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TRAVEL/TROUBLE

Although my knowledge of English is limited, my high school English teacher taught me that the words “travel” and “trouble” have the same linguistic root.

I believe it, because whenever I write about travel, I also end up writing about trouble. If you write something like, “Iowa City is an attractive city, just a 4-hour drive from Chicago, the temperature is blah, blah, blah,” it doesn’t make for a very interesting story. A better start to a short story might involve a tall middle-aged guy from Austria arriving at the Cedar Rapids airport and finding out that his huge luggage stuffed with complicated German books and 20 Rolling Stones T-shirts has been lost.

What makes you write is not the place you travel to, but the trouble of the travel. If Jim’s raft could go up the Ohio River instead of going down the Mississippi, and get to a free state, the adventures of Huckleberry Finn would not last for very long. Travel is trouble, or, at least, troublesome. Trouble leads to adventure. My second novel, *Ito in Love*, is both a love story and a travel story. It’s based on a diary called *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, written by Isabella Bird, a Victorian travel writer in the 19th century. Ito, a young Japanese man, was her interpreter. They traveled unbeaten tracks in Japan together. Well, of course the original journal is not a love story. I’m a writer who makes up stories.

In the beginning, the Japanese interpreter holds certain prejudices against westerners who come to Yokohama, his home town, and behave like kings and queens. However, as he travels with this little strange white woman he gradually comes to like her. The story takes place in the Last Samurai age, so someone like Ito, the son of lower class Samurai, has no clue what his future holds, because all previous value systems have suddenly become garbage, thrown to history. That is one reason for his attraction to a woman totally different from any he has known before. He becomes passionate because he is very young – but the Victorian traveler is much older than him, so she says, “The time of travel is the time of dreams. Travel makes the two of us the way we are now. We have to be very different when our journey ends. Only travel can set us free, bring us together.”

A period of travel is a special time in your life. That gives you a story.

Let’s move on to another question. Can we still write good travel stories in this internet age, even though airports look the same all over the world and everybody is drinking tall lattes at Starbucks?

This question seems to address the issue of globalization. If so, let me ask a question in return. Did globalization make the world simple? Well maybe at some point, but at some point, it also made the world troublesome. Then again, I believe the essence of a travel is a trouble. I think we still have a lot to write about.

Three years ago, I wrote a novel called *Tour 1989*. It is not about Tiananmen Square, the Berlin wall, or even about the Japanese emperor’s death. It’s about the most boring package tour in Hong Kong. An average young Japanese man, black hair, black eyes, wearing glasses and sporting a Nikon Camera goes to Hong

Kong. He takes the most boring bus tour, seeing stupid tourist attractions and spending too much time at Duty Free Shoppers. Then he goes missing, but nobody cares because he is too average and the world won't change just because a boring Japanese man disappears.

I tried to write about a travel, which means a trouble, in the present day. I don't know if I succeeded, but nevertheless, many of my stories are about travel in some form, and I'm pretty sure that I will write about travel in the future, too.