

Barbarians at the Gate Podcast Transcript

Episode: From Heaven Lake by Vikram Seth

Jeremiah (00:09) Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate in a joint podcast with China Books Review. This is Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting high above the Gulf of Thailand. And with me is Alexander Boyd, Associate Editor of the China Books Review in Washington, DC. Alexander, how are you?

Alexander (00:31) Hello Jeremiah, I'm doing fantastic. Not as good as you are in Thailand, but pretty good here.

Jeremiah (00:35) I would think that DC is a pretty exciting place to be this year, month, week. Look outside this evening.

Alexander (00:43) If you like martial law and government dysfunction, this is the place for you. But other than that, I would say, life is greater than the margins of DC. Thank God I'm not involved in politics.

Jeremiah (00:55) Yeah, who would have thought that after living in China you think, how could I recreate this lifestyle somewhere? Washington.

So Alexander, usually for the China Archives, I'm pitching books to you. In this case, this was a book that you pitched to me, and this is Vikram Seth's travelogue *From Heaven Lake*. Why did you pick this book, and why did you think it was a book that you really felt should be included in the China Archives?

Alexander (01:21) Well, you know, I've been reading China Archives before I started working on them. And I've always loved them. And then when I started working on them, it's been a delight to work with you. But, you know, in the archives, we really covered Chinese perspectives and Chinese archives. We covered Western perspectives, you know, but of course, they're not the same. You have British writers, you have like Reginald Johnston. I think it was the first thing I worked on. No, sorry, Graham Peck was the first archival thing I worked on. But either way, we hadn't had someone from a non-quote-unquote Western perspective writing their book on China. So that was the most base level for choosing *From Heaven Lake*. But one of the reasons that I was really excited for you to write on this specifically is the archive has done a lot of really interesting work on the travelogue genre. Not all the books we cover are travelogues. In fact, recently they actually have skewed away from travelogues. But there's something very fascinating about how the archive takes all these people and their initial contact with China—maybe it's not their first contact, but it's their first full experience with China—and translates that for an average reader and brings this initial contact. It's very special to me in my life. I can always remember my first time in China. I'm sure it's important for you as well. And so I thought that it would be really important to get this Indian perspective. And then, of course, the 1980s. So we did this great piece, you know, of James Mann's *Selling Jeeps in China, Beijing Jeep*, which was this fascinating look at the 1980s, this go-go era, and also the foibles and the failures

of this US-China cooperation. This is another look at the 1980s. And it takes us outside of the people trying to make a lot of money and inside of the people basically just trying to make it in general, quite literally in Vikram Seth's case from Nanjing to Delhi. But also I think the country as a whole, the people he's interacting with, their eyes are maybe set on riches in some sense, but mostly they're set on surviving. I think that's an interesting part of the piece.

Jeremiah (03:26) Yeah, I think the time period is important here. In a moment, let's talk about that shift of perspective. A lot of the writers, when we look at travelogues of people coming to China, they do generally come from a Western perspective. This is an example of someone who's coming from a non-Western perspective. But I think it's also important we think about—we read a lot about the 1980s. You mentioned James Mann's *Beijing Jeep*. There's a number of other memoirs, travelogues of doing business, living, working in China in the 1980s. One of Vikram Seth's classmates at Nanjing University, John Pomfret, wrote a very famous book about his time in the early 1980s in China, *Chinese Lessons*. But I think a lot of those books not only are often from a Western perspective, but they're also from an Eastern perspective. And by that I mean very often they take place along the coastline. There are some travelogues that penetrate into China's interior, but usually no further west than say Sichuan. And I think it's interesting to see in this early stage of the reform and opening era, when the possibilities of the economic opening, the possibilities of a new way forward are becoming realized or at least visible on the horizon for people in coastal China—that's not the case for people who are living out in Gansu, out on the Tibetan-Qinghai plateau. And a lot of the folks who were there, especially the Han Chinese, aren't there by choice. For them, this isn't the beginning of the reform and opening era. This is the continuation of what happened during the Cultural Revolution when so many people were sent there.

Alexander (05:14) I mean, not to spoil too much in the book, but you have an excellent anecdote there about a young Han man. You know, just to give context, during the Cultural Revolution, a lot of educated or urban youth who had been maybe, you know, stirring up trouble, part of the Cultural Revolution, were sent west, right? And you have this excellent anecdote about this young man who describes being sent west as essentially a prison. And they're not particularly hopeful at times, it seems, about the future.

Jeremiah (05:42) I also love this young man's geographic acronym. Vikram Seth writes how this young man told Vikram Seth, "I've been sent to New Zealand." And of course in English, that doesn't make quite as much sense. But when Vikram Seth parses it out in Chinese, *Xin Xi Lan* (新西兰), which is the Chinese phrase that means New Zealand—but in this particular case, this young man was using it to refer to the parts west that he felt no Han would want to live. And that was XINjiang, XIzang, and LANzhou. And it gives an idea not just of that feeling, as you said, of some people, especially young Han, especially those who had been sent there during the Cultural Revolution, feeling trapped, like a prison, if you will, but also just a sense of remoteness. That this is before the high-speed rails, that if you were out there, you were thousands of miles in some cases from your home, and culturally and geographically, you just felt this immense weight of isolation.

Although it is interesting that not everybody that Vikram Seth meets, and not every Han Chinese that Vikram Seth meets on the road—and he's hitchhiking across vast distances—he meets Han

Chinese who are out there. And I don't know if "loving it" is the word, but at least treat it as home. And so I think it complicates, first of all, a Chinese narrative that everybody out there is happy and harmonious all the way back in the 1980s. But I think it also complicates some of the Western narratives that suggest that everybody who was ever sent to Xinjiang, to the Western regions of China, it was all part of some kind of top-down migration of humanity. In fact, there were people who went out there, who lived out there, who were sent there, who stayed there and found a place to have a family and to make a living.

Alexander (07:38) Well, so, you know, I think we've teased people now. Where did Seth actually go? What was his journey?

Jeremiah (07:43) The book opens out west where he gets the idea to travel overland home from Nanjing to Delhi. He's supposed to go home at the end of his semester. It's coming up on the summer vacation. He has a ticket or has a plan to fly out of Hong Kong to Delhi. He decides that would be too easy. So he gets this idea while out west on one of these school trips. But of course, when he has to go back east to start the journey, because he needs all these permits, he needs permission, he needs to pack up his things. So the meat of the book takes place going from Nanjing, mostly by train—and this is early 1980s trains, no high-speed rail, this is where you get to know everybody in your car—all the way out to Gansu. And from Gansu his plan is to hitchhike to Nepal. And this is the part of it that I think gives it even more of a time capsule feel. The idea that a foreigner could say, "Yes, what's your plan?" "Well, I've got this vague piece of paper that gives me a travel permit to cross Tibet, but I'm going to do it by hitchhiking, sticking my thumb out along the road as all of these construction, army, and other trucks move up and down the highways of the plateau. That's going to get me to Nepal."

I can't even imagine what a modern-day Vikram Seth, never mind you or I, what kind of response that would create or what kind of hysteria that would create if the local authorities in a small county in Qinghai learned that a couple of foreigners were thumbing it down the road with no particular plan except crossing the Tibetan border and out again. We don't want to spoil too much—it's not an easy journey by any stretch of the imagination. There was plenty of bureaucracy back then too. Plenty of people were very concerned about what Vikram Seth was up to as he was wandering down the road into these truck stops and small villages and small towns. But I have to say, it would be almost unthinkable to try to recreate that journey today. I'm not saying it's impossible. "Impossible" is a pretty big word. But I have to say, it would be very difficult.

Alexander (09:51) You know, when you're discussing the difficulty of this journey, Vikram Seth talks about the "panda principle." So what's that about? And could you explain a little bit how Seth viewed this bureaucracy?

Jeremiah (10:07) While the surveillance state wasn't quite as advanced then in the early 1980s as it is obviously now, this general attitude about foreigners was—there are some consistencies. And one of the things that Seth says is he compares it to being a panda. You are special as a foreigner in early 1980s China, and you are to be protected and coddled as something precious, but also watched carefully because you never quite know what the panda might do. And so this is his "panda principle." I think in the review, I updated it a little bit and I said, it's now more of a

"raccoon principle." A wandering foreigner out west would be seen perhaps even less benignly than a sort of wayfaring or wayward panda. They'd be seen more like a rabid raccoon that's loose in your garage chewing on the wiring and otherwise causing the potential to cause all kinds of chaos and probably something that isn't meant to be coddled or watched but something to be contained and moved away as quickly as possible, or at least not attract more...

Alexander (11:21) ...gotten out of the garage.

Jeremiah (11:25) In the early 1980s, when Vikram Seth shows up, and particularly again, showing up as a foreigner, but somebody who probably doesn't present or look the way that somebody with not that much experience in foreign affairs or seeing foreigners outside of TV or a movie—they might not read "foreigner." In fact, he uses this to his advantage at one point. He actually goes to some sites in Lhasa as a local to avoid all the paperwork. But I think it is kind of interesting that he shows up in these places and because they don't really have—they've never seen a foreigner—the kind of conversations he has, there's a certain unguardedness to them that is refreshing. Do you think part of that maybe is because he is from India? He clearly is a foreigner, so he's not from China, but he's not a Westerner either and so perhaps not carrying a lot of that Westerner baggage that has always been part of how people interact in China when we think of that *laowai* experience.

Alexander (12:33) I completely agree with that. And I think it's something you touch on in the piece. Beyond just his Indianness or foreignness or thing like that, he's a pretty extraordinary observer as well of Chinese society. He's very keen. I mean, obviously he's a poet and these poetical qualities show themselves both in his writing and in his observations. But I think that, you know, he used very astutely that being Indian, looking different than Western—and I think at the time, there was still the idea of the Third World, Zhou Enlai, the Bandung Conference was very important within Chinese society. And that's something that you would read, or maybe you would hear over the village loudspeaker, that China is leading a new type of internationalism. India is a victim of imperialism, at least in the Chinese narrative. I think that would very much be a selling point that he used very astutely on his journeys. And some of it too is right because of cultural touchpoints like you talk about Raj Kapoor. And then of course you talk about—he talks about politics and that's one way that he bridges the gap because China and India were facing the same development...

Jeremiah (13:46) He says, there's a quote in the book where he says, "I remember reading a question in an economic textbook: if you were to be born tomorrow, would you prefer to be born in China or India?" And his answer is interesting because it talks about not just the difference between the two countries in terms of their economic position in the world, but also the difference in terms of how the societies are organized. And he says, "If I could be guaranteed the lucky place in the Indian sweepstakes that I at present occupy, there is no question as to what my answer would be. Even if I were poorer than the average Chinese child, I would still prefer to be in India. But if I were born to the inhuman, dehumanizing misery in which the poorest third of our people"—in which he's talking about in India—"live, to the squalor and despair and debility that is their life, my answer would not be the same."

And I think this is a very interesting take because often, a lot of the Western perspective of China in this period, whether consciously or unconsciously, do take on an attitude that I am coming from a developed country and China is a developing country. They have much to learn. We have much to teach, at least in terms of modern society. And there's very rarely a sense of trying to establish an equivalency between the Western country that I have left and the China that I am visiting. But here, Seth is looking at China and saying, "Okay, China and India are actually in similar places in terms of where they are. But there are differences between them as well." And he uses China—and this is, of course, something Western observers have long done, too—holds it up a bit as a mirror of his own society and the inequalities that are in Indian society. And of course, Seth is not afraid to critique his country of birth, something that is a big difference between Seth, the traveler, and many of the people from China that he meets. They're a little bit shocked, right? He talks about how he opposes some of the policies of the Indian government, how India and China are addressing the population problem in different ways and how he personally is not a particular fan of how India is doing that. And I think that he records how that's a little bit shocking to some of the people that he meets, the people he's riding around in trucks with, the people he meets in restaurants, because they think, "Well, how are you criticizing your own country?" And that's quite shocking to a lot of people in China in this era.

He's not unafraid to highlight his own privilege. He was born in a relatively upper-class Indian family. He went to Stanford. This isn't just somebody who's from the bottom of Indian society talking to somebody who's perhaps closer to the bottom of Chinese society. There is still a class element that separates him from the people he talks to, even if there's a certain shared identity or shared experience of being from the Global South.

Alexander (16:54) I think that's a very good point too, that final point about class and Seth's position while writing this. That's something where maybe for future archives, something I hadn't really considered actually, but it's something that maybe we should consider: who's writing about China and who are we reading about China? And are we reading upper class, no matter who they are, whether they're Chinese or... that's just the way that book publishing works, unfortunately.

Jeremiah (17:18) I think it also matters who's going to China. To be honest, especially early on, and even now, I should say, the majority of people going to China from Western nations, whether it's the UK, the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, they usually come from at least middle to upper middle to, in some cases, upper class. And that, I think, affects a lot of how they perceive China. People who are working class, people from underrepresented groups in the United States or in the UK or in Europe, they're even more underrepresented when it comes to things like study abroad and international travel as a young person. Think who does the gap years. Think who has the time and the resources to go to China and write a book about their experiences. And so one of the things I like about Seth is he's not afraid to point that out about himself, that he is coming at this from a perspective that is very particular and that class is a part of that.

I think one of the things too—you mentioned Seth the observer—and I have to admit, I'm not as familiar with Vikram Seth's works after this. I do know that he's an award-winning poet, he's a novelist, he's quite an important literary figure in India. And I think talking to some people who know him from that side, a lot of people are a bit surprised to learn that he wrote a travelogue

about China. It's so outside his usual genres. And yet, as you pointed out, he has these sections where he writes long poems about what it's like to freeze in a truck driving down the Tibetan highway. He translates sections of Chinese poetry. And he's not just an observer, but he's a real—you could tell the skill as a novelist that he would just put to full effect and full display later on in his career is already here. I mean, it's brilliant writing just in general. And that's something that honestly, travelogues, they often get by on how fascinating the journey was and sometimes a little bit less on how well they're recording their adventures. This is not the case with Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*.

Alexander (19:43) Yeah, I completely agree. I'm no poetry expert, but I liked his poems. This is my favorite one: "Here we three, cooped alone, / Tibetan, Indian, Han, / Against a common dawn, / Catch what poor sleep we can, / And sleeping, drag the same / Sparse air into our lungs, / And dreaming each of home, / Sleep talk in different tongues."

Like that's a very sweet poem, you know, that really captures what life is like on the road among strangers. And it's all heightened, of course, by the immense differences of a Tibetan, Indian, and Han in 1980.

Jeremiah (20:15) And I think, too, it reminds us a little bit about what do we lose these days traveling with Google Translate and Trip.com and WeChat. And of course, also on a long car journey, right? I mean, I've been on long car/bus journeys across the Tibetan Plateau. As much as I would love to look outside and count the antelope, I got to admit, there's large, long stretches where I'm like, "Huh, *Vikings*, season three." I just kind of unplug from what's around me and plug into my device. And that's not an option that's available to Seth and his companions. And so that does inspire, I would think, a lot more conversation, a lot more smoking, apparently. Do not read this book if you're trying to quit nicotine. But still, that time to think about it, to process—I wonder if that also accounts, in addition to Seth being such a good observer, for such great observations and for his ability to write about it.

So Alexander, our next China Archive selection, we're going back to the turn of the 20th century. And we're going to get a little freaky. For those of you who don't think there's enough sex in China writing or enough vivid descriptions, poetic descriptions, pornographic descriptions of the activities of expats living in China and Beijing, we're going to give you Edmund Backhouse's *Decadence Mandchoue*, one of the great China memoirs of all time, full of just the most crazy made-up shit imaginable—a book that was considered to be so raunchy and pornographic, it did not see the light of day for, I would say almost 60 years, 70 years. Alexander, for those people who are not familiar with Edmund Backhouse, the Hermit of Peking, and his rather lurid reputation among China watchers then and now, give us a quick hit. Who was this guy?

Alexander (22:23) He is a British Quaker who decides to leave behind his pious roots. He attends Oxford University. He has a nervous breakdown, and he goes to Beijing. This is probably a familiar story for many of us who have been in the China world. This failed-at-college start. But different than the rest of us in the China world maybe, is that he decided to write a potentially fictional, almost impossible to categorize story about his sexual exploits and other...

Jeremiah (23:03) ...and other adventures.

Alexander (23:07) Why did you choose this book? And what are we hoping to present to everybody?

Jeremiah (23:12) As you mentioned, it's the end of a dynasty. And it's the time when things are starting to really fall apart. And in that kind of context, both today and back then, there are spaces that emerge for people who maybe don't fit in in places where things are holding together a bit better, and also spaces for those people to find a way to earn a living that might not be as socially acceptable in those countries with functioning legal systems. And so Backhouse, who by the way, by all accounts is brilliant—he speaks multiple languages and never wants to let you forget it—comes to Beijing at the turn of the 20th century, sets himself up as a fixer, translator, scholar, just one of those people that hangs around the hutongs. You know them, I know them. You see them out in front of coffee shops somewhere in Dongcheng, dressed in cloth shoes and only speaking in Chinese, even if you speak to them in English, and who says, "I live in a small hutong home that still does not have floors and I use the bathroom outside and that's because I am a true China hand." He is that guy, but a hundred years earlier.

And of course, in the course of his time in Beijing gets involved in just about every scandal you could possibly imagine. I will leave this one as preview. It's not necessarily—well, it is a bit indicative of, is he making this up? He probably is, but damn, he's good at making stuff up. He does recount, for example—you mentioned the end of the dynasty and the Empress Dowager Cixi who was of course in control of the Qing government at this time—Backhouse in his memoirs recounts something like two dozen, thirty-something nights of pleasure he spent in the company of the Empress Dowager, both at the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace, which, while anything's possible in this crazy world of ours, seems improbable given that Backhouse was, A, rather famously gay, B, Cixi was at least 30 years older than he was—and again, anything's possible. And the part of it that always caught the attention of many readers and a few censors was the fact that in many of these encounters, and I should point out that he describes this in gratuitous detail, he was the passive recipient of those evenings of pleasure. And I will leave it at that.

I'm looking forward to rereading the book. There's a great edition which was annotated and put together, edited by a writer named Derek Sandhaus. I'm rereading the version he put out, and yeah, I'm looking forward to writing about it. I hope you're all looking forward to reading it. I'm looking forward to seeing you, Alexander, next month as we talk about things that are sure to change our rating on Apple Podcasts.

Alexander (26:10) I'm quite looking forward to it too. And I'm really excited. I think it's time for someone to bring a critical eye to these decadent stories and also someone with your sense of joy and humor to take this book from a different world and bring it and nurse it into being in ours. So I can't wait to see.

Jeremiah (26:33) Well, given that I'm about three miles down the beach from the city of Pattaya in Thailand, I feel that's a pretty good place. I'll just pull up in a cafe there and read all about Backhouse's adventures in the bathhouses of Beijing and look around and see a whole bunch of modern-day Backhouses wandering around the streets of this Thailand beach town. All right,

well, thank you, Alexander. And thank you all for tuning into this special edition of Barbarians at the Gate. Hope to see you again very, very soon.

Alexander (27:02) Thank you, Jeremiah. Really appreciate it.