

Travel Fellowship Application



PLACE, STORIES, AND THE SUBLIME

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Project Details

We will spend three weeks traveling the Trans-Siberian railroad. Starting in St. Petersburg, stopping in Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Krasnoyarsk, Ulan-Ude, Ulaanbaatar, and concluding in Beijing, we will interrogate our conception and experience of place, stories, and the sublime.

Project Rationale

Both of us are fascinated by stories (both real and fictional) and of the feeling of the sublime in a place. In our Week 7 in Mongolia, the wide, open landscape evoked feelings of grandeur, other-worldliness and indescribable wonder. As we heard stories from different people on the trip, the places took on a deeper, more complex meaning. One story was of Chinggis Khan saving his wife from an enemy tribe (she had killed her kidnapper herself), and through that story, we experienced what Paul Ricoeur calls a state of 'being-affected by the past'¹ and what Merrill Findlay also calls a state of 'being-affected by the future.' Looking at the steppes, it was like we could recall he and his fierce tribe thundering across on horseback. Stories were also related through finding bones, old coins or even stone knives. Holding it, there is a strange feeling of being connected to the people who held these objects in *their* hands, a kind of remembrance, but also questions of who they were and why they had abandoned these objects.

A place takes on a different meaning to us when a story is told about it. Without story, what is a place? With story, how does it change? Where then, does the feeling of the sublime arise from? These are the questions that are driving and pushing us. To investigate this, we wanted to go to places that *already* evoked this feeling of the sublime and yet were foreign to the both of us. We also wanted to be able to compare our experiences in different places in order to answer our questions better.

Finally, we were inspired by the website Maptia.² It is "a collaborative platform for stories from around the world that aims to *foster empathy* through storytelling." During this journey, we are interested in how stories shape people and place and vice versa. Further, we are interested in *not just telling one story from one point of view.*³

Objectives/Key Themes:

We have three major key themes: place, stories, and the sublime. Yet a major part of our journey will also be our consistent methodology. At each location, we will ask the same series of questions and perform a set of activities designed to force us into engaging with our environment. The train is also considered a "location." In this way, we hope to be able to compare our experience of different locations in more consistently.

¹ P Ricoeur, 'Towards a hermeneutics of historical consciousness', in *Time and Narrative*, vol 3, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp 207-240.

² <https://maptia.com/>

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Methodology:

1. Gathering data:
 - a. Walking as research: We will spend at least a day exploring the city on our own based on research on the history and culture of a place before experiencing it with our hosts.
 - b. Hearing personal stories: if possible, ask hosts over a meal or if they bring us around.
 - i. How did you come to live in this place? If you grew up there: how long has your family lived in this place?
 - ii. Do you have a favourite story about this place?
 - iii. What is the one thing you love about living here?
 - iv. What is something that most people don't know about this place?
 - v. How has this place changed since you've lived here?
 - c. National Story/Myth: Researching one myth and one historical event per place.
2. Reflections/recording/re-creation
 - a. Reflection:
 - i. 2 minute free-write upon arrival at each place
 - ii. 2 minute free-write upon leaving each place
 - b. Recording:
 - i. Writing observational notes during walk-about
 - ii. Photographing videoing places/people of note to the stories we research or receive from people
 - iii. Vlogging: noting where we are, and how we feel, attempting to capture our experience of a place
 - c. Re-creation:
 - i. Blog posts after each place (500 Words)
 - ii. Working on long-form articles
 - iii. Option creative expression: songwriting, poetry, fiction-writing

Place

Beyond defining a place as a person's immediate surroundings (including both physical and social settings), we are looking at place as how a person interacts, understands and defines his or her surroundings—The “sense of place”.

“Sense of place” can be divided into two: types of relationships to places and depth of relationship to a certain place, what Jennifer E. Cross identifies as ‘relationship to place’ and ‘community attachment’.

Definition: What is a sense of place?

http://western.edu/sites/default/files/documents/cross_headwatersXII.pdf

Stories

In an unexpectedly eloquent fashion, Wikipedia defines oral storytelling as “an ancient and intimate tradition between the storyteller and their audience. The storyteller and the listeners are physically close, often seated together in a circular fashion.” It is this intimacy that we seek to discover. As outlined in the project rationale, we want to connect how personal stories affect how we view a place. Through our consistent methodology, we will try to investigate both others’ personal narratives, and also national myths, legends, and fables. We will do so through prior research, on-site interviews, and interpreting national identity through museums and monuments. As we travel from place to place, we will record interviewees’ stories through photography and video and our own responses through writing (journaling, prose, poetry, song). Yet while we seek to uncover the stories of other people, we must also recognize that we are constructing our own stories and narratives of the trip.

Sublime

In the introduction to Yi-fu Tuan's book, *Romantic Geography: In Search of the Sublime Landscape* (2014), Tuan writes:

"Geography is useful, indeed necessary, to survival. Everyone must know where to find food, water, and a place of rest, and, in the modern world, all must make an effort to make the Earth—our home—habitable. But much present-day geography lacks drama, with its maps and statistics, descriptions and analysis, but no acts of chivalry, no sense of quest. Not long ago, however, **geography was romantic**. Heroic explorers ventured to forbidding environments—oceans, mountains, forests, caves, deserts, polar ice caps—to test their power of endurance for reasons they couldn't fully articulate. Why climb Everest? "Because it is there." "

The introduction then connects this "romantic geography" with the concept of the sublime, defined as "inspiring deep veneration, awe, or uplifting emotion because of its beauty, nobility, grandeur, or immensity." When we were last in Mongolia, we hiked for over three hours up a mountain, then climbed together to the top of a rock. Waves of grey-purple mountain ranges stretched off into the horizon as we could see, layer after layer without ending. This last key theme is our attempt to reflect on this transcendent feeling of the sublime-- thus, this is more personal and less interview focused. One way we attempt to pursue this through free writing. We will also observe the difference between the built and natural environment, and note where we do *not* get this feeling of the sublime. Finally, we will pay special attention to religious sites, where the layout and architecture is often designed to make visitors think of something higher or more sublime. Throughout our trip, we will visit sites from the Catholic, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Muslim faiths.

Location Rationale: Why the Trans-Siberian railroad?

We chose the Trans-Siberian railroad for a number reasons. First, we were intrigued by the extreme range of cultural groups we could be in contact with-- from "Western" culture in St. Petersburg, to Siberian and Central Asian culture for most of our journey, to Chinese culture in Beijing. Further, we enjoyed how we could experience vastly different places and then return to a neutral ground: the train. As people who travel a lot, we want to investigate the train as a place. But why through Russia? A train through, say, Southeast Asia, would undoubtedly pass through diverse locations bearing their own stories, but we were intrigued by the "West to East" feel of the Trans-Siberian railroad (although, of course, much of our time is spent in Central Asia, which defies both categories of West and East). In addition, we both are unfamiliar with Russia and Siberia--if we travelled through North America or Southeast Asia, one of us would have "home field" advantage somewhere. On the Trans-Siberian railroad, a Singaporean and an American are equally foreign. Finally, our friendship began on our freshman Week 7 trip to Mongolia. It seems fitting that we return their together as seniors.

Desired Outcomes:

Initially, this proposal was very academic. However, by working on it together, we realized in this final summer we want to stretch beyond the labels of our majors and investigate something closer to our hearts. Thus, through this lens of stories and places we hope to bring out the element of the personal, answering questions like: What makes a place different when there is a story attached to it? What is the difference to me? When do we feel sublimity? When do we not? What are the factors?

Avery: I want to relate the real-life stories I hear to the fictional stories we write to entertain ourselves. What is the relationship between reality and fiction? How do fictional stories, myths, and legends affect how we relate to a place?

Mel: I want to learn how to travel in a different way: a different way of engaging with place and people, rather than just reading about a place or ticking off all the sights and tourist places. How can my travelling not just be me reveling in exoticism or the 'Other'? How can travelling really help me understand and empathise and become a kinder person? How can travelling let me see what areas I can contribute most to? How can travelling be meaningful, in other words?

Deliverables:

1. During the trip: Production of a series of blog articles, vlogs, and photographs covering the journey. At least one will be published per city, and we will focus on the spatial, cultural, and political themes. The blog will be updated throughout the trip, with the last article written no later than a week after return to Singapore (July 22). Our travel writings will be shared with the Yale-NUS student body. Can be incorporated with the general Yale-NUS Travel Fellowship blog.
2. Attempt to write a long-form story-essay in a style of Maptia, with the potential to submit.
3. Symposium: Create an interactive presentation with featured stories. On our relation to the student body that will:
 - a. Present our findings on place, story, and the sublime: including voice recordings and photographs to illustrate what we learned about each theme
 - b. Show students photos of locations on Yale-NUS campus, elicit their stories, either in verbal or written form. Ask how they feel differently about the place after telling/remembering the story.