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Vikram Seth

AUTHOR OF A SUITABLE BOY

From  
Heaven Lake

TRAVELS THROUGH SINKIANG AND TIBET

From Heaven Lake  
Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet

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VIKRAM SETH



PHENIX

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To the people I met along the way.

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## FOREWORD

This book is an account of what I saw, thought and felt as I travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a student. It is not intended as a summary of the political or economic situation of that country, although I did occasionally digress into such ruminations in the course of writing the book. But since a great deal has changed in the world I wrote about seven years ago, I thought it might be of interest to the reader of this new edition for me to say a little about these changes. It is strange to be doing so at a time when places and people I have come to love – both in Tibet and in China as a whole – are so deeply threatened by recent events.

These seven years have been difficult ones for what is called by the Chinese 'the Tibet autonomous region'. The Dalai Lama – scholar, teacher, statesman, politician, administrator and, to many of his people, God – continues to live outside his country, attempting to keep Tibetan culture alive outside its homeland, and the cause of Tibetan freedom alive in the world long after it could have been expected to die down. The Chinese government over much of this period has for economic reasons encouraged tourism and travel to Tibet. But it greatly underestimated the political effect that contact with sympathetic foreigners and Tibetans visiting from abroad might have upon those living in Tibet. The non-violent protests against Chinese rule that took place in Lhasa earlier this year on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Dalai Lama's forced flight from Tibet were put down with deadly brutality. Whatever kind of government rules in Beijing, Tibet will not be given its independence; members of China's majority ethnic group, the Han, for all their political differences, are united

when it comes to what they see as the integrity of China's borders. The more realistic hope is that a serious measure of self-determination on economic and cultural issues may be granted to some of the so-called autonomous regions where ethnic minorities live, such as Sinkiang, Inner Mongolia and, most particularly, Tibet. But this depends critically upon the outcome of the recent events in Beijing and the rest of China.

For China, these last seven years have been a period of great change and great revelation. The greatest revelation came from the census of 1982, the first for thirty years, which, when collated, revealed what had not previously been reliably known: the extent of the famine of 1959-61. This famine was only partly the result of poor weather. China had had famines in the past, sometimes over large areas, but had never suffered natural disaster everywhere in its borders simultaneously. What exacerbated and prolonged this particular famine was the rigidity of the chains of information and command that typified (and to a large extent still typify) the Chinese political system. Excessive norms of food production demanded by an impatient and unrealistic leadership under Mao; the unwillingness of the local cadres in the countryside to admit that they had fallen far short of even normal food production; their compulsion to misreport and exaggerate their achievement; and the forced requisitions of grain calculated by the state on the basis of these inflated reports of production – left villages throughout China so short of food that tens of millions of people died. There was no independent press that could inform the isolated leadership about the terrible tragedy that was taking place in the country so that the policy it continued to enforce might be modified. In the course of writing this book, I mentioned what I saw as the achievements and failures – both of them considerable – of post-liberation China. With what is now known of its causes and extent, this largely man-made famine heavily affects the reckoning.

When I left China in 1982, the economic liberalisation of the countryside had already started under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. This involved the devolution downwards of decisions (often to the level of the individual farmer) about whether and when and how to grow various crops. The liberalisation of the economy greatly increased in scope and extent year after year,

soon affecting the cities too, encouraging small businesses and fostering elements of private enterprise and initiative even in state-owned industry and foreign trade. But the paramount Chinese leader hoped to de-link economic reform (which was permissible) from political reform (which was not). This attitude stood in sharp contrast to that of his Russian counterpart, Gorbachev, whose visit to Beijing coincided with and may have accelerated recent events. Dominant sections of the leadership under Deng believed that they would be able to keep firmly under check the political effects of foreign contact: of Chinese students living and studying abroad, of foreigners visiting China, of the translation of foreign books – each of which was necessary for economic modernisation. How they entertained this belief is difficult to imagine, but they were increasingly out of touch with the feelings of the people, and had made a similar misjudgment in Tibet.

1989 marks the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, the 70th anniversary of the great May 4th student-led movement in China, and the 40th anniversary of Liberation. In April this year Hu Yaobang, a political leader groomed by Deng to be his successor and then discredited by Deng because of his unacceptable sympathy for wider reform, died. Students who gathered in Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing to express their sorrow began to ask for political reform, for an end to corruption, for greater freedom of speech and of the press, for the rule not of power and nepotism and influence but of equal laws. They asked for a dialogue with the government, and were refused it. They demonstrated peacefully, nonviolently, restrainedly, and were told that they were immature and that the government would not budge. Three thousand students began to fast for their beliefs, and as they grew weaker the general population of Beijing swung behind them in sympathy. The government was terrified of losing control but entirely unwilling to compromise. Referring constantly to the need to deal sternly with ‘tiny minorities of counter-revolutionaries who have misled the students and the citizenry’, it clamped down with martial law. This was quite ineffectual, since it was unpopular even with locally stationed divisions of the People’s Liberation Army, an army that had never before been asked to act against its own peaceful population. Deng, faced with such

dissension, first made sure that he had consolidated his position as head of the Military Commission. And then, when the numbers in Tiananmen Square had with the passage of time dwindled and would very probably have continued to do so, instead of letting things take their natural course, the authorities decided to show their might. On the night of June 4, they ordered reliable sections of the People's Liberation Army to move their tanks and rifles and bayonets and machine-guns in to break down the barricades and clear the square. The firing of salvos into crowds, often while they were attempting ineffectually to flee, the crushing to death by tanks of unarmed students, the indiscriminate slaughter of bystanders, in fact the entire operation was marked by a deliberate and sickening viciousness. The claim of the authorities that this action was necessary to prevent yet greater bloodshed is insulting to the intelligence: the numbers of demonstrators, peaceful as they were, had been diminishing. Nor could an ex-army man like Deng claim that he did not know what carnage would result if the people resisted the army. What else could have resulted? How many hundreds of ordinary, decent, patriotic, peaceful people died in the massacre of June 4 and in the days following we may not ever know. Nor can anyone guess where these events will lead. By the time this book is in the hands of the reader a great deal, for ill or good, will have overtaken the events of these days. But whatever happens in China,

No miracle will ever clean  
The memory, bestial and obscene,  
Of those who, having fouled their trust,  
Grew warped with dread and powerlust –  
And ordered fire on the square,  
On unarmed people everywhere,  
Brave people seeking to be free  
Of rottenness, of tyranny.

*Vikram Seth*  
New Delhi  
June 7, 1989



## INTRODUCTION

I am Indian, and lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980-82. In the summer of 1981 I returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal.

The land route – for this was a hitch-hiking journey – from the oases of northwest China to the Himalayas crosses four Chinese provinces: Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and Gansu in the northwestern desert; then the basin and plateau of Qinghai; and finally Tibet. This book is based on the journal I kept and the photographs I took while I was on the road.

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## Turfan:

### July in the desert

The flies have entered the bus, and their buzzing adds to the overwhelming sense of heat. We drive through the town first: a few two-storey buildings of depressing concrete, housing government offices or large shops – foodstores, clothing, hardware. Small street stalls, too, with their wares displayed on the pavement and vendors selling refreshments – glasses of bilious yellow and red liquids, looking increasingly attractive as our thirst builds. Donkey-carts pulled by tired-looking donkeys, pestered by flies and enervated by the dry, breezeless heat, some ridden by young boys with white skull-caps, others standing beside piles of watermelons. Even when they flick their tails, they do so listlessly. It is not long past dawn, and already the heat has struck. And the light, shining on walls and signs – in Chinese, Latin and Arabic scripts – has a painful brilliance.

Turfan; July. The combination is not a happy one, even for someone accustomed to the oven of Delhi as the summer heat builds up over northern India. The only way to remain even tolerably cool in Turfan is to pour cold water on your head and let your hair dry in the air. This happens in minutes and the process can then be repeated.

Turfan lies in a depression in Xinjiang (Sinkiang), the extreme northwest province of China bordering on the Soviet Union. In summer it bakes and in winter it freezes. It is an oasis town, and its agriculture depends on subterranean water-sources under the inclined plains south of a distant range – just visible to us, purple on the horizon. But since everything evaporates so alarmingly fast at the time that irrigation is most needed, an ingenious system has been constructed for the preservation and transportation of this water. We are to see this later today.

As for Xinjiang itself, it is a curious province. The name means 'New Borderland', but the 'new' is as appropriate a modifier as in the 'New Forest'. The area, populated mainly by people quite different from the Hans (who make up more than nine-tenths of China's population), was first 'pacified' by the Chinese some two thousand years ago. Since then it has been an area of Chinese interest dotted with military outposts and, in different periods, tenuously or closely connected with China: sometimes independent, sometimes semi-independent, and sometimes (as now) an integral province of the country. Strictly speaking, it is not a 'province'. The Chinese call it an 'autonomous region'. This is the name for administrative entities of provincial size which are populated largely by minorities, i.e. non-Hans. (Tibet is another such region.) But effective power is entirely in Beijing's hands.

Xinjiang is a desert province, with the huge Tarim Basin at its heart. When it came to this basin, the ancient Silk Route from China to the Mediterranean bifurcated into the northern and southern Silk Routes. These skirted the periphery of the Tarim, to join again at its western end and continue the long traffic from Changan to Antioch. Along these routes – sometimes desert tracks, sometimes not tracks at all but wastes marked by beacon or tower – lay the green nodes of oasis-towns. Here imperial officials, or whoever happened to hold the region at the time, would examine the visas of merchants and travellers, verify their credentials, provide them with permission to hire or buy fresh mounts (usually camels), and allow them to proceed. Along the southern route lie such towns as Yarkand and Khotan. Along the northern lie Turfan and Urumqi. The routes rejoin at Kashgar, in western Xinjiang.

But Kashgar is out of bounds for foreign travellers. Any area too close to the Soviet 'social imperialists' is, and the green-uniformed People's Liberation Army is everywhere in evidence. The treaties of the two imperial, not to say imperialist, powers have left the boundary in some dispute, and their two socialist successors have fought bloodily over it. Furthermore, each side has a 'minority problem' in the area, for the Uighurs and Kazakhs who live in this historical no-man's-land of Central Asia and whose far-ranging communities, settled or nomadic, are scattered on both sides of a border negotiated or contended over by

## *Turfan*

others, feel little sense of allegiance to the Russians who dominate the USSR or the Hans who dominate China.

They are Muslim in culture and religion; cultures based on the Orthodox Church or on Confucianism are equally alien to them. The script of the Uighur language is Arabic. The dress of the people on the streets outside is colourful, unlike the drab ubiquitous blue of eastern China. Their features are more marked, eyes larger, skin browner: they are in fact racially more akin to the Turks than to the Chinese. But China is a multinational state, and sixty per cent of its area is peopled by the six per cent of its minorities. Beijing is not unalive to the reality of minority disaffection and the need to appease or crush it.

One feature apparently shared by the Uighurs and the Hans is the passion for walls. We have passed out of the town centre and are in the residential outskirts. Small mud houses with walled compounds go past, a grape trellis flung over a courtyard, an occasional tall sunflower raising its head over the wall. Claire cuts a Hami melon. It is not sweet, unlike the watermelons and grapes we have been eating ever since we arrived in Turfan. But it is cool, and we are now in the desert again. The minibus (organised for the Foreign Students Office of Nanjing University by the Foreign Affairs Office of Turfan) pants courageously along the straight metalled road, aimed for another oasis in the distance. This lies close to the old capital city of a local kingdom, whose vast ruins of clay wall and clay edifice continue till today to crumble and survive.

A wall, miles long, circles the ruins. There are towers and domes and palaces and ramparts, and a heat and dryness that are breathtaking. Our guide gives us names and dates and they go straight out of my head – evaporate. I walk away by myself, and climb a flight of collapsing steps to the top of a high wall. From here I watch a donkey-cart with a load of grass – green! green! – trundle through the baked ruins to a market in the small settlement beyond. Every few minutes I take a swig from my waterbottle. I am trying to recall how ‘Ozymandias’ goes when the bus horn reminds me that the group is about to leave. I scramble down, notice I have left my lens-cap at the top of the wall, scramble up – the honking of the horn has become frantic – rush down again and arrive breathless and heat-dazed at the bus.

## *From Heaven Lake*

The ruins we have just visited are described as follows in a pictorial guide to Turfan:

The most famous place is Ko Chang Old City. The City is in the south-east of Turpan and is said to be built in 1.B.C. It lasted until the 14th. Century. In other words, the City has a long history of about 1500 years.

In the ancient time, Ko Chang City acted as an important political, economical and cultural centre. It was also a city along the Silk Route. The City was ruined during a fierce battle which fighting cause is religion.

Before the Muslim invasion and conversion, the area around Turfan was Buddhist. We are now to be taken to some Buddhist temples and monasteries that lie – also in ruins – on the other side of Turfan. When we arrive I look for lizards in the cracked clay crevices, but can see none. The heat is stifling and there is no vegetation except for the sporadic thorny scrub. The buildings are domed, of uncoloured clay, preserved to some extent though dryness, but damaged, I imagine, by the expansion of freezing moisture during cooler months: the clear skies make for a large daily swing in temperature. This site is a long plateau, islanded between the fork and rejoin of a stream far below. Its edges are precipitous, and the braiding stream so far down feeds a brilliant band of green growth. It must have been an enormous task supplying the monastery and temples with water, and I wonder if this place, like Fatehpur Sikri, died for lack of it. I should ask, I suppose; but it will mean a walk back to the guide; and the heat is so intense that I decide to sit in ignorance in the shadow of a wall and stare at a stone.

I am the last one on the bus. 'You are late as usual,' says the guide, an amiable Uighur official who is keener to get us from one tourist attraction to another an hour away than to allow us twenty minutes at the places themselves. He looks at his watch and sucks in his breath. There is a hurried consultation with the driver, after which we descend from the plateau to find ourselves in the desert again.

The three week tour we are on has been organised by Nanjing University for its foreign students: a mixed bunch, though largely from the richer countries, with Japan and the US predominating. During the one or two years we are at Nanjing we study or research our subjects – ranging from philosophy to Chinese literature, from economics to

history – usually on leave of absence from our own universities. Nanjing University provides us with facilities and some supervision, but does not grant degrees. During the holidays we are permitted to travel.

The tenor of this trip, though, is beginning to worry me. It is well-organised – the transport, the board, the accommodation, the guides, everything that would be time-consuming and expensive for individuals to arrange has been thought of. Considering the problems of organisation (train tickets, for example, can be booked no earlier than three days in advance) things have gone smoothly. Yet the comfort of being cushioned from these practicalities has brought with it restrictions of two kinds.

The first is inherent in group travel, indeed in any form of organised group activity – a discipline, a punctuality, imposed upon the participants. Every minute I am late for the bus means fifteen wasted person-minutes for the group as a whole. It will not do, I realise, to stare at a stone when Claire and Carlo and Midoragawa and John and Wolfgang and ten others besides are slowly vaporising in the bus. And yet to be hustled by the Group Will into rushing from sight to sight, savouring nothing, is, I'm sure, irksome to all of us.

The second kind of restriction is peculiar to travel in China. The movement of foreigners is tightly controlled, and it is easier to keep an eye on a group than on its scattered members. A travel pass is needed for every place – outside Nanjing – that we foreign students go to. It has to be filled out and signed by the Public Security Bureau (the police). They will certainly refuse, for instance, to put Kashgar on it; the whole of rural China, except for famous scenic spots or – occasionally – model communes, is out of bounds. If you travel in a group, even what is shown within a town is effectively limited to those places to which the guide is willing to take you. By the engaging ploy of keeping you continuously occupied from dawn to sunset he leaves you no time to explore. Our avuncular guide, Abdurrahman, is particularly adept at this. This is stringent enough, but the situation is aggravated by the ever-present phenomenon of *lianxi* – a word as fundamental to an understanding of China as *guiding* (regulations), or *guanxi* (personal connections in official places). Roughly translatable as 'contact' or 'liaison', *lianxi* is absolutely

essential for effective action where discretion, personal fiefdoms and a hierarchical system of command exist. Channels for lateral communication are poor in China. If your work-unit wants something done by another work-unit not in its direct line of command, you have one of two choices. Either apply upwards through your hierarchy to a common boss, and then have the order percolate downwards to the other unit, which is time-consuming; or, alternatively, try, through phone calls, visits, common friends, promises of future favours or some other form of *lianxi*, to get them to do what you want.

Since we foreign students are under the care of the Nanjing University teachers accompanying us, and since the group, during its stay in Turfan, travels under the aegis of the Turfan office of the Foreign Affairs Bureau, there are certain proprieties to be observed. If we want to see something – a museum, for instance – we cannot go to the curators ourselves. We speak to our teachers, who *lianxi* with the Foreign Affairs guide, who, after checking with his superiors, will *lianxi* with some representative of the Ministry of Culture, who will talk to the museum authorities. By that time, of course, we will probably have left for another destination. It is also worth noting that in this delicate concatenation a single reasoned, hostile, lazy or timorous ‘no’ is sufficient to stymie our efforts to do what we want to do, or to see what we want to see.

I do not think that I will be able to tolerate the limitations of group travel much longer. I have already committed myself at Turfan, but at Urumqi I will simply refuse to be shown the sights. Seeing fewer monuments will not distress me. At the birth of this idea I pour a little baptismal water onto my head and feel the cool comfort as it steams off my hair. I drink the last of the water and, more cheerfully than before, face the constraints of the present and the heat of the desert.

A line of poplars appears suddenly to the right of the road, a crystal channel of water running alongside. ‘*Karez*,’ says Abdurrahman. ‘It’s water from the mountains.’

We get out to inspect the stream. The water is ice-cold. We take off our hot shoes and wade gratefully across. A few members of a *karez* commune come forward to meet us. Three naked children splash about in the stream and pause to greet us with ‘bye-byes’ of



## Turfan

great vigour and friendliness. They have met foreigners before.

As we look upstream, the channel cuts more and more deeply into the desert, and finally disappears underground into what appears to be a cave. This is in fact a narrow tunnel, or *karez*, part of a system of tunnels that brings water down to Turfan from the mountains to the north. A *karez* is usually less than ten kilometres long, but some are as long as forty kilometres. The same volume of water flows all the year round; there is little depletion in summer, even with temperatures of as much as 48°C. All this is explained by Abdurrahman with a note of justifiable pride; within China, the *karez* is unique to Xinjiang.

‘What if the roof caves in somewhere?’ I inquire.

‘The *karez* can be repaired.’

‘Repaired?’ I ask.

Abdurrahman smiles indulgently. ‘After all, it was built once.’

‘But there doesn’t appear to be anywhere to get in from apart from the mouth. What if damage occurs a good distance inside – say, a few kilometres?’

Abdurrahman points to a slight rise in the ground. ‘We can’t see it from here, but there’s an entrance there too. It’s a hole, like the entrance to a well. It’s fifty metres upstream, and there are entrances of that kind all the way along the *karez*. Some are further apart, but you can always get to the damage and repair it.’

We walk over to the opening and I am intrigued. The stream gurgles about three metres below, its surface almost unruffled. ‘This,’ says Abdurrahman, ‘is where the *karez* commune members enter to maintain the channels. It’s quite simple.’

The water is too tempting. ‘I think I’ll be an honorary commune member,’ I murmur, as I take off my shoes, slip off my shirt and drop my legs over the edge of the well. ‘See you at the mouth of the *karez*.’

Abdurrahman drops his avuncular air. ‘No – no –’ he exclaims, ‘there’s nothing of interest inside. I wouldn’t go down.’ Then, yielding to the inevitable as I disappear downwards with a splash, he adds, ‘Be careful!’

The walls are slippery, and I couldn’t climb out even if I wanted to. There is not much light, which is something of a shock after the brilliant