

FROM
HEAVEN LAKE

Travels
through Sinkiang and
Tibet

VIKRAM SETH

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To the people I met along the way

I am very grateful to Stanford University and the Ford Foundation, who supported me in China for two years.

I would also like to thank Nanjing University, where I was a student for those two years.

Most of all I am indebted to Gabrielle Harris, who among other things typed almost the whole of the manuscript. She was at the same time editor and critic, disciplinarian and friend. Only she can know how valuable were her suggestions, occasional prodding and continuous encouragement.

V.S.

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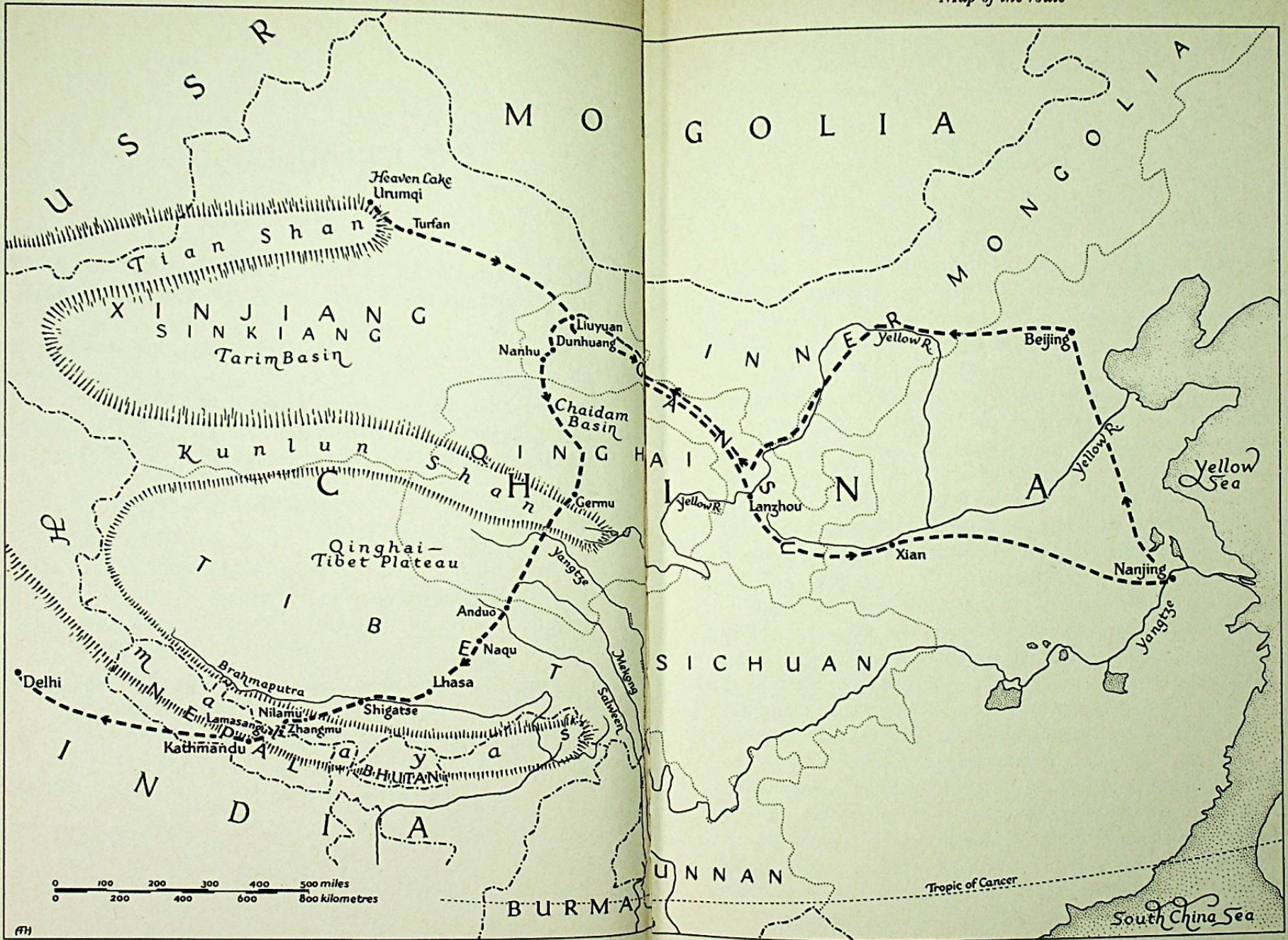
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Introduction

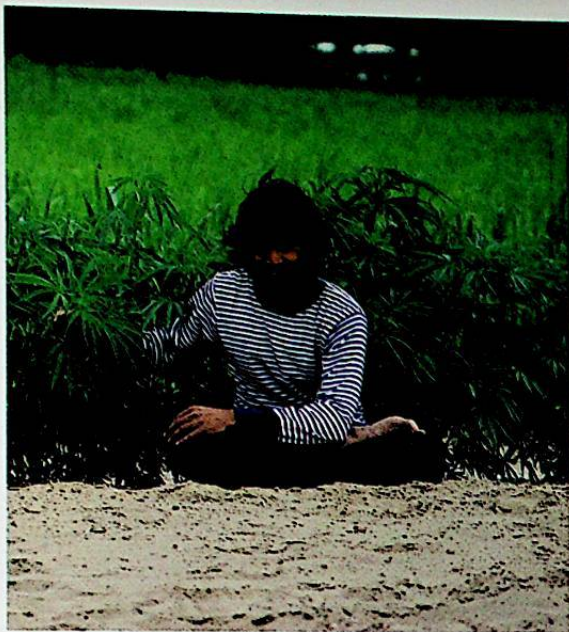
I am Indian, and lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980–82. In the summer of 1981 I returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal.

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



In the summer of 1981, Vikram Seth – an Indian postgraduate student at Nanjing University – decided to attempt the improbable and hitchhike home to Delhi by way of Tibet. He proved to be an observant and irrepressibly resourceful traveller; and his account of his battles with bureaucracy, climatic extremes and the amiable but agonising discomfort of the long-distance lorries that took him from the arid wastes of China's far west to the Potala Palace in Lhasa has the descriptive vividness, the anecdotal wealth, and the combination of narrative excitement and personal reflection that characterise travel writing at its best.

Vikram Seth knew almost nothing about Tibet before deciding to try to get there, and so approached a part of the world that remains exceptionally remote and inaccessible with an engagingly fresh eye; but his ability to speak Chinese enabled him to persuade those whom he met on his travels – nomadic Muslims from Sinkiang, Tibetans still ambivalent towards rule from Peking, the supposedly uncommunicative Chinese themselves – to talk about themselves with remarkable candour: while his refusal to take no for an answer not only enabled him to get where he wanted to go, but to swim in the icy waters of Heaven Lake, and to witness the unusual rituals whereby the Tibetans dispose of their dead. He proves to be a wonderfully stimulating and evocative companion; and *From Heaven Lake* is a travel book to put alongside those of Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux.



Vikram Seth was born in Calcutta in 1952. He took his first degree at Corpus Christi, Oxford, and is at present working towards a PhD in the economic demography of China at Stanford University. He has recently completed two years' research at Nanjing University in China.

'*From Heaven Lake* is in that unique category of books which couldn't have been written by anyone else. Only a diplomatic Indian, fluent in Chinese, could have made such a journey. His spirit shines out from his writing.' John Hillaby

'Delightfully written and observed, and a worthy successor to the accounts of the Victorian explorers and missionaries who tried to reach Lhasa nearly a century ago. I found it hard to put down.' Peter Hopkirk, *The Times*

'If there were a prize for the most engaging and unexpected travel book of the year Vikram Seth should get it.' John Keay, *Sunday Telegraph*

'Enormously enjoyable ... elegantly written'
Tim Radford, *Guardian*

*Cover photographs by the author.
Photograph of author by Walter Stryker, Jr.*

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