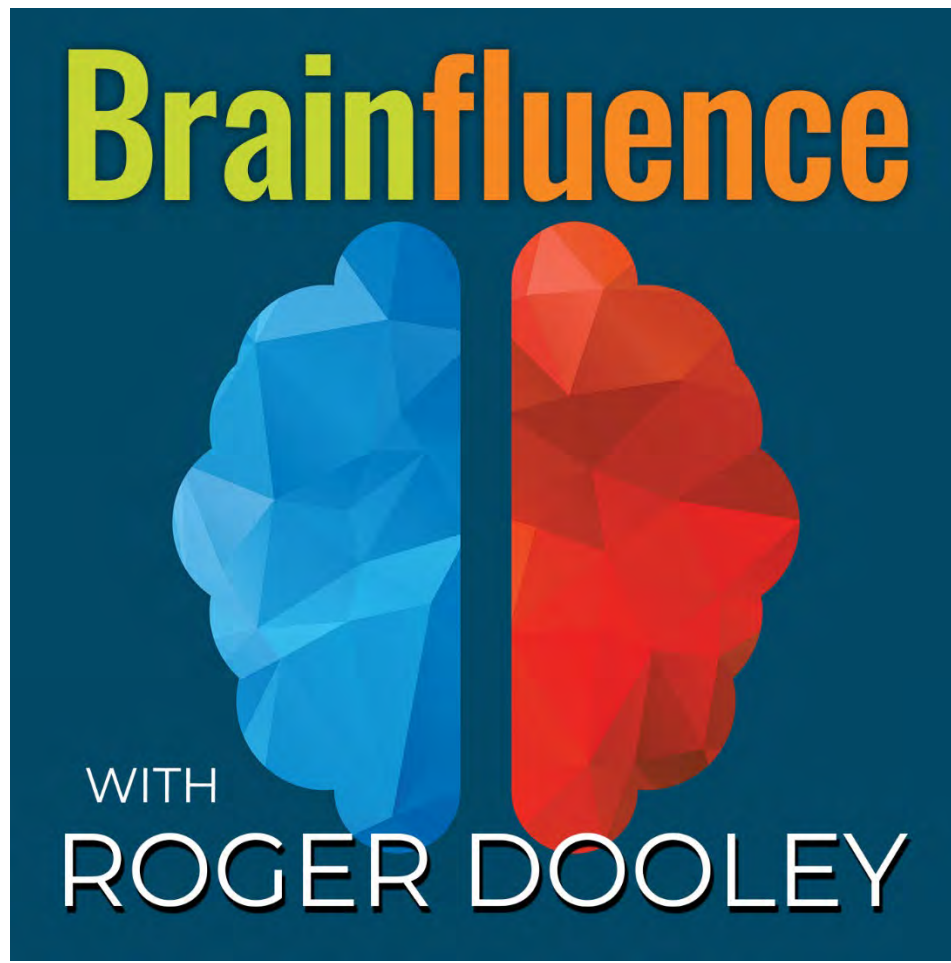


# Kevin Kelly's 50-Year Project | Brainfluence

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/kevin-kelly-vanishing-asia>



**Full Episode Transcript**

**Brainfluence with Roger Dooley**

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## **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Welcome to Brainfluence, I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest has been on the show before, but for rather different purpose. Kevin Kelly is the co founder of wired and is best known for his insights about technology and how it will shape the future. His last visit was to discuss the ideas in his book of predictions the inevitable, today, Kevin joins us to look in a rather different direction. The past in the present, his new book, or actually three oversized volumes in a set might just crush your IKEA coffee table. The set is called vanishing Asia and includes over 9000 photos spread across 1000 pages. Welcome to the show, Kevin.

## **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Oh, it's my pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me on.

## **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Yeah, Kevin, you've compiled these photos over, I guess, three decades. Plus, when did you start thinking about this as a project as opposed to just photography and hobby.

## **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

So actually, I've been working on it for 50 years. Wow, I set off in 1972, basically, was my college, I went to Asia with a camera, I didn't really know what I was going to find, I had no clue about what was in Asia, because I was in a very provincial part of the East Coast, New England, New Jersey, where I grew up. But I was funded beginning trying to document those traditions that seemed to be disappearing even from first sight. And as I went on, it

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became very real to me that those ancient textures and festivals and ceremonies and customs were disappearing before my eyes. And I just became an acquire and compulsion, to document them, maybe with the idea of doing a book sometime in the back of my mind. But what that would look like was never really very clear. Until recently, when I stopped traveling. I haven't been anywhere for two years, and I got my mind to finally make a book out of these 50 years of stuff that I've been photographing. And so I had the chance to do that. And the result is this three volume set called vanishing Asia, which documents all the traditional things that have been disappearing between Turkey in western Japan on the east.

### **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

It's really an amazing compilation. And, you know, I, it seems like a sort of it's a project that adopted you where you began, I'm sure it kind of casually and then suddenly, this gradually seeped into your bloodstream and became a passion project. And I haven't seen the entire set yet, because as we're speaking, the books have not been published. But we've sent a nice sample in PDF format. And it's really a gorgeous photography, I guess the thing that comes to mind would be National Geographic photography. But I think it's probably fair to say that where they would tend to focus on the image itself, in other words, a fascinating image, not that the certainly don't document important things, but you are really focused on the people, the practices, the art. And, you know, it's just really a phenomenal compilation.

### **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Well, thank you. It is a work of passion. As I said, over 50 years, where in the beginning, I was doing it, kind of like I would say full time. Then later on, as I aged in life, I decided I would need a career. And then it became kind of something I would do a little bit on vacation. And then as my own journey

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into technology continued, most of my life. It was basically talking to people in Asia, about the future of technology, and then it would piggyback on, journeys into the remote parts on top of that, and that was how I finished the travel. So in them, in the process, I got to see not just the Asia that was disappearing. But Asia that's appearing, the Asia of the future. And it was the Asia of the future. That was my professional interest. This is sort of my compulsion. The little bit of thing that I was addicted to, was finding these little pockets, where the past was still there and recording them before they were gone.

**Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Do you speak any Asian languages, Kevin?

**Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

I understand enough Chinese to be dangerous. Because my wife is Chinese and my kids are bilingual and I've been hearing it for so long, though, as they will tell you my accent is so bad that they don't want to hear me speak it.

**Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Did you have any difficulty in getting to some of these places or finding them or communicating with the people? I have to imagine that many of the particular things that you documented, we're not in the big cities, where you've got transportation and English-speaking people and whatnot. But really, I had to get off the beaten track. How did that work?

**Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

As I said, I've been doing this for 50 years and 50 years ago that the world was a very different place. In the early 70s, many places in Asia, I'm thinking of, say, Afghanistan or in the Himalayas, were not just that they were

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backwards for the time, they were living in the 15th century, they were actually centuries old. It was like a time machine, I had the privilege of getting on time machine, you being transported back to medieval times, a city like Khadmando, which was half a million people, and no vehicles. Everybody know me, not even bicycles, everybody walked everywhere. Porters, carried the stuff that trucks, even animals might have. And I'm that, in those days, there was very little information, there were no guidebooks to the many places I was going to. So finding things was difficult. I remember my early travels in Bangladesh, there were no hotels. And so I was staying on the missionary circuit, being passed from one missionary to another. Because that was really the only choice there was, or places like North western Pakistan, where there was literally no roads, you were just driving through the plains, on the dirt. And so that was a different era. And that was an era where the information was scarce. And what it meant was, I often was spending my time at the least interesting places. Wasting time, we can almost say, because I'd had no idea where the good stuff was. That is a complete reversal now, today in this era, and I still travel to these remote areas where you do research, and you can kind of find out when people were there are still some places and you can actually, you know, make a reservation in a new bear hotel, and you can I can hire a driver online and pick me up. And so there is the information, and where to go is very, very clear. But disadvantage is that you're not the first person, the camera would be there, right. And So things have changed. And that's, one of the lessons of Asia, I should say is that they are going through, centuries of development in several decades. So the US, United States where I'm from, what's a third world country in 100 years ago, I mean, by any measure that we would use the number of people had electricity, or indoor plumbing was very, very small. But we took a century to go through this and century before that, to arrive where we were, and China, places like that are doing it in 20 years.

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And so that acceleration is thrilling and disorienting. Because it's very clear that people in Asia going 1000 miles an hour, but they're really not sure where they want to go.

## **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Is there a way? I would guess that maybe that's a silly question. But is there a danger to that pace of modernization? I mean, obviously, you're seems like you're losing so much. But perhaps if it happens over a longer period of time, there might be more of a sense of preservation.

## **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Yeah, and there's different modes. So again, the ultimate contrast with these two very large countries like India and China, China's solution is to bulldoze the past, they just basically clear cut, get rid of it, leave it behind, kind of a Maoist approach. It's like they're gonna put it behind them. And they're just going to go forward and they literally have bulldozing the old sections of cities and stuff, just completely eliminate them. India has a very different attitude, the India is we're gonna build on top of the old and not changed the old at all. And that's like, who's already chaos Central. And now it's like, could it be more chaotic? Yes, because we're going to add the new stuff on top of the old stuff without taking it away. And so you have this sort of the thing, where the old is preserved in a weird way being built on, but it's like, totally crazy. And there's some kind of energy in there and they do keep the past but that's the thing. That's the other polar opposite in terms of the approach about the past. So you know, these things are leaving and China has rebuilt it. And the really popular thing is to make these old towns they call them which are basically new towns that are built like old towns, except they have electricity and built-in plumbing and everything. So they Outwardly they have some of the veneer of an old town. And they're much

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better looking than, you know, a modernist concrete building, but they are not in any way an old town. And so the past is, it's a way of I think in order to really have a good view of the future, to have a valid or helpful or productive view of future, you have to have some sense of history. and most of the good futurists I know are really good historians. In fact, the further you kind of want to look into the future, I think, the more you have to look into the past, partly because of momentum, partly because of repeating patterns, partly just to understand the cultural dynamics of wherever you're talking about. And so I think it's harder to not have a past and think and dwell on the future. And one of the things I've noticed is that my book finishing Asia is actually appealing even to Asians, because in some cases, they are not even aware of this stuff in their own country. And secondly, there's more diversity within Asia than there is between Asia and say, the West. I mean, I would say, you know, there's differences between, I don't know, Pakistan and Korea, maybe more than between the US and Korea. So there's still awareness of culture in the past and history that serves not just outsiders like me, but even people within Asia.

### **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

I think we're probably somewhat kindred spirits, although I'm somewhat less adventurous Kevin for about 10 years or something, I was chairman of our little Indiana city's historic preservation commission, where we tried to preserve some of the significant structures, no, we had nothing that went back centuries. But we did have some rather interesting and occasionally historically significant structures. But even there, it was a very difficult fight, there were always people who wanted to develop a property, could show that what they want to put in was much more valuable than what was there. Now, we did manage to save five beautiful riverfront homes from turning into a drugstore and drugstore parking lot, which was one of our

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achievements, we saved an original Carnegie library that was headed for the junk pile. So a few little things like that. But it's so important. And you know, right now, I'm in Austin, Texas. And I just read an interesting story today, that the Alamo, believe it or not, was almost destroyed around the turn of the century, from the 19th to the 20th century. At that point, there was no value placed in its history, it was being used to store groceries or foodstuffs and whatnot, they built a warehouse around part of it, I didn't even know that parts of the structure were encased in the warehouse. And a one woman in the early 1900s kind of stood in the way of progress, she actually locked yourself inside. And until finally, they decided not to tear down immediately. And ultimately, now, it is practically the symbol of Texas that generates million or 2 million visitors a year. And people value it for its history. But to think that just a little more than a century ago, it would have been gone, it had not been there, just the upper of one single person. So that's pretty scary.

### **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

I just wanted to indicate is that this stuff that I'm documenting in this book, Asia, I am actually not trying to preserve it and not nostalgic about it, I understand why it's going and that's fine. I think there's a cost to all those kinds of old ways of doing things that may not be worth paying now. And so I'm perfectly happy to have them behind us, it's just that I don't want us to forget about them. And that we should understand that they are designed solutions that may still have some meaning that can be renewed into the future, you know, we will still make new fashions and some of these ideas, maybe recyclable, renewable and new fashion or architecture, and how we design our home if we were to actually grow materials, we want to revisit bamboo houses and how that kind of grown material can be used in house. And so this is an attempt to kind of try and not prevent these changes and

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from being eradicate but just saying here's a document about what they are, and at least they live on in this visual way.

## **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

That's a good clarification. Kevin. I think you know, even as a preservationist, I was aware that you can not save everything, even everything that was pretty good. But yeah, I think it's important for any culture or group to have the occasional tangible reminder of their past in their history. You know, if you look at the Alamo, now it's a touchstone for Texans and the fact that that one little tiny structure, which I'm sure you've been at one point or another, for those folks who haven't been there and have perhaps seen a movie about the Alamo, it's way smaller than you'd expect. You pull up in front of it. It's like, that's the Alamo. I expect something much bigger. But this is one little mission building, has ended up having such cultural significance. I'm curious when you started your photography work 50 years ago, clearly, you were using film. Did you transition to digital at some point, Kevin, and how did that transition go?

## **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

I did transition to digital and having transitioned I will never return to film again, there is a kind of a little bit of a hipster fashion in terms of the retro going back to using film, as well as vinyl, but film, it's like, there is no way I'd ever returned to film because in every way that I can think of digital is better. And digital can imitate whatever a film can do. And there's so much more control. So I say good riddance to film. Although in the beginning, that's all that I had. And I often would set out with 500 rolls of film, in my backpack, which seems like a lot. But there's only 36 Little exposures on a roll. And I would on average, shoot two rolls a day. And when I told people back in the 70s, that I was shooting two rolls of film a day. That's 70 pictures,

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they would be flabbergasted, they would be astounded, blown, their minds would be blown, that anybody could take 70 images a day, because most people, including my family would have a roll film, that they would do one a year, they would do the entire year, one roll of film, Christmas, birthday party, whatever, one or two shots. And so the idea of doing two rolls a day, 70 A day was like that is insane. And that just shows you how far we've come. In our own journey.

**Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Now you take that many shots in five minutes.

**Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Exactly. Everybody does. Yep.

**Speaker: Roger Dooley**

Now, the book is organized in an interesting way, Kevin, you know, logically, you might think, well, let's sub chapters by sections, by region, and then countries. So this is going to be the turkey chapter. And we're going to have maybe different regions in Turkey or different cultures and so on. But you took a different approach to describe how you organized it.

**Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Well, actually, it's in fact, generally organized in direction from west to east, but there are themes as well. So some of the themes might be kind of a pan asian thing like tea. So I would have a whole thing on growing tea, different regions, picking tea, transporting tea, there's a famous tea horse Road in China that goes from Tibet, down to poor, or tea houses. And the tea culture that goes as far as you know, Istanbul. And then other times, I had a theme of just color like, for some reason, Indians have a really a preference for

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Orange. They love oranges, but really oranges throughout the country. And I would just kind of have orange things together as the theme. So and there was visual collections, I would do of baby carriers or street graphics from hand painted signs. And so in addition to the general drift of a direction, from west to east, there are also all these themes. And part of it is to show this diversity, and this otherness I call otherness, this the value of having other ways of approaching things. And I think it's very important that we have different ideas and have think differently. Because in the new economy, thinking different having different ideas, differences is the chief engine of innovation and creation and wealth. And when we are all connected together with our phones, 24 hours a day, it becomes harder to have a different idea. And so part of what this book is about is to say here's a bunch of different ideas, mostly from the past, but partly because of the differences in isolation and cultural things. Here are a bunch of different ideas about how to have a life.

## **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

I'm sure you've had some fascinating experiences and maybe a few scary ones. Were there any point during your travels when you were pretty sure you were going to die?

## **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Remarkably No. Partly because while there certainly crime in Asia, there is less personal crime in terms of being personally threatened. People don't carry guns around. I mean, the idea that everybody should be carrying a gun would seem to them utterly insane. And the more conservative you are, the more the where you would be sure that that's not a good idea. And so, there really wasn't the danger of personal affront or you might be pickpocketed. And that was always a possibility, but not dangerous. off course the greatest

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danger was just riding the buses, just traffic accidents, because traffic rules were always suggestions. Right? You know that, line down this middle of the road was a suggestion. And so that was by far the greatest and there were, some rides in the mountains on the buses, we were coming in the Himalayas, we were coming around curve. And you might have just missed, you know, the previous bus coming at you. So that was probably the closest that I got to feeling my life was in danger. We've been and you know, it was not an idle threat. Because every week, there's a report of a bus falling over the edge. Somewhere in Asia

### **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

I've been on a few of those, both in Asia and other countries with winding mountain passes that are minor for one vehicle. And that's pretty scary. You're putting a lot of trust in the drivers. You know, the pandemic changed things for a lot of people at I don't know if that was part of what drove the creation of this book. But you were had to stay put for a while. But when we last spoke, we talked about some of the your predictions for the future from the inevitable. And how has anything changed? has been pandemic, change things in any way that you can see that you say, Well, okay, I thought this now, I think that or this is going to move much more quickly, or much more slowly.

### **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Yeah, I mean, I think was, everybody was surprised, I believe, about how fast people adapted to this remote work. Even though people like us and myself, who had worked that way before, we're not really surprised, but we understood the resistance to it and hesitancy. And that kind of evaporated, once people were forced to do it. And they understood that it wasn't that bad. you could get work done. Some people became more productive. And

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manyways. And so that was, I would say, collective surprise, although I don't think I was surprised. But it was collectively a surprise that it was adopted so quickly. And partly because there was not much choice. The other thing that I think that I was surprised by that it wasn't technological. But I was surprised by the degree of the of the anti Vax sentiment, accelerating the way it did. And obviously it's political. But it's not entirely because, it doesn't happen in other countries. But just that was sort of caught me off guard, I would not have believed that would have gone to the depth that it got to. I think one place maybe I changed my mind, or I'm still changing my mind is the notion about whether masking will become a norm. And it seems like it's possible that we might keep that up in a way that the Japanese say, have a society in the urban areas, where masking is the norm for many people. And that's possible that could spill over. And we could find some degree of normality with masking as part of the general environment. I'm not saying all the time, but it might become the norm in some ways.

### **Speaker: Roger Dooley**

So probably a pretty good place to wrap up. Kevin, how can people find you and your ideas and your new book?

### **Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

Vanishing Asia was fortunate to have a Kickstarter campaign to crowdfunded. But it is now going to be available on Amazon. It's listed on Amazon. If you do Vanishing Asia, you'll find it it's you can order a copy. Again, it's three volumes, 27 pounds, it's huge, 1000 pages, well worth the price, and not right here. But down here. I'm in the middle of a two story library. And I have every photo book about Asia ever printed. I have lots of other photo books and art books. And I can say that this book is like no other book.

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**Speaker: Roger Dooley**

From what little I've seen that Kevin that's definitely true. And we will link to the book in the show notes page at [Roger Dooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast). We'll have text and audio versions of our conversation there as well. Kevin, thanks so much for being on the show.

**Speaker: Kevin Kelly**

It was a real delight. Thanks for the great questions.

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