

"Fragments of China: More Wanderings - Letter to Lychee."

Dear Lychee:

I have already been in Lisbon for one week; I have been away from XJ for almost two months. During this time, I went through the time-worn process of "depressurization" - that is, trying to re-adjust to home-culture. I saw some old students in Sichuan, Shanghai, Beijing, and elsewhere; I visited some relatives; I went back to my place in Maine state to unpack the year's "stuff" and re-pack for the next round; I flew to Lisbon. Throughout these three or four stages of "cultural depressurization", I went deeper into anomie and the fog of existential futility. With a few exceptions, it was a laundry list of life's obligations, and by the time I had gone to the emotional safety of Lisbon, I was too emotionally worn out to know it. It is now close to 30 years that I have lived "in foreign lands". My die is cast, my river is crossed - and I like it this way! Save for the bare essentials of land, supply, and a few "pickled friends", I have very little to look back to. Like Alexander, I have only the faint but ever-present promise of "the ends of the earth".

Lychee...there is nobody in the world that I would rather write to! For a few weeks I had thought about starting up this latest round of "Fragments of China", but I was emotionally unable to. Although I walked the cobbled streets of my beloved Lisbon, I found melancholy and what the Portuguese call "saudade". I slept for terrible lengths of time. My body was weak and trembling, as if sick. Then, I woke up recovered, sat in the drawing room of the Lisbon Hostel (with Bob Marley music in the background), and decided to write - to you, muse!

Economic hardship has been rubbed into the soul of Lisbon, the way tung-oil is rubbed into antique floor boards, giving them a mysterious, silent beauty. I can see it in the way there is more loose sand between the mosaic-cobblestones on the pavement; I can see it in the careful attention of the shoe-shiner in Chiado; I can feel it in the soul of the street music; I know it in the eyes of the sales people - all of them. Perhaps, I have been too sad to recognize any happy things...but I feel Lisbon this year is different. Something has changed.

This city, this land, is under a kind of "corporate takeover". The small souvenir shops are now under a new paradigm. Luxury properties up in the hills of Sintra have become someone else's "play-paradise". Inventory, and where it comes from, is changing. The new carpet-bags are now for sale.

Those who "know the times" have left to re-establish themselves elsewhere. There are still tourists, but the streets seem emptier. Lisbon will survive whatever its incarnation, but my recollections of this place, this refuge, will blow away like each year's brown leaves of cold autumn.

As in Bangkok, so too in Lisbon...For me, there is a distinct similarity.

As usual, Lychee, I wish to jump around with the narrative. The unity is in the fragments, as you know.

I left XJ for a year or two, for a variety of reasons. I was burned out, again. The students wanted to play, to varying degrees. I lost yet another potential sweetheart. XJ itself is ready for a new round of agitation/suppression (and what difference does the order-of events make?) The delicate balance, the very sensitive eco-system of expats / visas/ local people has been violated, and now demands "correction". It is time for me to clear out (at least, for a while). I want to return to my "bucket-list", and to the rest of my life. I feel time is short - for me, and for the "world-playground" I have known and enjoyed for almost 50 years. Although I have been a very diligent collector/pack-rat/hoarder over the years, I am now paying attention to "giving things

away”, mostly to those super-elite students who have risen in my estimation over the years in China. Of course, I would like to come back to XJ in two years, and work as an English teacher there for five more years – but nothing is certain these days.

Meanwhile, back at my “global crash-pad” in Maine state, I spent four days unpacking my curriculum, and putting it where it belonged. It would have made an interesting time-lapse video... Once again, I had no time to actually enjoy the place. However, everything is 85% “well-organized”, which does make a big difference to me. Now, I am ready to go off on another round of trips.

People, from various episodes, have criticized me for “having chances, which most don’t have”, or “being a solitary sardine, away from the protection of the school-of fish”, or “engaging in marginalia”, and so on. As for me, I know these things: my time is limited; “to have, but not to use” is the worse crime; my ambitions may be small, or obscure, or unconventional, but they are, nonetheless, ambitions; the “global playground”. I have dreamed over (and visited) for the past 50 years will be shut down, curtailed, blocked, and forbidden to me, and many, many others. So, for me, it is an easy decision to make – execute and carry out the bucket-list, now! “He who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.”

So Lychee, here I am in Lisbon once again, to begin a new round of travel.

I walk the streets, devouring every single scrap of “eye-candy”, every small gesture, every smile or frown, with the feeling these are for the last time. Some days I notice nothing, because I care for nothing. I pass a shop that sells outrageously expensive dark chocolate from Ecuador; I walk in, discuss the relative merits of 60%, 72%, and 84% cocoa-content with the shop-keeper, as if I were discussing 50-year old port; I buy some, and enjoy it. The 72% is best. For most of my life, I would not have dared to do this, but now, such acts of real, elitist enjoyment are the right thing to do. Here is the secret, which the French know all too well: enjoy the very best, in small amounts, but only occasionally. Anything more is revolting, “super-sized” gluttony.

Some cities are to be enjoyed to the last drop, “burned down to the water line”, as it were – for life will end soon, and there will be no further chance. Some cities should be left alone or relatively untouched, usually because somebody lives there, someone frequently visited; one must hoard away those interesting places to visit, to counter-balance social boredom. Some cities give, and give, and give. Lisbon is my favorite city, but on this trip, I marked off those tourist sites I had not yet seen, and went to visit them one by one, with a ruthless, systematic determination. Now that it is done, I can recall those favorite places, and re-visit them in a spirit of enjoyment...but that is for later. On this trip, I devoured everything with my eyes, my perception, my aesthetic, my imagination.

Lychee, I will not describe the beauties of Lisbon to you – Fernando Pessoa, and many others, have already done this. Lychee, go yourself!

I went on day-trips from Lisbon to Palmela, to Evora, to Sesimbra. The oft-touted attractions of these places did not move me, but unexpected little details did – especially in the town of Sesimbra. Under a wisteria canopy in a minute garden-plaza, the old men gathered to discuss life. There were no women there. Under the wisteria canopy, everything was shaded, fresh and peaceful. On the beach, the restored fortress, with its distinctive Portuguese corner-turrets, gave me shelter from the harsh sun-glare. I stood inside one of these pillbox-like shelters, put my face up to the vent-slit, closed my eyes, and let the sea-breeze blow over me. For a brief moment, I could forget about life.

It was in Lisbon that I noticed something which has become a subtle, quiet constant in my wanderings in western Europe...that is, the migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. They have been distributed to all parts of Europe, but especially to the capitals and the big cities. Just as every chimney-pot has a stork, and every barn has its swallows, so too the migrants and refugees have come to Europe, and settled.

I too began to move through western Europe. After two weeks of “mental convalescence”, I began my own form of migration. I went the hard way, by long-distance bus, to Ghent (in Belgium), passing through Guarda, Valladolid, Bilbao, Tours, Paris, and Brussels. Nothing has changed for me; I like to re-connect with the universe on those long and cramped journeys. Once again, “7-11” stores and autobahn rest-stops became my home and sustenance. I was surrounded by many people, but spoke with none, save to ask, “How long do we rest here?” My minor sustenance was a pocketful of one-euro coins, for buying little things – but sometimes, I splashed out on salmon (as I had with the chocolate in Lisbon). After two hard days, I arrived in Ghent.

I chose Ghent for two reasons: one of my Tianjin students was now living here, and I wanted to drop in and see her (after 20 years of silence); also, Ghent was about half-way between Lisbon and Oslo, and I needed somewhere to rest. I had my inter-galactic rendez-vous with my former student, decided that Ghent was a suitable regional base-camp and worth another visit, and left in haste for Oslo, via Hamburg, Copenhagen, Malmo, and Goteborg. That meant more time on the bus and ferry. The layover in Copenhagen was long, so I read, and observed people—especially the migrants and the refugees.

In a sense, Oslo (in Norway) was the real beginning of this trip. All that came before was just “getting there”. I have an old friend in Oslo who I looked up. The visit was successful. We “caught up”, and I got used to basic tourist survival in Norway. I say this Lychee, because Norway is so very expensive – a good pair of sandwiches is ten dollars! (However this year, the exchange-rate was in the dollar’s favor...and, I had a “Eurail travel pass”.) I needed to make a conscious decision to accept “expensive Norway” for what it is, and enjoy the place. Of course, Norway is so very beautiful, and everything works. Once the tourist has made the decision to spend more money, then everything becomes better. So, I began to wander in Norway by myself.

Of all the Norwegian cities, I liked Stavanger the best. The bus was due to leave the next morning and early, so I walked back to the bus station, after dark, in order to scout out where everything was. Normally, I am afraid to walk about after dark, but I decided to have a try. Then, I followed a street by impulse, over a rise, and discovered by accident the old part of the city, and the harbor. The night was dark, it was a little cold and there were a few people about. However, the buildings were lit up from outside in such a way as to contrast light and darkness. For example, parts of the walls of Stavanger cathedral were brightly lit up, but the nearby hedges or bushes were unlit and all the darker for the contrast. The public areas near the quays were wide and open. At anchor, under its own lighting, was a cleaned-up tramp steamer, straight out of a Joseph Conrad novel. The combined feelings and impressions of the moment, combined with the utterly clean night air made me want to go on living – which for me is rare. Here was the world at peace, inviting me to step out and explore.

The next morning, I took buses and ferries to Bergen. On a ferry, I craved smoked salmon, even more than the local scenery. My mind was fretting and very preoccupied, as usual. I stayed at another youth hostel – bright, clean and perfectly efficient – and wandered in parts of old Bergen. I returned to Oslo for one night, and then headed north.

Throughout this part of the trip, I was often worried about being blocked by the snow, and having to go back to Oslo. However, that did not happen, though it rained and grew colder. Lychee, I do remember hauling my heavy suitcase-on-wheels over the cobblestoned streets of Trondheim at 4:30 in the morning; at that hour, noise seemed so much louder. I got lost, and bumbled my way to the station. The

street cleaners swept the sidewalk with water – cannon, but nothing much seemed to change. At Bodo, it was raining and I got wet, while looking for the hotel. All the people at the hotels were kind; still, the act of booking the next night – and paying for it – were hard. I detest internet and credit card based travel! Give me a wad of cash, a guidebook, and a public phone in the train station any day. In Bode, I asked for travel directions in Persian from an immigrant who worked at a donner-kebab restaurant...but did not know how to get my answers from the Norwegians. I slept in clean sheets, but my mind was confused, cluttered, and disorganized. It was often thus.

The next morning, I got up very early, and walked the semi-dark streets to Bodo bus station. Nobody was on the streets, but many hooded crows walked the cobblestone, flitting in and out of the lamplight – it was the only light available, this far north in Norway. The wind blew freely and rattled everything; I relaxed once I was on the warm bus, and on my way. That day, as usual, the Norwegian scenery was very, very beautiful, with nature pristine and untouched, and civilization meticulously organized.

In Narvik, I stayed in a business hotel, because I could not find a youth hostel. I mention this, because on this journey, around the time I was in Narvik, I began to accept that (sometimes) going first class is a good choice. I do not want to “spend up” every day, but sometimes it is better. Of course, on the other days, I still like to live and dress much more simply. In the Narvik business hotel, which is only glass-walled, 20-floor structure in the city, I looked out over the city. In the afternoon the mountaintop weather worked its way downwards towards the city. I had time to walk around part of Narvik, and look at a Stone-Age rock etching of an elk.

Of course, if one stays in a good hotel, then the breakfast is good. There was smoked salmon, and different forms of pickled herring, which I tasted. It was a time to try and look at life differently. Before, I would wolf down the food before anyone could take it from me, or else eat too much. Here I tried eating less, and tasted each kind of pickled herring as if I were at a wine-tasting event. It was a new idea.

From Narvik I entered Sweden. Two trains took me through Kiruna, and on to Stockholm. On that night train, there was a family with two very noisy boys. These boys were completely out of control, and played at shouting volume for much of the night. Their parents were totally indifferent to it all. So, I moved to another seat in the carriage. Even so, I could not sleep, but drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the night. The next morning, I was so worn out and disorganized, it took me an hour to check my heavy suitcase in a locker, then find my way out of the station and onto the street.

Lychee, I mention this, because my body and mind have been acting in strange ways this year. I have nodded off to sleep in museums (on a bench), and the museum staff have awoken me, afraid I was having a stroke. (No, I was exhausted and confused that day.) When I enter a new country or situation, I am slow to figure it out. Sometimes, there is a solitary streak of bright red blood in my stool, and then nothing. At times I have no wish to do anything, and when I do, it is harder to “get in gear”, and do it. So, Lychee, all the more reason to do as many of the “dots, lines, and projects” as possible – and now! (Dot’s” – living for a season in a city of interest. “Lines” – travel over vast areas, between various cities. “Projects” – various personal ideas and projects which interest me – mostly about writing, foreign language, curriculum.)

There were several hours in Stockholm before the night ferry to Helsinki. In the morning, I had a bad attitude towards this place, on account of the high cost of living there. I walked around the Gamla Stan (Old Town) district, and by the mid-afternoon I found that Stockholm is a very good place. So, I decided to come back later, during the tourist “off season”, and stay for 12 days, and visit everywhere. Thus, Stockholm went into my “tourist pantheon”, along with Singapore and Lisbon. I think Stockholm is best served up on a slightly cold autumn day, when the weather is grim but the city is charming, the leaves hang wet and brown in the parks, and I can imagine Tintin on a street corner. I drank hot chocolate in a dimly-lit café. When I asked the boss to turn up the lights so I could read he refused, but then put three more plug-candles on my table. I still could not read, but decided to sit and feel the special atmosphere of the place. Across the cobbled square, I found a bakery that sold the best brown bread I have ever had. Yes...number one. It lasted me for many days, and I ate it to the end, scraping off the green mold that eventually appeared. I picked a hostel to stay in during the next visit. When the boss asked what time I would be checking in, I said, “In two years. I am now scouting, for later.” He was surprised. So, I wandered about until it was time to get on the ferry.

To me, a “ferry” is an uncomfortable boat to Calais, with hard seats, awful sandwiches, and people queueing up outside the toilet, sometime in the 1970’s. This boat was like a floating casino- hotel, complete with a four-story atrium. I was shocked at the opulence, and hid in my cabin. By now, the fog had come down and it was raining, so the upper deck was uninviting. I barely came out.

I stayed in Helsinki for a few days, with an overnight trip to Joensuu. I only stayed in Finland for a few days, because the Eurail pass ran out, and because I felt driven by time constraints. Finland is always worth another visit, and another. Everything is well managed and very carefully maintained, as it is in Japan. By now, my suitcase was getting insanely heavy, and was driving me crazy. The little plastic wheels were getting pounded by the large grey cobblestones of Helsinki.

Food was also an attraction of Finland, especially the pickled or smoked fish. In Helsinki there are several covered markets, conveniently located in the pulse-points of the city. They remind me of Boston’s Faneuil Hall, but are much better. All the local regional favorites can be found there – at mind numbing prices. The only solution to this is numb one’s mind before shopping, and buy only a quarter of what one thinks one wants. Outside, it was cold and very windy, but inside the food markets, it was warm and pleasant. The cornucopia of dishes of eye-candy was balanced by the looks in the shopkeeper’s eyes as they hoped one would buy just a little bit more. Lean times are near.

The public buildings in Helsinki are large and magnificent, with wide avenues between them. The cold, late-autumn wind blew strongly enough to keep most people off the harbor front streets. I visited empty parks, locked up and shuttered churches, and deserted quays: such is the essence of off-season travel. After an hour or so of this, I would go inside shops I would not ordinarily visit, and keep warm. Like many other parts of Europe, the streets and street corners were staked out by street people and migrants, from inside and outside. The overture is almost over, and in a few moments will come the silent hush, as the audience awaits what is to come. All of Europe awaits what will come next. At that point, all I could think of was collecting local maps, tourism pamphlets in English and Russian (for my language study), and brown bread for the next stage of the journey.

The next stage of the journey was in Tallinn, of Estonia. I took a ferry from Helsinki to Tallinn, and camped out at a backpacker’s hostel. Even though I am not a “backpacker” in any sense of the word, am a complete stranger to almost everyone there, I like these places, because globalization, the internet, travel books like “Lonely Planet”, more than a whiff of global neo-paganism have made many hostels remarkably homogenous the world over. Thus, they are predictable to me, a known entity. The staff are young, well-educated and well-informed, and very helpful and friendly. I have the good feeling and comfort of the camel-driver in a caravanserai, the gentleman in an affiliated club, the Mason in any lodge, the Muslim in any local mosque, the tired traveler stopping in at any distant consulate. They are way-stations in an anonymous and indifferent world. The hostel was in the old, medieval part of Tallinn city.

In Europe, four cities stand out to me, because they have so far escaped war and national disaster, and are thus very beautiful. They are: Lisbon, Stockholm, Tallinn, and Krakow. Of course there are others, but these have caught my eye. Tallinn’s old medieval quarter is as good as it gets, and it was very pleasant to just wander the streets, my mind at rest.

By now, my suitcase was driving me crazy, because it was so heavy. So, I sent three parcels of useless clothes and bought books home. Fortunately, the cost of parcel postage is cheap in Estonia, and the staff were friendly. Once again, the moral of the story is: take next to nothing out (at the start of a trip), and send booty home by parcel-post (as you go along). Save any space in the suitcase for valuable or irreplaceable items, or things which are awkward to send in a parcel. By the time the trip was over, I had sent ten parcels home. To be honest, I made serious baggage planning mistakes on this trip. However, I was also shopping intentionally for books and language-learning materials which were unavailable at home.

Outside Tallinn city, there is a rural theme park, where representative cottages, barns and farmhouses from around all of Estonia have been relocated into one place. There are many such rural theme parks in Europe, usually near a capital city, for the tourists to visit. It was a typical off-season, late-autumn day. Most of the exhibits were shuttered up for the winter. A few had elderly docents in them, in period costume, as alone as an ant on an asteroid – even though the city was ten kilometres away. I walked the silent, damp earth trail around the park.

Perhaps it was I who was on the asteroid, but within the cosmos of my own introspection. Anyway, I liked the place because it was a lonely park to walk in, where my inner thoughts, like someone's dog, could run everywhere. There were a few other walkers, here and there, like cockle-diggers on a long sand-spit at evening.

I will skim the next section. In a few days, I took the night bus to Warsaw, passing through Riga and Vilnius. Then I took another bus to Krakow, and stayed there a few days, in yet another global youth hostel. Since Krakow is on the way to Budapest (and all the rest of east Europe), it is worth a second visit. I was afraid of entering Hungary, because of the refugee crisis, but the staff at the hostel said western tourists were still welcome. Oh well... next time!

I spent one night in Prague. To have passed through without stopping would have been barbaric. I stayed at yet another global youth hostel (also friendly), and wandered the usual tourist drag at night, between Republic Square and the Charles foot-bridge. Here, there was no need for a map, even at night, as the streets were full of tourists, all following the same path. It was like swimming among the salmon at spawning time, up a cobble stone river-bed. It began to dawn on me that tourism in Europe is almost a franchise – one sees the same thing in almost every capital of Europe. More on this, later. For now, I took solace in Prague sausages, a cathedral concert, and looking at the other tourists gawking at the Astronomical Clock. Then I went back to the hostel.

I saw some more people in Germany, Switzerland and England, and then went back to Lisbon. When my suitcase became heavy again, I sent home another parcel. I was often on the lookout for language-learning books, and local delicacies like black pudding, apple tart, and oat flapjacks. Staying with people made it possible, and cheaper. I would never have gone there, while staying in various hotels.

After a few days in Lisbon, which is becoming more and more a “third home”, I went to Madeira Island for twelve days. I wanted to have a look, and was uncertain of what I would find there. After a few hours, I felt it was very touristy, and I wondered how I was going to make the best of twelve days. Like most of Europe, Madeira is a well regulated slot-machine. If you want to access some beautiful place or cultural activity, you must plug into the services offered by the tourism “apparat”. Otherwise, the opaque nature of European society makes getting anything done really difficult. So, I plugged into the system, and went on various day-trips (in minivans), to various parts of the island. The island is very rugged, steep, and volcanic, so going off the roads is virtually impossible. One can look at the beautiful scenery, but for most people, hiking in it is just not possible. I also learned that accessing services was done through the hotel's reception desk. Thus, everything was regulated – and each movement cost money.

Once again, I stayed at yet another hostel, frequented by the same, “twenty-something, Euro-pagan” crowd (yet, in a flash, they could maintain the decorum of their parents; how they managed this, I don't know). It was me, the quiet, out-of-place, middle-aged, semi-anonymous wanderer who hid in the corners, and “stuck out”. They enjoyed life and social fellowship around the table, and shared a Brie or a bottle of Madeira wine; I ate my food out of the plastic wrapper, alone and standing over a counter in the kitchen. They socialized constantly, and linked up with like-minded lovers of surfing or hill-walking, with everyday efficiency; I wandered the parks and gardens of Funchal alone, systematically covering areas on the city map.

Even though Europe shuts out those who “don't belong”, she compensates the misfit in other ways. As Ford Maddox Ford says somewhere in the “The Good Soldier”, even the outcasts and misfits of society have a table in the corner of a Paris café, where they can sit and enjoy their coffee. This is not so, in other societies, where the ejection is total. So, I saw that though I might be shut out of a private garden, there was a public “mirodouro” (viewing point) very nearby. I wandered the semi-deserted streets, or bought a bottle of “Pedras” mineral water to drink at the bar, or sat on park benches for long moments...trying to absorb the essence of Madeira island, outside the normal runs of social commerce. I could live in Portugal forever, as it never stops trying to charm me. I may not understand Portuguese “saudade”, but Portugal leaves me alone and quiet in my own melancholy. The Chinese allowed me to sit alone on the ash-heap, but the Portuguese gave me a “mirodouro”, from which to view life.

The hostel was about two kilometers east of Funchal city. Some of the guests did not like it that way, as the area was too quiet, and “away from the action”. However, this isolation was just what I wanted. There was a bus, but walking was better: one could depressurize one's mind. The way was

narrow, and followed the folds of the steep landscape. Moreover, the hills around Funchall were heavily settled: if you see landscapes from the 1820's, you will be shocked at the difference between then and now. Although the road was narrow, the bus blundered its way up or down as if it owned the road – and nobody challenged it. Meanwhile, I would retire into the hostel, to retire from the world, and share my findings with the boss.

Then I went back to Lisbon for a last stay. I sent more parcels, and wandered the streets around the hostel, trying to suck out, scrape and nibble the last marrow of experience...but it had to end. I went back home, for a brief stopover period.

Lychee, this travel through Europe was consistently amazing. This year, the dollar-to-euro exchange rate was favorable – else I would not have dared to go. Europe is still cobbled and beautiful, but the Europe I saw in the 1970's is no more – so much has changed! Over everything was the pall of uncertainty as to what will happen next. For me, the defining image is of a beggar on each street corner, in a number of the capital cities. They paid little attention to the coins, but sat carefully watching the souls walking by, noting everything, and waiting. I feel that I left Europe at just the right time.

(Lychee, I forget where I left off. It has been some time, and many miles, since I last wrote. On many days, I just did not want to write – so I moved on to another place.)

I left the U.S. for S.E. Asia again, for a “five trips, operating out of Bangkok base-camp” sequence of travel. I would like to finish off the last ten or so routes in S.E. Asia, and then put this region to rest. I am convinced, more than ever, that the “traveler's honeymoon” of the past fifty years is over, and all but dead. I see the handwriting on the wall in many places; the signs are still small, but they are unmistakable to me. Here are some of them. The travelers have become tribal, clannish, opaque to all outsiders, and suspicious. Many people wander the earth, living off of their ATM card and credit cards; when something goes wrong, they reveal their backup codes with no concern for any personal information security. Many people, especially young travelers, have turned travel into a sort of “reality show, survival of the fittest” ordeal. People do not mix, unless the “other” has been vetted – this is why I use the word “tribal” in my observations more now. The check-in agents at the airport are much stricter about “onward/next destination”. It appears that simple itineraries (i.e., go somewhere simple and ordinary for a week, and then come back home) are now in vogue, but more complex and imaginative routes (i.e., go wherever the spirit leads, or “home-base camp-side trip #1-base camp-side trip #2-base camp-side trip #3-base camp-side trip #4-base camp-side trip #5-base camp- return home”) are viewed now with increasing levels of suspicion. Solitary travelers are now viewed with extreme suspicion. Society, and its “norms”, has become more ignorance-based, or else elitist, and also clannish. We have now entered into a new “Dark Ages”, just as lethal as the one that started with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 400's. I call it the “digital dark ages”. With the world's rising awareness of pollution, global warming, over population, income disparity, the time will come when formerly “normal” activities will be controlled or stopped altogether. Travel will be the first to go. The world is no longer a happy place for “free-thinkers” or “blithe spirits” to live. Like the secular bloggers in a certain land, they are being hunted down, one by one.

Thus Lychee, I wish, more than ever before, to follow my “bucket-list” of “lines, dots and projects” now, and not later, for “later” will never come.

I went back to “base camp” again – the backpacker's enclave of Bangkok. Once more, the twilight has grown a little darker, the horizons of imagined possibilities has contracted just a little more. The tree shadows are a little bit longer, and I feel like Little Red Riding Hood, walking back home, who realizes that the crickets have now stopped singing and the air is cold to the back of her neck. Every tribe and nation walks down that street, gawking at the other tribes and nations and photo-clicking anything that moves. Seen and unseen influences are eroding the base camp I once know...Yet this has happened before: somewhere in “A Farewell to Arms”, Hemingway observes relics of the 1890's and the Guided Age, returning to their old watering holes, and finding them changed beyond repair, or vanished altogether. I too, am becoming a relic...but not yet! I will make Bangkok work for me, for as long as I can, and then some more.

Dear, dirty Bangkok...crowded, hot, noisy, polluted, filled with jostling and progressively more offensive tourists by the day, and locals who do what they have to in order to survive...I come here to plan out the next trip, recover from the last journey, or just to be on my own. Since movement around the city is such an ordeal, I prefer to stay put in the back alleys of the backpackers enclave and do my own

things, or else move about the city at 4:00 am (before the morning rush hour), or in the brutally hot early afternoon. Once again, the trend in this age is towards inertia and being “frozen in amber”, and not movement. I like my corner of Bangkok, because once I am ensconced there, the rest of the world need no longer matter, or even exist. Only my mind is unchained, and it roves everywhere it wants to. I sit at the small table in my single-bed room, with the wall-fan blowing on me, stripped to my underpants, and write my language-study materials. I go out, at set times, to eat or drink the same thing at the same place, or to have my clothes washed at the same booth: I like it this way, Lychee. Bangkok has ceased to become a place, but has become a state of mind, a refuge from the horror of existence, a dream-world surrounded by innumerable traffic-jams.

So, Lychee, I went back to Burma again. This was the sixth visit. The purpose was to collect the translated version of “Sentences and Paragraphs”, pay off the translator, have some fairy tales translated into Burmese (for future language study), buy certain novels translated into Burmese (again, for later), buy a big brass “flat bell” (for my tea-house), and travel to a few more places in Burma. I also re-visited the question of “would I like to retire in Burma, or not?” I was able to meet these objectives.

Burma has changed quite a bit from the last visit (February, 2015). There is more money flowing into the country, now that the future appears better. Many of the old colonial buildings in Yangon are being restored, and I am amazed at how well the process is going. Where did all this money come from? The telecom and cell-phone companies have completely taken over the country. One day, I saw more cell-phone towers (from a popular view-point) than gilded pagodas! There are now many more foreign tourists wandering the streets of Yangon than ever. I think I liked it better ten years ago, when “going to visit Burma” was the off-color thing to do, and the countryside was as butt-innocent as Eden, and so beautiful. However, just to be safe, I bought many books and language study materials just in case Burma slips under the water again, and becomes difficult to visit.

As usual, I stayed at my usual watering hole, the Motherland Inn 2. Even the types of tourists who frequent the Motherland Inn 2 have changed – more Chinese, more travel pea-pods of three or four Western, “20-something” women, and older couples. The French still come, as before. As for me, I am the same, and the hotel staff recognize me. The food, the single room, the shower are still the same. This is important, as Burma is still an extremely dangerous place to fall to bits in: I need a secure base-camp to be and to feel secure in, and from which to explore the country. The street outside the hotel is very basic, and all along the rail-track are shanty-huts and many dozens of street children. Several times a day, a freight train passes through. The level-crossing guard pulls closed the gate, shoos away those children who were playing “cane-ball” on the track-bed (but they insist on returning to their game, until the train is all but upon them), and holds the gate closed until the train has gone. Small crows caw out everywhere. There are large family groups above the streets, always looking for something to eat. Sometimes, I want to forget all this, and retreat into my hotel room, which is quiet.

By now, I had visited the most interesting areas of Burma, and was now conducting “mop-up” operations in the last remaining places. Perhaps it is time to leave Burma, for the excitement of looking out the window at the countryside “frozen in amber” has departed. The day is sunny, so the curtain is down, rendering that day’s reconnaissance all but worthless. Nobody cares about looking at the countryside; all they care about is money, ego, and “guan-xi peers”. This will not change. I should move on, elsewhere.

Lychee, I fear I am becoming an old grouch! I showed up in Loikaw, after a brutal night’s bus ride. It was four in the morning, and I checked into a hotel. After “zapping” the mosquitoes with a device that looks like a tennis racket, I slept for a few hours. After breakfast, the hotel boss’ son drove me to the bus station to buy an onward ticket. I looked around at the layout of the town, saw nothing to endear me to the place, and then and there amputated my Loikaw itinerary – I bought an onward bus ticket for three hours later. The driver was appalled: what would his mother say? Too bad...I went back to the hotel, packed by things, picked up a book somewhere, went back to the bus station, and waited for the bus. All of Asia refuses, and has consistently refused, to recognize that the tourist experience should reflect the consumer’s desires, and not those of the producer. (Of course, I assume that there are reasonable limits to this idea.) “When in Rome, provide what the tourists want.” In any case, Lychee, I moved from place to place, looking at the landscapes, and astonishing the locals here and there.

The Chindwin river has now been opened for tourists. There was a certain monastery overlooking the river, north of Monywa, so I went there to scout out the lay of the land, for the next trip.

The water-level seemed very low on the Chindwin; I thought of those earlier boat trips on the long Irrawaddy. Looking in another direction, I could see the enormous slag-heap from an open-pit copper mine. It was a hot day, so I stood in the shadow of the stupas. Someone came up to me to talk about meditation, or something about the monastery. To be honest, Lychee, I did not care! I only went to that place, as it was on a hill, and I could see around! I have conjured up in my mind an entire Burma devoid of people, and without a history. So, when a person came up to me, and dropped detergent onto my water-film, I was not happy; he probably thought I was mad, and left me alone in the heat. The land is so big, and timeless, and under the harsh sunlight. No one can subdue it. Countless nations and generations had their lives stolen into slavery, so that the temples of Bagan could be built, but now Bagan is full of ruins. I felt happier visualizing the land devoid of people, devoid of history, but most of all, devoid of victims. Why are most monuments built on the backs of the oppressed?

On this trip, I went shopping: this trip to Burma was very much a procurement trip. I often thought about the diamond-buyers that Louis XIV sent to Golconda, to pick up crown jewels. Over the years, I have learned to thresh the landscape with my eyes and see what is there, rather than set out in search of something. The world and Asia in particular does not give what people ask for; rather, it must be pounced on and abducted on sight. There is no “coming back tomorrow”, or second chance. So, as I was riding a bicycle-rickshaw, in the cramped “sidecar”, languidly sweeping the shop-fronts with my eyes, I saw some Burmese brass “flat-bells” inside a shop. They were big ones – about six pounds of solid brass. I have coveted them for long time. So, I passed by, noting the place, and also seeing there were no other similar stores in the area. I went back to the hotel and hunted down mosquitoes in the shower room with the tennis-racquet bug-zapper. The next day, I took another rickshaw back to the area, got off some distance away, and walked back to the shop with a nonchalant air. I walked in without warning, pointed to a bell and said, “Hang it on a string and ring it for me”. The first bell had a bad sound, but the second one was pure, with a tone which will inhabit my cherished memories forever. The shopkeeper wrapped the bell, I paid the 37,500 kyats (about \$34.00), and walked out. For her, it was a big sale; for me, I felt as if I had one of Louis XIV’s famous Golconda diamonds in my breast pocket.

To counter this story, here is another one. I wanted to buy a mosquito net (such as the colonials used to hang from large, four-poster beds) but, I wanted a small, child-sized one, to cover just my head and shoulders. This time, I hired a motor-tricycle, and went out in search of a small mosquito net. The driver tried very hard to help me, but we found nothing. I gave up, and went to the Monywa bus station to wait for the bus for Nyaung – U (Bagan). To my surprise, the motor-tricycle driver came back an hour later, having found the small mosquito net on his own. He was very kind, so I gave him a big tip. I include this story to (a) record the kindness of the Burmese people and to (b) say how difficult it is to go out and intentionally search for something to buy.

There are now more and more foreign tourists running around Burma, and they have brought new behaviors onto the Burmese street. I saw two tourists use their cell-phone cameras at point-blank range on a few Burmese women, who were doing some “pin-work” on the street. I think they were very rude and thoughtless. Some others showed no “street sense”, in looking out for their passports or cash-cards. Why are there more and more people today, whose actions are just plain dumb? (Indeed, later on in Bangkok, I saw someone resting, by leaning his body against a household “spirit house”! That is really the limit.) I do not know how “floodgate tourism” will work out in those ex-nemesis countries, like Cuba, Burma, Iran, and one day, North Korea, or if it will work at all.

Before I returned to Yangon for the last time this trip, I stayed in Pyay for five days. I wanted to see if this town on the lower-middle Irrawaddy would be suitable for me to retire in. I feel that “retirement visas” for China will never be granted, so over the past few years I have thought about Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Burma, Kazakhstan and Portugal as friendly, foreign places to live in. Now, it was Burma’s turn to be considered. I intentionally chose to live in Pyay (my favorite Burmese town), to get a feel for life there.

Pyay is not an easy place to live in. The road to Yangon is long and torturous (even though by Burmese standards, it is considered a good one). Dust and shanty are still widespread. It can get hot and nasty in summer. It is in its own world. However, living conditions did not bother me. I like Pyay for its pleasant isolation on the river. Besides, the fundamentals were good: it was an important crossroads town for the west of Burma, and on a secondary north-south axis. There would always be people coming to Pyay, on account of its famous Shwesantaw Pagoda. The success or failure of Pyay would be found

out in how it suited me, as a day-by-day sojourner. So, I checked into my by now familiar quest-house for five days, and just lived there, doing nothing much. Yes, I tracked down the “hedge-row” teacher from the last visit, I hired a motorcycle-taxi to take me to some local tourist places, I picked up some more books for “later” (whatever that is), and I visited my old haunts. Then there was nothing to “do” anymore – all I had was “being”, each day.

I have always regarded “retirement” as the ash-heap of humanity: you “did” your things in life, won your exploits if possible, hoarded up gold or some other commodity for forty years. Then, one day, society said, or “implied” to you, “We don’t need you anymore. Please retire. Be good, do not deviant, or we will put you away. Your major purpose is over.” I visualized old men in France playing “boule”, in Portugal under a wisteria arbor discussing life, in a thousand African villages looking out over the fields and into the unknown. As for me, I went back to the streets of my teenage years – late 1970’s, in London – and wandered out of nondescript, shabby stores to see what they were selling. Perhaps I bought something – its destiny known only to me. In Pyay, I bought a pen (this pen I have now in my hand), or a banana, or else I tried to explain to a waiter that no, I did not want any sugar in my lemonade. (The waiter did not even understand the word “no”, and still gave me sugar.) For me, life’s “gremlins” are not good or bad – they just exist. I wandered up and down, back and forth, in Pyay’s general market, with everything imaginable on the stands, and everything unmentionable underfoot. I wandered an entire neighborhood, up and down the streets, looking for a restaurant I had noticed from the rickshaw the day before and thought interesting – only to finally find it and find it shabby. So, I left it and walked on. I saw again the old truth – in another form – that for every person who helps you, there is someone else who will not help you. Why does life’s daily reality come in “binary pairs”? Burmese night-restaurants will serve big platters of rice, with many, many small dishes of meat, fish and vegetable to choose from. In my case, I just wanted three small dishes of vegetable and little rice. Some restaurants gave me what I wanted while nearby there were others who almost wanted me to leave, and not come back!

So, Lychee, I became the wandering village idiot of Pyay for five days. The people did not know what to make of me, so they left me alone in the Burmese abyss. Truly, there was nothing to do, and I did not know what to be. I have always been a “doing” person – “being” never meant much to me. I stayed in the guest-house room around noon to avoid the heat, and also after dark. Up in the high branches of the shade-trees, the crows kept on calling to each other; they never seemed to rest. I came to realize that I could never retire in Pyay, as there was no one to talk with in a meaningful way, or relate to. I was as much of an enigma as Lear, or Nebuchadnezzar, gone mad, rummaging through the trash-heap. There was no question or possibility of making a life of retirement in Pyay – then, or any time.

One evening, I visited my old friend, the Irrawaddy River. The smoke of evening cooking fires and swept up leaf piles lightly graced the landscape. The crows, for once, were quieter. People were trudging home to their dinner. At the government boat jetty, magnificently run down, people were heading in two’s and three’s to the river’s edge, where they could watch the sun set over the opposite river bank. Some held hands; some leapt from rock to rock to find a better place; all were quiet for a few moments. Sunset in Burma, and especially on the great river, is a holy time. At a certain point, the sounds of evening and dinner prepared called people back to their homes.

In time, I went back to Yangon, did a few more projects, packed my heavy bags, and went back to base-camp, again, in Bangkok. My feelings were low and depressed. On the one hand, I had accomplished much in a short time – the translation was done and paid for, I had many books in Burmese, and I had done some more traveling in Burma. However, I wasn’t sure where to go next in life. Burma no longer seemed to be a viable candidate for my (future) retirement. Whether or not my new curriculum stays in a plastic box forever, or whether it is actually used in an inspired new chapter of life remains to be seen. For now, Lychee, let us say that I took a new risk.

The eight days in Bangkok passed in a spirit of directionlessness. I ate, I slept, I posted a monster, 55 lb. parcel home (full of booty from Burma), I went to my usual places, I picked up a few more books for later, I ate more fruit. Yet throughout, I felt increasingly and strongly meaningless. Is Bangkok (as one of my regional travel base-camps) now becoming used up, like the depleted soil of some rainforest “slash-and-burn” farm tenement? Maybe so: I have now visited most of the areas of interest that can be easily reached from Bangkok; moreover, history continues its inexorable flow-of-remolding against Bangkok, and the time of phase out will happen. However, Lychee, I should not be sad, for I have done almost everything I wanted. Maybe it is time for me to open up a new and interesting regional base

– Istanbul, or Tbilisi, or Dubai, or Kupang, or Bali – and get working! Maybe Bangkok is a “life-chapter”, that should be closed down. (However, Lychee, I will not do that: I like that city too much!)

During this visit, I went to Wat Arun (The Temple of Dawn) to climb the tower-pagoda and look over the river traffic on the Chao Phraya. This time, I could not go up the tower, as it was getting a complete face-lift. (The surrounding four secondary towers had been restored over the past several years, and now it was the turn of the main tower.) The new plaster, with its embedded chips of old porcelain was very white and glaring in the sunlight. I saw everything local from the first level perspective, and not the third level. This was a good thing. Wat Arun is very much a touch-stone for the Thai nation; it is also a sort of metaphorical way station for me, as I look out over the river, look at the world passing by, and sip fabulous coconut-juice from one of the vendors.

In time, I moved on to Singapore, for 16 days. I went back to the same place in “Little India” – the Footprints Hostel – as it was cheap. (A bunk-bed, in a 10- person room, for \$28 / night, in Singapore, is a steal!) I wanted to repeat the “urban trekking” exploits of 2014, wandering everywhere on my “air-sole”, black slippers. However, this time was different. I felt worn out, and lacked ambition to achieve great exploits. Second, I invited a good friend to join me, and I used Singapore to mentor her in global travel. (Bear in mind, she grew up in a severely “culturally-deprived” home environment. She learned to “do her own thing” in Singapore very quickly, and now, she is on the way to becoming a more independent traveler.) However, all this “traveling for two” was not good for me: I spent my days in Singapore, but got very little out of it all! I want to go back, for a third, two-week block of time, for Singapore still charms me, but then, I will go alone, and do everything my way! Lychee, I just cannot be happy in community. I am only really happy when I do my things alone.

Singapore is still magnificent, the city of “ultimate urban eye-candy”, but it too is changing. What is it? Perhaps the people are tired of the “benign nanny-dictator”, and do their own things more openly. However, I wonder: perhaps Singapore really does need the “nanny” in order to be great. This is the main reason why I pursue my “urban-trekking” in Singapore so aggressively – I think I must “see it all, and now”, before the elixir of magnificence blows away, never to return. It is a fragile magnificence, held together with migrant Indian labor, careful city planning, and compliant citizens. Upset any of these variables, and everything is ruined. For me, there is no city on earth as magnificent as modern Singapore, so I come back, again and again. Lychee, I hope you will have a look!

It was the Lunar New Year, and the Chinese disappeared into their homes. It was the weekend, and the migrant Indian workers descended en masse onto the streets of “Little India”. The sensory stimulation was enough blow the filament of any light bulb, so I switched off part of my mind, and wended my way through the crowds. The “hawker food centers” were completely packed with migrant workers taking their day off – to shop, see friends, or send money home to their families back in India. I bought some spiced chickpeas from a vendor, then ate them standing up in a corner, until some people, very embarrassed at seeing me thus, cleared a seat and called me over. I sat down and ate the chickpeas, feeling the social energy all around me. There must have been two or three thousand people there!

Someone once quipped at me, “The one who spoke to you most recently is the one who makes an impression on you.” How true. Well, Singapore is now the most recent place I visited, so it is on my mind. Like Japan, it is supremely well-organized and civilized; like Portugal, it has beautiful parks and a café-snack culture. It has soul-stunning architecture that demonstrates imagination and great boldness. However, it is beastly hot; I soak my clothes in sweat every day. However, since I stay in a slightly shabby part of the city, no one comments. I would not do well in the expat-oligarch, gated communities – but who cares? Singapore has a place for everyone. I wonder if I would like similar places, like Dubai, or Tokyo. The secret to these glittering mall-cities is to enjoy their free public areas (parks, malls, squares), and stay in very cheap hotels, so as to channel travel expenses elsewhere, and go further.

It was rainy season, so heat, humidity, staying out of the rain and nearby a “7-11” convenience store became constant mental preoccupations. The people did not exist, even though they were all around me, in their thousands. This being Asia, there was an invisible membrane separating me from the social world around me, even though I could see it; this state of affairs suited me just fine, Lychee. There are “two Singapores” – the city of eye-candy, and the locked-in box; the tourists’ urban paradise and the local’s workplace; the vale of the excluded, and the mount of insiders. The best analogy to describe this “so close and almost touching, but so very much separated” is a kidney or a lymph-gland; two systems come into intimate contact with each other, but they are separated by the thinnest of membranes. The best

example in Singapore is the metro (subway) system, vs. the city bus system. Although they exist together, they are completely different worlds.

The metro is one of Singapore's great and crowning achievements. It services most of the urban areas very well. Each metro station, at ground level, is a sort of self-standing village community, with shopping malls and social services right on hand. There is no need to have a car in urban Singapore. So I wonder: which came first, the metro stations, or the "villages" up topside? The metro is efficient, easy to use, and above all, air-conditioned. By contrast, the bus system is much more complex; you need to plan and execute your journey very well, and very carefully. There are many, many bus routes, each with their own requirements. Step away from a bus stop, and you are lost forever in an endless urban maze, known only to the locals. Of course the bus system works, and it works well – but it is for the locals. One day, I took a bus to visit a certain temple, but when I tried to walk back to a certain metro station, it was nigh impossible; I took a taxi.

Whenever the metro line ran above-ground, I chose to stand by the doors and look out. I passed a landscape that was supremely well designed, efficient, and in places inaccessible to the outsider. There is very much the tourist's Singapore, and the local's Singapore. Once I came to this realization, I accepted it, and based all of my "urban trekking" and tourist activity on the metro system, since it is so easy to follow. I wonder if the city planners of Singapore intended it to happen this way. As for the universe of life opportunities afforded by the bus-system (and also by the expat's social networking), I cut them out, and took my life elsewhere. Only when I look out of the metro windows, do I allow my eyes to scour the scenery, and imagine what is going on in the other, hidden half of the city.

The streets of Singapore now carry memories and associations, since this is my fourth visit. The memories are often bittersweet. I remember lost friends, now gone. Here, at the "7-11" store, I bought a bottle of iced tea, but then wandered the neighborhood fruitlessly for half an hour, looking for a 'fine-free' place to sit down and drink it. Over there I stood in a "hawker food-center", surrounded by hundreds of dinner choices, but unable to make my choice. In Singapore, I revel in the urban eye-candy, while living on the fringes of anomie. A few shop keepers or hotel staff recognize me, but otherwise, I am anonymous. It is a sublimely delicious feeling. Yet make no mistake, Lychee! Everywhere I go, and everything I do, the "apparat" of Singapore knows it. I could never be hidden, here.

I left Singapore, and went to East Timor for two weeks. I wanted to see colonial Portuguese things, and maybe speak some Portuguese with some local people. It was the wet season, and many roads were impassable. As soon as I arrived at Dili airport, I realized that East Timor was not at all what I thought it would be. It will be twenty more years before a basic minimum of road infrastructure is completed. So, I languished for two weeks, and re-designed the holiday for wet season travel. When travelling in very poor countries, the only way to go is first class. A tour group found me a 4 WD and driver, for one day; I went into the hill country at the western end of the country, up to the poussada in Balibo. Then I stayed at an "eco-hotel" on Atauro Island. Then I stayed at another poussada in Baucau. Then I left. In the between times, I camped out in Dili, trying to make the most of the days. The bottom line is this: island cultures are not for me! Give me "big land", any day.

I went back into Indonesia again, to look at some more new bus-routes. Bali was still chocked in its traffic. Ternate was so hot, crowded by habitation that I had my return ticket brought forward within half an hour of landing. I had assumed that Ternate would be just the same as it was in the 17th century, when the Dutch controlled the clove trade. My mistake...! I stayed only one day, and then moved on.

It was at this point that I sat down on the bed, in my shabby hotel, and thought about all the many places I had visited over the years – mostly in Asia. Almost every place I have been to, has been poor, or shabby, or polluted, or over crowded, or unpleasant in some way. Bear in mind, Lychee, I am not even considering war-zones, or disaster zones. It dawned on me that people (humans of the newly-coined "Anthropocene Era") have made so many places on the earth unpleasant and ugly to live in – and worse. I also realized that out of the very long roll-call of places I have visited, there are so very few places I would like to visit again. This last point was for me a very damning assessment. So, Lychee, here is my "short-list": Lisbon, the Azores, Kyoto, Butittingi and Lake Maninjau (Sumatra), Isfahan and Tabriz (Persia), the Rif and Chefchaouen (Morocco), the Dingle area of Ireland, Stockholm, Singapore, and Baltit Castle in Karimabad (Pakistan- controlled Kashmir). Did I travel to all of these places, just to sift out these thirteen places?! That is terrible...So, I am thinking about going back to these places, to really enjoy them.

This trip to Indonesia was really about the island of Sulawesi (Celebes). On the surface I flew into Manado, then passed through Gorontalo, Palu, Rantepao, and Makassar. I was in Sulawesi for about ten days. The weather was very hot. I had minimal social contact with the people, save hotel staff, the bus crews, a wide variety of hucksters and con-artists trying to see if I was worth being “taken”, restaurant staff, taxi drivers, and nameless others. I watched the “Animal Planet” programs, to remind myself who I was, and at night I locked and barricaded myself in the hotel room – for the “were-wolves” really do come out after dark, in this part of the world. I had no phone or internet contact. My objective was to travel along the Trans-Sulawesi highway from Manado to Makassar, and commune with the land, by observation.

Manado is packed with people, cars, and blue minibus taxis. The streets are veins and arteries, drained of their blood, and filled with formaldehyde and autopsy rubber solution. The traffic at rush hour is truly sclerotic. In the shops and malls are all the usual attempts to mimic the mall eco-system of Singapore, save that the shelves are full of junk food and tinsel culture. Like the blood cells, like the traffic routes, the people go around and around. The sidewalks have real holes in them, big enough for a large sheep to fall into, and drown in the sewer below. Money is channeled into one’s home (the hidden, inside part), and into large communal places of social gathering.

Sulawesi is the Beirut (pre-1970’s) of the nation. That is to say, it is a mixed religion island: the Christians get Manado region and the Tana Toraja area, the Balinese Hindus get some enclaves around Poso, and the Muslims get the rest. Displaying one’s collective religious totem is taken very seriously here, and buildings of assembly are stridently displayed. In Manado, some areas had an ostentatious church building every 100 metres. It made me think of Soi Patpong. The Balinese homes had their house-shrines, made just like the ones in Bali. Over most of the island, the mosques were magnificently built, with gleaming paint and large, tiled floors – and surrounded by village communities with rusted corrugated iron roofs, and that “not quite shanty” feel to it. For me, the message is clear: one’s religious totem, and one’s social, communal identity are more important than anything personal, or anything to do with infrastructure development. I think this will never change.

However, in compensation, the Trans-Sulawesi Highway was a well-built and maintained capillary route for most of its 2,000 km. route. The central government left the people to their communal madness and put the money where it most mattered for the nation – that is, basic infrastructure development. Out of this, Sulawesi will develop, and become a better place. It seemed as if one were driving through a village hamlet, with cottages, painted wooden picket fences, shade trees, children playing by the side of the road, and other trappings of village life – except that this effect went on for hundreds of kilometres, broken only by the wilderness, or large towns. The paving was good, and a lot of money, time and effort was going into building the double-wall drainage trenches along the side of the road. That alone is a huge task. It is the “hidden, Great Wall”.

So, Lychee, I broke up the monotony of subsisting in Manado, by visiting the “Gramedia” bookstore, to see what they had (and didn’t have). I like to get an idea of a new place by looking at the book stores, shopping malls, and supermarkets. I don’t ask people, because I don’t think they want to tell me, or can’t. The hotel’s front desk was selectively helpful, so I learned to do without, or find it by accident, or get a nugget of information from the L.P. guidebook and chase it down. There was a recommended restaurant in Manado called the Rumah Makan Green Garden. It was hard to find, but worth it. Places like this are an oasis of sanity in the sea of dark anomie – especially during the types of wandering holiday I follow. The food was good, and I felt emotionally safe there. Remember, here it is the men who are “cat-called”.

There was also a small, family-run shack-restaurant near the hotel. The food was all right...but they gave me “iced tea, with no sugar”, which I needed because of the desperately hot weather. The “auntie” and her children were a good natured and humorous lot. One of the regular customers was a ninth generation Chinese man from Foochow (Fu Zhou), and speaking with him in Mandarin suddenly made life possible, one again. These are the people who made my long journey through Sulawesi possible.

At this point, I should make some comments about food, and unhealthy diet, in S.E. Asia. I do not know how people ate in the “old days”, since I was not there to see it. (Seeing is everything, and a sharp, trained eye can evaluate what is there in seconds, without actually tasting it.) However, today, there are some very disturbing trends in the way people eat in S. E. Asia. At root lies the insatiable desire

of all people, but especially the middle class, to be living the successful Western materialist life – or, if this is not possible, to at least be appearing to do so. For most people in S.E. Asia, it is completely impossible to replicate the Western life, so counterfeit products that appear to show this lifestyle have flooded the shelves, and the consumers have lapped it all up. For the sake of Asian “face”, people eat every form of plastic, chemicals, way “out of date” food, and products full of palm oil, sugar, and salt. That, Lychee, is why I say “Face is the enemy of progress”. The advertisers and sellers know this, and ruthlessly cheat and destroy the people. The fastest way to completely destroy S.E. Asia would be to show T.V. plays portraying normal, Western, middle-class people living a healthy life, eating the right food, being good to the environment, and living in a beautiful, green and well-balanced world. The resulting firestorm of envy, grief and bitter realization would utterly consume the entire continent. If there is one thing that the Asian psyche cannot accept, it is being “left behind, and not able to make it up”. So, for now, let them eat plastic. The course has been set, and Asia will endure plagues of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and the like. The prime-time T.V. ads are revealing: “So! Eating too much food with your friends is making you fat, or have higher blood pressure? No problem! Take this pill and our product will eat up all those bad fat particles! Now, you can carry on with your friends!” Social relationships, “face”, and appearances remain unchallenged, and the people’s health gets worse and worse. Sometimes I wonder if the “developing world” has reached a point of no return.

As for me, I had my own problems. I was withdrawn, brooding, thinking of many things, and slowly synthesizing everything into words, so as to make this letter for you.

From Manado to Gorontalo, I rode in a “kijang” – a shared long-distance taxi. The seat up front was the most expensive, but the view was clear, and I was left alone. The countryside along the road was well-managed. I have no idea what sort of land existed out of sight of the road. Since Sulawesi is part of “Wallacea”, I was expecting to see tarsiers calling out from every tree; the trees all looking like something out of a Dr. Seuss book, and the landscape like nothing else on earth. But no...it all seemed like anywhere else. What did Alfred Wallace see, that caused him to write to Charles Darwin, and discuss geographical isolation and a different track of evolution? Well, he went everywhere, and here am I in hotel room and bush-taxis... Still, I looked at the passing land, often hidden behind the roadside trees, and wondered about Sulawesi.

I stayed in Gorontalo for two nights, at yet another L.P. recommended hotel. This town is a jumping off point for the Tonggean Islands; many western tourists go there for the scuba diving. That a tourist would bypass these islands and press on for Palu by road was shocking and unthinkable. Still it was my odyssey, and not theirs. I visited another old Portuguese fort which had great views over the flat lands west of Gorontalo. I got about on motorcycle versions of the Vietnamese “cyclo” – scooter in the back for the driver, and two seat “pram” up front for me. I foraged as best I could, at evening food stalls, or at an old Dutch colonial house reincarnated as a café.

The next stage of the journey was the hardest, but also the most interesting and revealing. (I must point out, Lychee, that the road between Gorontalo and Palu went through mostly Muslim territory.) I bought a bus ticket to Palu when I arrived in Gorontalo, and got on the actual bus two days later. It was almost clapped-out, had doors held together by wire, and was noisy. I sat up front, almost over the engine. Ventilation was provided by holes in the inner partition, near the driver’s feet, so whatever was outside blew through the bus. The floor under my feet was very hot because of the engine nearby, so the fruit in my carry-all bag was ruined – not even I dared eat it! The bus left Gorontalo late, went around town to pick up other passengers, came back for me, and then went out to a neighboring village for even more passengers, as well as their baggage.

It was these new passengers who defined this trip. There were about ten men, who were mostly in their 20’s and 30’s, all dressed in white for the haj, and with wispy beards. Since it was now approaching noon, they were dropped off for prayers, the other local passengers went off for lunch, the bus driver got his spare tires fixed – and I stayed on the bus, as I had no idea of where to get food, or pee, or when to come back. It was a repeat experience of a bush-taxi ride in Africa, 32 years earlier. (As you well know, Lychee, with me, some things will never change...) In time, the tires were fixed, the other passengers came back on board, and we went back to the mosque to pick up the ten men. They had finished their prayers, and were seated at a nearby restaurant having lunch. They showed no inclination to scramble back on the bus, but finished their lunch in an unhurried fashion. The entire bus load of passengers waited for them. Then the ten men trooped up to their seats, stepping over and around me (I

was in seat # 2, in the front row). The bus finally started on the journey proper. This elitist incident happened again that night, at the midnight pee-stop, with late supper. They ate in a different place, and when the re-filled bus came to get them, they were still eating their supper, with no intention of rushing out. As I write this, in a deliciously cold “7-11” convenience store in Jakarta, I can now imagine one of them quipping, “You have the bus, but we have the time.” But no, no one said anything, and we sat in the darkened bus, some already asleep, the few mothers comforting their children in and out of their night-dreams and the driver smoking yet another cigarette and staring out into the darkness, awaiting the moment.

As is usual during night bus rides in hot countries, I gave up all hope of sleeping. The seats were hard, and the knees of the person behind me prodded by back throughout the night. The engine was loud, but so too was the music. The Indonesians love to make fusion and copycat music and this night was no exception. 1950’s “dew-wop” music was re-worked with Indonesian words. The whole bus got blasted, so that the driver could stay awake through the night. However, on this night’s ride, I was prepared. I pulled out a pair of construction worker earphones, put them on, and mentally departed from that place. I knew that all the people in that bus were looking at me in astonishment: Asia is not about one person problem-solving; it is about putting up, making do, submitting to the collective. This act was silent but it was very subversive. I don’t care. Let them eat decibels. I floated away, somewhere else.

In time, we got to Palu. There was one final episode with the ten men, as they filed into the bus after a prayer stop. This time, they had taken off their white robes and cloth caps, and were wearing ordinary shorts and T-shirts. For a moment, I thought of hippies, back from a year on the 1970’s “hippie trail”, their hair cut short, the dust of India and Persia scrubbed off them, the suspect items carefully hidden in a friend’s attic, now standing on their parents’ doorstep, taking a deep breath, and mentally preparing themselves to resume their former way of life. All of a sudden, these stern and acetic-looking neophytes, dressed in white and acting their own elitism, they became ordinary “good ol’ boys”, Indonesians like anyone else, ready to come back home.

This journey was rough on me, even with the sound-reducing headphones, so I camped out at a hotel in Palu for two days. I am not the heroic traveler in African bush-taxis that I used to be. I spent a lot of time in the hotel room, pacing up and down, thinking about many things, and glad for having air-conditioning. I wondered, “What have I achieved? Not much!” However, that was not quite true, as my objectives had been simple: see the land; procure language – study materials. In these matters, I was successful. I also saw again and again, that if I stepped off the invisible but nonetheless clearly defined tourist trail, I entered a wholly different world – and it wasn’t friendly. By day it was populated by “we don’t care; we have all the time in the world” hustlers: at night, were-wolves stalked the city landscape. That is why I gave up on day-trips off the beaten track, and evening walks to the nearest convenience store for milk. With each passing year, I become more and more afraid of stepping off the forest track or even going forth. How right Solomon was, in his analysis of old age (at the end of Ecclesiastes)! Still, Lychee, here I am, somewhere at the uttermost ends of the earth, writing these travel thoughts for you!

The bus from Palu to Rantepao was also long, but the conditions were much more civilized. Upon reaching Rantepao, I found it to be completely repulsive, so I took the first onward bus to Makassar.

For me, showing up at a completely new and unfamiliar city is normal, but to do so without the assurance of a hotel booking is very worrisome. However, on this trip I had no choice: Indonesia (and most of Asia) has no more public telephones; the hotels I stayed in were not willing to let me use their phones to call ahead to the next hotel; it was not possible to know when the bus would arrive. So, I went “standby”, and flew blind in the void.

Makassar is infamous for the port-area were-wolves, so I went to a high-end and expensive hotel, and shut myself in for another two days, got my laundry done, ate the celebrated “coto Makassar” soup, visited Fort Rotterdam, and roamed the world in my mind, while pacing the air-conditioned room, the door bolted and a chair against the door. I ate alone.

Lychee, maybe you (and others) are wondering why I even went out to travel! In truth, Sulawesi is not “a beautiful place, with children-of-paradise people”. I went for the land, to see what Celebes looked like, and for the road, which was the only open way given to me. In this, land and road did not disappoint me. The people were gracious to me, and some of them sustained me in my loneliness, ignorance and confusion: they gave me cold tea, they showed me how to find places, and they kept me

from drowning in the sea of anomie. Moses said, "Welcome the stranger that is among you." How right he was, and how kindly were the people of Sulawesi. Yet, at this point I am tired. It will be some years before I am ready to return to Sulawesi, and really check out this place. I have no doubt that some of the 21st century's juiciest secrets and interesting stories will come from here!

Before I left Indonesia, I spent a few days in Jakarta. It is my exit gateway out of the country. Each time I stay at the Hotel Margot, on Jaksa Street (the backpacker's enclave), in the middle of a crowded and almost chaotic city, I promise myself that I will never come again...but I do. I visit the same places, while waiting for the airplane out. I like Jakarta, for all its nature. For me, it is a way to depressurize, before going back to Bangkok. It is well I did no; this visit to Indonesia was more difficult, as I saw many run-down places. I am getting to the end of the "novelty stage" of experiencing Indonesia, and at some point I will need to decide, "Do I want to commit to this place, the way I did with China?" Thus far, I cannot say this of any place – not even Portugal! All I want to do is finish the few remaining wander-trails, and keep to myself, away from society.

While I was in Jakarta, there were some demonstrations by the city taxi-drivers. After I left Jakarta and was in Bangkok, these demonstrations became worse. Also, there were other demonstrations in Dili (East Timor). Lychee, I am glad I left these places before these troubles began!

I stayed in Bangkok for about a week, before embarking on the third stage of this four-part journey. I was all mentally exhausted, and wanted to do very little. Another sea-parcel went home. I visited the usual places, and ate the same snacks. The "7-11" stores are becoming more and more of a refuge; they are air-conditioned; no one bothers me; everything is predictable and in its right place; it provides a brief respite from the trauma of having to navigate a chaotic world. Convenience stores and backpacker enclaves have allowed me to travel all over East Asia without having to meaningfully interact with a single soul. Naturally, Lychee, I like it this way!

In time, I came back to Vietnam. I like this very businesslike country. There is something here which makes Vietnam different from the other S.E. Asian countries – all of them. I think it is because Vietnam is free of the invasive pollution of religion into the social fabric. Here, I follow the "Lonely Planet" guidebook very closely, and plan my daily activities like mine-operations. I plan; I go out and do something; I come back to the hotel; I rearrange what I use; I go out again. Naturally, it helps that the cost of living is much cheaper in Vietnam than in Bangkok. I am always ashamed of myself after a week in Bangkok, after having purchased little from life and lost a thousand dollars, like a pebble in a bottomless lake. Where did it all go? In Vietnam, I feel like I am getting something from life. I follow the universe, as defined by "Lonely Planet", as I am afraid of the social and cultural rip-currents that exist "two steps to the left, or two steps to the right". Lychee, you have only to look at the seething rivers of motorcycles to know that danger is a near and present reality in Vietnam! Still, I like it here, and keep on returning.

As with Burma and Indonesia, the purpose of this trip was to finish off the last "routes of interest" in the country. I want to pass through some areas, and see them, before everything is taken away and shut down for good. Of course, I do hope to come back at some point, but I am taking no chances. People are starting to call me somewhat paranoid, but my almost 50 years of travel experience tells me I am exactly right!

After about 15 years, I am back in Saigon. I used the "Hotel Madame Cuc 127" as a base camp and went out to Con Dao Island (Palau Condore). After my previous failures with small-island mini-trips (Atauro Island in East Timor, and Ternate in the Molucca islands), I decided to get it right, so I flew in on one morning, pounded the island for a day, and left the next morning. It worked. I will remember this.

Con Dao Island was long used as a prison camp, both by the French and by the South Vietnam regime. It was here that the infamous "tiger cage" scandal was revealed to the world in 1970, in a Life Magazine article. There is an abiding sadness in walking through the Con Dao prisons. Like the V.O.C. warehouses in Batavia, or Makassar, these "Second Empire" – era buildings were well built, with sound walls, roof-beams, and roof-tiles – only here, they were used to warehouse people, and under bestial conditions. The "tiger cages" were designed so that quicklime slurry could be thrown down on the semi-naked bodies of the prisoners below. Now, all the doors are deliberately left open. I walked everywhere, alone. There was no need for imagination or any tour guides; walking in those silent and empty cells and courtyards was enough. Later that day, I walked through the cemetery, elsewhere on the island. It is a mournfully beautiful place to be.

I returned to Saigon, having seen enough. Then I roamed over the Mekong Delta area just to have a look. However, since the land is flat, and most of the local population lives next to the roadways, there was little to see. Extracting any nugget of experience in a place like this requires social ability, and this I do not have. So, I focused on street-food, observations on the street, and reading pulp-novels at night. It seems to me that each traveler interprets a location uniquely, as they see fit.

To be honest, Lychee, I was glad to return to Saigon again. The city is never boring; a thousand vignettes play out every day, wherever one passed that day; there are colors, textures, sounds, feelings everywhere; there are hundreds of places and times to walk, look around, snack, drink coffee, hop on a “xe-om” motorcycle-taxi, look at the colonial-era shade trees, and wander about aimlessly. I can see why Graham Greene came here – it would be hard for a writer to become bored and jaded here. Instead of taking a copy of “The Quiet American”, and looking for the places he wrote about, I went to those places, looked at them, and re-created the story in my own mind, with myself as a hidden character. Although sitting on the back of a “xe-om” motorcycle-taxi is the most effective way to get about Saigon, to see and feel the soul of the place one needs to ride up front in a “cyclo” rickshaw, and go wander the quiet streets. Ignore the world looking at you: tune it out, and put on a sun-hat to give you “blinker-vision”; absorb the experience on your terms, scene by scene. Lychee, you will not be disappointed with what Saigon has to offer. Another thing: when you are on a “xe-om” or a “cyclo”, you must tune out all awareness of the crazy traffic around you, or else you will worry too much, and absorb nothing beautiful from the experience. How should one phrase it? “I fly the iron river, surrounded by death. / Contemplating the tall trees, I feel eternity’s threshold.”

Perhaps, Lychee, I will come back to Vietnam – to either Hanoi, or Hue, or Saigon – give up the pretense of mere tourism, stay in one place, and live, and look, and write. Vietnam has it all!

Next I did forced march bus rides to Boon Ma Thuot, Pleiku, Kon Tum and Da Nang. I had long wanted to take “the other road north” from Saigon, so I did. Da Nang was a necessary rest stop – as I get older, travel becomes more tiring. I am not the wandering hero any more.

After Da Nang comes Hoi An. Many years ago, Hoi An was a very important trading centre in Vietnam; however, the river silted up, and business moved up to Da Nang. As for Hoi An, it was re-invented as a tourism city, since the “old city” still has many antique houses. Think of “old Hangzhou” (the tourist place), with original antique houses, and not copies. I stayed here for a few days. Part of me did not want to come (as I hear it was very touristy, with many aggressive salespeople on the streets). But I went as it is one of the top stops in Vietnam.

To appreciate Hoi An, one must (once again) deliberately cultivate a contrary, even “asymmetric” attitude to the place. Why so? There are so many tourism and sales-related shops there, it is hard to see and feel the original place. Almost all of the old buildings have been turned into shop front businesses – restaurants, craft boutique shops, tour arrangers, and above all, tailors. It is your classic “tourist trap”. Prices are high, and the noon sun is hot. Culture has been taken over by business. Therefore, the tourist must focus on details, and must make up one’s own experiences. What do I mean by this? First, Hoi An is a beautiful town – if one peels away all distractions of the mass tourism industry – and focuses on one thing. Out of one chaotic street, find one interesting building, and give it all your attention. In this building, focus on the actual building (and not what people are trying to present you), for raw buildings are honest and tell their own stories. Look at the architecture of the place – the roof tiles, the great wooden beams, the stone floors below or the upper wooden floors. Look at the courtyards, and fish pools. Stand under the shade trees. Drink deeply of the whole, through one carefully (or randomly) selected part of it. Second, make up your own experiences throughout the place, throughout the day. The mass-tourism “apparatus” wants you to accept their experiences on their own terms – and these are ultimately bankrupt, since they are motivated by money, and because they are rigid, inflexible, and cannot be modified or creatively re-set or re-imagined. For example: when I was tired, I went to the lowliest tea-stall, and got a beer-tankard full of bitter, iced jasmine tea –for 25 cents. I sat there, on the mini-stool for half an hour, or until the ice-blocks had all melted away...and I watched, absorbed, and listened to everything going on around me. I ignored what was on offer, and made up my own life, my own perceptions, and my own experiences. Believe me, Hoi An is quite capable of speaking out for itself! As the ice melts, so the stories come out to me.

It was lunch time. I wandered the covered market, scouring the tables for some new snack – and not just “pho”-noodles. The shop keepers studied where my eyes were looking (they are very good at

this), and when my gaze tripped a certain spatial trip line, they tried to gaff-hook me with their voice. All of them were waiting, like hunter-fishers. I walked up and down the rows, until I found some rice-flour pancake, a new experience and I tuned out the rest of the market for fifteen minutes. Only the plate of rice flour pancake existed, and it defined the entire day, until nightfall.

Well, Lychee, from this you can see (once again!) that I am a non conformist and a passive social rebel. Maybe this is why some people look down on me. However, I do not care as my life is colorful. The alternative is to be cheated, robbed and depleted by society, day after day.

I went to Hue, the ancient capital, expecting a re-run of the last visit, but was disappointed. Perhaps some things are best tasted once, and once only, and then left in the fantasy world of memory. However, there were some parts of Hue that were very peaceful and beautiful. This city was built on each side of the Perfume River, somewhat inland from the coastline. From one pagoda, there are good views of the inland mountains. The citadel of Hue, an imperial “city within a city” makes me think of the Forbidden City in Beijing (Gu Gong). However, there are differences: the Citadel is relatively new (19th century); it is made of smaller red bricks; it suffered the ravages of war; it has much more of an abandoned and depopulated feel to it; there is less money available for restoration. It would take a few days to carefully examine everything inside, but under the hot sun, such a tour would be really tiresome.

Some parts of the Citadel saw very few tourists, especially at noon. In one corner there was a barrier lake hidden behind high walls. If one stood in just the right spot, one could easily imagine one was in the countryside, and not the city of Hue. I stood there for quite some time. A lizard came out in the nearby grass, butterflies layed eggs on roadside weeds, and Hue was forgotten, for a moment. A foreign tourist poked his head over my shoulder to see what I was looking at; I told him this was the best scenery in the entire Citadel; he left, thinking me mad. I stayed on for some time longer, still very much entranced by the view. After, the rest of the Citadel held little interest, so I took a “cyclo” rickshaw to a French restaurant. This place was situated in an elegant villa from the colonial period. At times, Lychee, I want to forget my addiction to street food, and eat high-end food. I eat alone, look around at the beautiful surroundings, attempt to “understand and appreciate” the masterpieces set before me – but don’t get it, pay the bill and go out, enjoying the sounds of dozens of hidden cicadas in the trees. By evening, I am eating “pho”-noodles again, at some street vendor’s stall, sitting at a low table on a lower plastic stool... and I am happy. Not far away, the river of commuters, the metal river of motor-scooters, flows past. It is a chaotic river of noise, and yet I don’t really notice it, for my mind is elsewhere. Eating “pho” noodles, somewhere in Vietnam, is one of my happier experiences.

After Hue came Hanoi. There too, I went to my usual haunts, and waited for the flight out. Hanoi – or rather the rabbit warrens around Hoan Kiem Lake – is a very pleasant city to hang out in. To better understand one should look at a Vietnamese city from the air. The first thing one notices is how narrow the buildings are. Many years ago, Vietnamese city houses were taxed according to street frontage. Thus, “thinner” houses paid less tax, and the “tube house” was born. Vietnamese city houses often “go back” quite a ways, and have several floors. Population density is very high, the streets are narrow, the flow of motor-scooters in unceasing by day, the sidewalks are taken over by the shop front, pedestrians are forced out into the street, and overhead is a kelp-forest of improvised telephone lines; it is a chaotic scene that somehow, the Vietnamese deal with every day.

Like so many global backpacker colonies all over Asia, the area north and west of Hoan Kiem Lake has become a huge trap for tourists – although it is mixed in with the daily life of the local people. It is like fungus and algae co-existing to make up lichen. At times, I ask myself, is this tourism, is this really Hanoi? Obviously, there is “pure Hanoi” out there, waiting to be found – the temple of Literature, many pagodas and temples, the museums, and the grand colonial buildings – but there is also the “lichen culture”, a place to be lived in rather than looked at. Here, I can have my own small room, disappear from life (but be surrounded by it), enjoy the world’s best “pho” noodles and just watch life ooze out of the pavement and flow through the alleyways. So, Lychee, this area has real character, and is a favorite haunt.

This part of Hanoi is a perfect place to “rough it”: the guest houses offer “fan-rooms” which are little bigger than closets, with shower rooms so small one’s shower-splash falls all over the cracked tile floor and the toilet bowl between your feet; the early morning “pho”-joints on the street are nothing but small plastic tables, and even smaller plastic stools (and sublime “pho”); those alleys which serve as market places for the local two or three blocks are an indescribable fusion of “chaos, approaching

squalor” with “very tightly controlled micro-management”. (Is this what the King James’ English referred to as “the shambles”, many years ago?) Many backpackers do indeed like to “rough it” here, and so would I, except that latter middle-age has made me into a quieter, more easily tired out tourist. So... I gave up the closet-sized “fan- room”, and asked the guest-house boss for the larger, air-conditioned room; I found a “pho” noodle restaurant that was a real, “inside” restaurant, and not a campground on the pavement, paid more money, but found myself happier... I still like Hanoi, and want to come back again and again, to disappear from life.

Lychee, in Hanoi I have my “secret tailor”. Of course, I have a tailor in the backpacker colony of Bangkok, where many of my clothes-in-Asia are made. However, something is not working out with the Bangkok tailor; I don’t feel like I am getting what I really want, or that the “front shop” (that measures me up for the unseen, “back room” cutters and stitchers) is giving me good service. It was in the spirit of unarticulated frustration that I walked into a tailor’s shop in Hanoi, for a “special job”; I wanted three exact copies of my money pouch. How I found this shop (out of hundreds) I don’t know. (Most of my encounters with genius people have come about in this way.) This shop was tiny – maybe five feet by fifteen feet. The boss was accommodating, understood very well what I wanted and was able to dialog with me “outside the box” (which so many people in the tourism business just cannot, or will not do). She was completely efficient, and reminded me at once of Mr. Goossens the Belgian, from “The Day of the Jackal”. She has no rival anywhere in Asia. Anyways, she made three duplicate money pouches for me, and I never forgot her, or her high quality work.

So, on this trip, I walked down a certain street in Hanoi (my secret, Lychee!), looking for that store. I needed ultra-lightweight, tropical travel trousers, as my present ones were wearing thin. The shop was still there, but the boss was not. She had moved on, and let her younger sister manage the business. Thus began one of my defining experiences of Hanoi. It was worth the entire trip.

She was feather light, a classic “A4” woman. Bright-eyed, full of life, always five steps ahead of me and knowing just what I wanted; playful and humorous; she wove her social art on the razor’s edge of mischievousness and sincere caring. She knew of me from her sister, although she had never seen me. (Indeed, one of my proto-type money pouches from two years before was still on a display shelf. I took note). I told her about the trousers I wanted made up, and my difficulty in finding just the right thinness of material, and then and there she said, “Let’s go to the market and find it!” Just like that she whisked her outside displays into the shop, and locked up. I have never seen anyone take the initiative like that. She hauled her motor-scooter out of the line, gave me a helmet, and with pure Audrey Hepburn panache, looked at me playfully and said, “Do you trust me in traffic?” Of course I did; I would have followed her in any traffic. So, off we went to one of Hanoi’s many markets. I retreated in my Zen-like indifference, as we darted here and there in the maelstrom of Hanoi traffic. As we arrived, she said to me “Let me do the talking.”

The market was packed, like a pond full of tadpoles at hatching time. We squirmed, squeezed and darted up the stairs and between each vendor’s postage stamp empire. Of course, she was an “A4” girl” so she could zip wherever she wanted. After some time, we found the fabric, her assurance completely melting my uncertainty as to whether it was the right fabric-mix and thinness. At this point, as I stood a little ways off, while she negotiated with the fabric vendor, I wondered if she was cutting a side-deal. However, at this point, I said nothing. Asia runs on this and besides, I was in shopper heaven. No money was more pleasantly parted from me. We returned to the shop, and made final specifications for the four pairs of trousers. I picked them up a few days later; they were just what I wanted.

From this experience, I saw why Vietnam is called “China, plus one”. The Vietnamese are super capable, and ready to tackle any business challenge. As with Indonesia, (and maybe, Burma), the future belongs to Vietnam. I am most impressed.

A few days later, I left Vietnam and returned, once again, to Bangkok. I had come to Vietnam with the intention of “closing shop”, seeing my last travel places of interest, spending out my wads of small change, and saying, “Been there, done that”. Good luck... Vietnam was more open than ever to what was possible; I fulfilled three travel routes but discovered three more for the next trip; my small change pouch of carefully collected and “clean” bills actually got fatter; I realized I would never close out Vietnam and discard it. Someone asked me, “What is it about Vietnam that you like?” I did not know what to say; it is a mystery to me. All I can say, Lychee, is this: I want to go back again, see more new things and the same familiar things, and live out my life.

At this point, Lychee, I was getting a bit nervous. My travel money was not getting very, very low, and I still had six weeks left before going home. I took a risk and with only 2,000 dollars or less in my pocket, I went on the final stage of this big trip, to Ladakh and to Delhi, in India. When I got the Indian visa in only one day, I knew I was favored, and I leaped out into the future. I am glad I made this choice!

After yet another Bangkok interlude, I flew to Delhi airport, and camped out in the airport waiting for the next flight to Leh city. Fortunately, Delhi airport has day-couches to sleep on and there are no audio flight announcements, as it is a “silent” airport. I did not dare leave Delhi airport, so late at night, and look for a hotel somewhere.

Lychee, please look up Leh city on the map. It is in a part of northern India, not that far from Hotan (He Tian). It is on “the other side of the mountains”, and therefore, there are many geographical similarities with XJ. However, there are also many geographical and cultural similarities with XZ. As you know, I wanted to teach English in XZ, but my contact there said it was “difficult” to get a job (i.e., not possible). So, I then decided to visit Leh (in Ladakh district), since it was like XZ. I chose to stay in Leh for two weeks, and visit the surrounding villages on day-trips.

The landscape of Ladakh is very harsh. Much of it looks like the moon or Mars (or for you, the Huo Yan Shan, in Turpan). Those valleys which get regular water are barely green. The Indus River, in its “early” stage, passes through this very barren landscape. Yet, Ladakh is painfully beautiful. The colors of sky, far mountains, mid-range foothills and nearby scenery change over the course of the day. In British English, Ladakh is “gob-smacking beautiful”. Therefore, this part of India attracts many tourists. Perhaps, this will prove the undoing of this place, which was once “beyond the end of the world”. Now, everyone wants to come. Ladakh is a fragile place, in terms of water resources, arable land, and local culture. Too many tourists will ruin the place forever. Even now, many of the local farmers are building large and costly guesthouses for the foreign and Indian tourists on their farmland!!! Imagine the Shi He Zi “bing tuan”, with half of the farmland covered in houses! The pull of tourism money has changed Leh a great deal in the past ten years.

Then, Lychee, there are the dogs. There must be thousands of unwanted dogs on the streets of Leh. Every street has a dozen or more. They sleep on the dust, watching everything that moves. Sometime, they try to bite you, but usually there is an uneasy truce between the people and the dogs. In summer, when there are so many tourists, the dogs eat waste food from the restaurants, but in winter, when the tourists are not there, the dogs slowly starve. As soon as night falls, the dogs join together in “wolf packs”, and hunt any people on the streets. There have been some wild stories of people killed and eaten. Needless to say, after the sun goes down, I stay inside my hotel, and do not dare go outside. Even in daytime, I am somewhat afraid when I walk here and there, about my business. No one really seems to do anything about this problem. If I were the local Leh government, I would shoot every dog, and then bury their bodies, one by one, under a newly planted anti-desert tree plantation!

As in XZ, there are many Buddhist monasteries, in Ladakh. Almost all of them have been built on top of hills, or far up remote mountain valleys, or in the middle of some very unfriendly landscape (ge-bi-tan). Of course I like this, since I can see monasteries and beautiful scenery at the same time. You know me well, Lychee. Take me to a beautiful place, and the first thing I will do is search out the remote and very barren places, to be alone in a vast landscape. In this respect, Ladakh is perfect. Modern mass-tourism is unable and unwilling to serve tourists “outside the box”. It says, “Take what we offer, and do not expect otherwise”. It is the same in Ladakh, but fortunately for me, all of the variables – barren landscapes, old monasteries on high places, local min-van drivers to take me there, cheap food and hotels – are in my favor. Thus, I can turn the system against itself, and get what I want...which is not that much.

Leh city has become a “tourist-trap”, but it has the infrastructure for certain day-trips or overnight trips to various, predetermined “places of interest” – usually monasteries. There are trekking routes out there, but I felt myself physically unfit and socially disinterested to take part. Also, the local people of Leh are more open and receptive towards foreigners and their needs, but the people who live outside Leh are less able or willing to help. Once again, tourism is a constant tension between what the tourists want, what the locals are willing to give, and most of all, what the local eco system can carry.

As I wrote earlier, many farmers are using some of their family farmland to build a guesthouse (which would certainly not survive an earthquake or a massive landslide). For now, there is money to be made in mass-tourism. (Anyone who thinks he can offer “boutique” or “bespoke” services is deluding

himself. I will create, or subvert, or steal those moments of originality by myself, as the opportunity presents itself.) In certain parts of Leh, there is the same tourist colony, which one can see all over Asia. There is little to do in Leh, save eat, sleep and spend money. The narrow lanes, alleys and capillary roads of the city are choked with traffic by day...and the dogs rule by night. This poses a problem for any tourist. The only quiet place, where one has a certain degree of autonomy, is in one's hotel room (at least, if one is travelling alone)! What a ridiculous state of affairs! So, nothing has changed, since Smollett wrote about the tourists at Bath, in his novel "Humphrey Clinker". However, Lychee, I do think I have found a way to subvert this sclerotic state of affairs: when inside one's hotel room, exclude everyone else, and cultivate the inner life; when outside, use the principles of "asymmetric warfare" to navigate through whatever the region has to offer. If the crowd plays on a sunny day, stay inside and read a book (or write to Lychee). If the crowd is confined to barracks on a rainy day, put on your boots, get an umbrella and visit the rain-drenched tourist sites. Eat your meals outside the "normal" hours. Visit a summer play-zone in winter and a winter play-zone in summer. Avoid "your kind" like the plague. Bring many pulp-novels to overcome the barren emptiness of the nights. Search for Ladakh's beauty outside of Leh!

Once again, "land" is everything. If you look at a satellite photo of Leh and the surrounding villages, you will see that most of the land is brown (the "ge-bi-tan"), and only a little is green (the "bing-tuan, nong-ye qu"). That is, desert vs. farm land. Then, locate the monasteries (culture), then the roads (infrastructure). Now, you know where to go, and where to avoid. When I was actually "on the ground" in Leh, I found the satellite photo information to be mostly correct. Any problems that I found were dealt with by observation and keeping silent for a few days – or else they were rejected out of my travel agenda for something else.

The major tourist attractions of Leh, serviced by roads, are like fingers on a hand: one must return to "home base" by the same route. A circular route is not possible, due to the mountains and valleys. One must accept this, and deal with it. On those overnight stay, "there and back" excursions, one must bring some books to read, for there is nothing for a tourist to do in a Ladakh village at night! These inconveniences can be solved.

Ladakh is a land of extreme and noticeable contrasts. It can be hot and glaring by day, but very cold at night. The views by day, the vast spaces, and the changing and contrasting colors are events approaching ecstasy, but with the evening comes a horror, a terror, a fear of the unknown, a night-time filled with strange dreams. Leh is now the darling of the tourist industry, but the possible scenario of a 15th century, Greenland-style collapse of all tourism is always at the back of one's mind. The land, always beautiful, is also always ready to unleash destruction. Perhaps that is why Leh is special to many, who come from afar, leaving behind (for a while, at least) the stale, homogenized and gutted landscapes of their homeland. Maybe the monks were right.

There are many monasteries in Ladakh, and each has its own character. I never really cared for what was inside the monastery, or the people; instead, I sought out the top balcony or the rooftop, so I could look out over the surrounding landscape. Those founder abbots often had impeccable aesthetic judgment. The views were... "gob-smacking", and beautiful. All were beautiful in some way, but the best was La Ma Yu Ru. Even better was the same view from one of the meditation cabins above that monastery. If I knew the abbot, I would ask him for permission to stay there for a few days, and look at the views...

So, Lychee, my time in Ladakh ends tomorrow, and I plan to spend ten days in Delhi, before returning to Bangkok. I would like to return to Ladakh, maybe after five years, but there is a feeling in me that the Ladakh I once knew will be no more, or else shut out...

I spent about ten days in Delhi, at yet another global hostel. By now, I was getting worried at being so different (and much older) than the usual hostel-going crowd. Don't worry, said the management: we take all groups. This hostel was well-run, an oasis of order and a bubble of cool rooms in a sprawling city of near-chaos, daily languishing under 40 degree C weather. It was not too far from the Hauz Khas metro stop, so I was able to get around the city. It also had clear access to the airport, and escape. My purpose was to pick up final books, and to "do Delhi". By now, my money was very low.

Getting books in Delhi proved to be almost impossible. There appear to be no book stores, such as Barnes & Noble, or Kinokunia, or Fnac, where the books are easy to see and find. Finding a book (or even a book store!) requires inside knowledge, a "priest" (i.e., an intermediary person), and extreme

social mediation skills. The system is very opaque, so I threw it to the dogs, picked up a few books through lucky discovery, and focused on local tourism. Once again, the Soviet housewives and grandmothers were right: don't shop for what you want; snatch up whatever you can find, for later use, because tomorrow, it will be gone forever.

These ten days in Delhi, in 2016, make me think of the famine year of 1984, when I was in Niger (in French West Africa). I wrote about that elsewhere. Those who had money could buy millet or sorghum: those who had no money, lost everything, inch by inch... In Delhi, in 2016, there was no famine (yet), but there was drought, and the unmistakable precursor signs that the entire Indian eco-system was on the verge of total collapse. I walked the streets, hot and sun-beaten; I fled for refuge into the strategically – located cocktail bars of posh hotels to drink lime-and-soda, and sit for as long as I could get away with it, completely still, absorbing every degree of air-conditioning; I felt, very clearly, that India is on the edge of an environmental apocalypse, a collapse.

I partitioned those tourist sites of interest to me, according to their place on the metro system, and tried to go through the “wish-list” systematically. Usually, that meant one site in the morning, lunch, and one site in the afternoon. I walked a lot under the hot, noon-time sun. In certain very evocative passages in “The Last Mughal”, Dalrymple writes about Delhi at noon, to perfection. (That was long before air-conditioning, and ice-cold lime-and-sodas at the Imperial Hotel's cocktail bar!) In outline and tourism objectives I knew what I wanted but in the in-between spaces, in the dusty, worn-out shambles they called market streets and neighborhoods, I knew not who I was, what I was doing, or what I wanted. I just followed my wish-list blindly, trying to compare what I saw with impressions from “The Last Mughal”! So many places are shrouded in indifference and strewn with trash, such as I have not seen for a long time...and yet, it was these places that I instinctively sought out. I absorbed what was around me through the “skin of my soul”, the way a frog absorbs oxygen through its skin, but trained my eyes not to look at things or people directly – for the reality I walked through was caustic. I know that after a few years, I shall try to come back to India once again, for it is an opiate that few can do without.

I am now in Bangkok again (for the fifth time, this trip). I want to put my things in order, and seal off my soul, before I go back, to the inevitable and changeless criticism. For me, summer is often the low point in a year, for what I left behind is unchanged and waiting, as if eight months were eight minutes.

Lychee, I must bring this long letter to you to a close. There will, I hope, be a new letter at a later point. It is always good to write to you, dear “earthly muse”! For now, I will try to summarize my impressions of this year's wanderings in Europe and S.E. Asia.

I took this “gap-year” for a number of reasons. Once again, I was burned out with teaching at Zhi Da. Of course it didn't help for many students to like playing over studying. I wanted to use and exercise “the rest of my life” – which for me means travelling. I felt that the modern era of unrestricted global travel (especially for Americans) was about to come to an end. Of all the times to be born into, I have been so, so lucky! I wanted to go to, enjoy, and “check off” many places before new “Tokugawa edicts” of the coming digital dark ages descended upon the world's civilizations. I wanted to go out now, in late middle-age, for old age after 65 is a rip-off, and I never saw any old person doing what I consider to be exciting and meaningful. I saw the world desperate to go into war, to settle the unfinished business of 1945. I said, “I must hurry, and do what is in my heart.” I saw my health, and my good luck, about to fall away.

So Lychee, I went, and did these many things. I visited many places. If the routes appear haphazard, it is because I was intentionally “mopping up” routes and countries somehow left unvisited over the past twenty years. I am, after all, systematic and a perfectionist. I also tried to bring some closure to my translation and book-illustration projects. I bought and shipped back home large amounts of language-study and reading materials, for that “rainy day” later on. Better to have those books in my containers, than in places one can no longer visit. So, this trip was very much a “procurement trip” for me. I also tried to see where I might go to for work, then retirement – since China seems to be closing down. Here, I was not able to get a good answer. Many countries presented themselves as candidates, and most of them fell down as possible alternatives for me. I choose to leave this problem unsolved, for now. That said, I think these wanderings were very successful

In Europe, the dominant observation was the impact of the migrant crisis. Lisbon (as usual) and Stockholm (a surprise) were my favorite places to be. Certainly, I would like to return to various parts of Europe, and wander.

In Asia, my true soul-home, the discoveries were more grim. Maybe it is because I was on a “mopping up” expedition, and not visiting primary tourist sites, but I noticed that almost everywhere I went was grim. The eco-system was horribly over loaded, polluted, depleted, and approaching collapse! The earth has indeed now crossed a certain “tipping point”. The rising middle classes everywhere, but most noticeably in Indonesia and India, are trying to live the good life on an eco-system that can no longer carry them. For case-studies, go and look at Manado (Sulawesi, in Indonesia), and New Delhi (in India). I asked myself, “Was there anything beautiful...any place I would want to come back to?” The only places were Singapore, and maybe Saigon, in terms of cities. For “country areas”, nowhere. Now I ask myself why I did all this travelling...but no... I will keep faith with myself. I am glad that I went, and that is that. This year, it was a “grunge tour” and not a “beauty tour” of the expected tourist sites.

Lychee, I hope you are well. Once again, you have inspired by writing.

As for me, I want to go back to be in Lisbon, and Portugal: they remain glorious!