

## CHINA, or Something Like It

Arijit Sen

While travelling around Asia this summer, I met up with various old friends from school and college. When they asked what I was doing, I told them I was in graduate school, studying creative writing. ‘Then how are you travelling,’ they asked me. So I told them.

The idea that graduate students, among the most underpaid citizens of the workforce, could afford to travel three continents away without fear of perpetual penury was astonishing for my friends. The more I spoke to people outside the program, the more I found it myself equally astonished. There is a habit among those of us in the program to take these sort of opportunities for granted, when in reality they are truly special—I will allow myself to lapse into the vernacular and say, absolutely stupendous.

Graduate students in other programs spend their summers bussing tables, or teaching online courses. Of course some of us have to do that, a number of us can spend that time in places like China and Singapore, in Prague, in Mexico, in Argentina. While we did not get to teach creative writing this summer, we got to see the truly monumental scale of Chinese architecture, I got to admire the golden pagodas of Thailand, lose my wallet on a long-haul bus in Laos, co-habitate with rats in a seedy Bangkok hostel while waiting for Bank of America to courier me my credit card, and meet people I would never have met elsewhere.

In Beijing I spoke to a grocer who said that the Chinese government had closed all shipments of vegetables coming from outside the city till the end of the Olympics. The grocer was clearly suffering the financial affects of this action, but was nevertheless very very excited about the Games. In Bangkok, a taxidriver first offered me a ladyboy, then

found out I had no money, and explained the role of boxing in the Thailand prison system instead. In Laos my hotel clerk spent the day immersed in a fourth-grade English grammar workbook, and shyly asked me to help him with some of the problems—unfortunately we could not work on adjectives because the second-hand book already had those exercises filled out.

At home in Calcutta, I decided to view my home-city through foreign lenses. For the first week I found myself getting irritated at the inefficiency, the corruption, the traffic, comparing all of them with my academic home in the United States. But as I spent more time there, I gradually found myself viewing Calcutta through a different lens, accepting its rhythms, its magic—I understood why foreigners habitually go there and fall in love. This time I had a tool with which to understand it.

Over the two and a half months that I spent travelling, I grew to understand my own writing more—reading native literature in Thailand and Laos, re-reading Bengali and Hindi literature, attending a lecture on Chinese philosophy at a coffeeshop in Beijing, I grew acquainted and reacquainted with modes of thinking, with manners of expression, that I was not quite used to anymore. Teaching a creative writing class at my high-school, I realized that the instruction given to me in a New England college needed to be changed for an audience of Indian seventh-graders. Instead of Tobias Wolff and Joyce Carol Oates, I used the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to explain my points, and fell in love with the epics again.

The sum of these experiences cannot be summarized in the pages of drivel my mother's computer was subjected to this summer, but hopefully the seeds of what might one day inform my writing, the opening of partially closed brain-channels, will help me more. Yes, it is ridiculous that we get to travel like this as writers, but for those of us

who are still learning about this life that we one day want to join, those of us still in the first stages of our apprenticeship, these opportunities (otherwise unaffordable) are invaluable, and even more importantly, are essential for our development.

In closing I'd just like to thank the Virginia G. Piper Center for allowing us the funding to go on this trip, and Professor Rhodes and Matt for helping us with all the logistics. I would however like especially not to thank US Airways for stranding me at LAX airport at the end of a 55 hour journey, that turned into an 80 hour journey.