Singapore to Stockholm Overland: Travel Internship Proposal
Brian Huang, Matthew Bolden and Graham Link

Combined, we have already undertaken several journeys, and on each of them, we find the moments that most stuck with us were those coloured by silence. In true YNC fashion we will blaze a trail through both dense metropolises and vacant expanses. In doing so, we hope to come to a deeper understanding of what exactly “silence” is, what it means, and moreover, what it costs.

In this travel internship, we propose to travel overland from Singapore to Stockholm. We will follow roughly in the footsteps of ‘The First Overland’, or the Cambridge and Oxford Far Eastern Expedition, originally undertaken in 1955. At the time, this was the longest overland trip ever completed, and it remains one of the longest to this day. We chose to emulate the “overland” aspects of this expedition because we find that an overland trip best allows one to engage with and find silence. Journeying from a modern capital of Asia to a historic capital of Europe, the draft itinerary involves a path across 9 countries and 13,000km. The approximate timeframe of the project will be roughly 9 weeks, all segments of which are served by either train or bus. This project has several key aims, being: (1) Extensive travel writing, to be published in a professional blog. (2) The planning and creation of an exhibit on the ‘Sound of Silence’, using high-definition video and immersive audio. Students will be introduced to the concept of soundscapes, or distinctive aural layers and identities. Displays will be interactive, educational and moving to the senses. (3) To engage meaningfully with the locales and people we meet and find moments of silence (4) To reflect on the purpose and function of travel in the modern age, where flights disconnect us from the feeling of movement and isolate us from the world around.

Project Rationale-

This travel internship seeks to explore the ‘The Sounds of Silence’. We define silence as the sound one experiences when all others we have come to expect and take for granted are absent. As such, this is not necessarily the literal absence of all sound and is in fact inherently spontaneous; we do know we’ll find them, but we don’t know where or when. This theme is derived from a talk at Yale-NUS by Pico Iyer. Building on this focus, the project will use silence and the lack thereof as a window into modern social issues, as identified with the aid of Professor Anju Paul. Silence will highlight the rural vs. urban divide/gradient as well as the social importance of religious and spiritual spaces. The project will consider how silence is now a privileged commodity rather than a given, as well as contemplate its worth in the modern context. Toward these ends, our three core questions are as follows:
1. Urban/Rural Contrasts - How has modernity, specifically urbanism and technology, changed our view of silence? Does natural silence hold a different meaning from social silence?

2. Spirituality - Anthropologist Hillel Schwartz writes that silence is inherently spiritual, but not inherently religious. How do different cultures or people value silence differently and why? How does silence tie into one's sense of self?

3. Definition of Silence - We previously defined silence as the sound one experiences when all others we have come to expect and take for granted are absent. Is this definition flawed? Can it be expanded? Are different forms of silence comparable, and can they even be considered under the same framework?

These questions relate to our curriculum at Yale-NUS on a number of fronts, which we propose to group under: (1) Urban/Rural Binary and Globalization, and (2) Modernity. Firstly, the topic of modernity as a philosophical, social and cultural issue is a core theme of Lit. & Hum. II. In texts such as Don Quixote and Journey to the West, self-awareness plays a key role in the undertaking of quests and adventures. This same self-awareness will be cultivated on our journey during moments of silence. In addition, we will explore how industry and urbanization at once enable and pollute modern life. This will segway neatly into issues of the urban/rural binary. We will observe what is gained and lost in the transition from urban to rural environments, specifically in terms of silence and self-awareness. The nature and role of silence in the countryside will be compared with that of silence in the city. Globalization is a separate, but heavily related element of this urban vs. rural discussion. Due to mobile phones, the internet and the media, communication with the outside world (both national and international) is more prevalent than ever before. How does this increasing awareness of national and global context affect rural communities? Is tourism an element of globalization, and if so, how does it contribute to communities’ sense of context? How does this ‘noise’ from the outside world affect the original silence? Comparative Social Institutions in Semester 1 imparted us with a useful framework of analysis for these and similar questions. In Semester 1 of Year 2, we will encounter each of these questions in far greater depth through Modern Social Thought. After completing Modern Social Thought, we will return to our travel writings with a new perspective. Revisions and additional reflections may then be published.

We choose this topic because we notice that in this modern world of ours, especially in Singapore, silence has become increasingly hard to find. The world’s steadily been shrinking and homogenizing, thus squeezing out many of the places where silence could
once be found. Nevertheless, we still find many places in time and space permeated with silence, places like the 9/11 Memorial, the Siberian wilderness, Mr. Iyer’s Tibetan monastery. This leads us to secondary questions such as: Why do these places remain as bastions of silence while others become saturated with the sounds, information, “tweets” and Facebook notifications we’ve come to expect in our lives as homo-modernus? Is there something inherently powerful about places and events that are permeated with silence; could they not be seen as akin to the “totems” that Durkheim investigated? Does silence come at the expense of something else and if so, what? And most importantly, why do we, as social animals, seek silence at all and attribute to it so much power?

Desired Outcomes-

- Interact and engage meaningfully with destinations that represent a broad spectrum of silence or the lack thereof. Some examples include:
  - Angkor Wat, Cambodia
  - Village near Fuzhou, China
  - Gorkhi Terelj National Park, Mongolia.
  - Lake Baikal, Russia
  - Laplands, Finland
  - Saigon, Vietnam; Beijing, China; Other major urban centres

- Observe and comment on the experience of the journey through a series of expositions and entries (vlogs, writing, pictures, and/or podcasts) on a professional blog. Develop and practice travel writing skills. (Note: Professor Robin Hemley has agreed to work with us toward this end beforehand, and we hope to correspond with him during the trip.) Share travel writing with the Yale-NUS community, where reflections can be made and discussed with other students, especially those interested in writing, and perhaps even publish our writing after the trip. Our writings will be focused on the aforementioned three themes: (1) Urban/Rural Binary, (2) Spirituality of Silence and (3) Definition of Silence.

- Plan and create an exhibit on the ‘Sounds of Silence’. The exhibit will make use of both HD video and immersive audio (binaural audio) to maximise the experience. Students will be introduced to the concept of soundscapes, or distinctive aural layers and identities. Displays will be interactive, educational and moving to the senses. We will present this exhibit to the Yale-NUS community following our return at the beginning of Year 2.
Case Study: Vietnam

Over the recent mid-semester break, the members of this proposed trip took a leg (⅛) of the journey by traveling by train from Saigon to Hanoi, stopping off at Danang to see the cultural heritage site Hoi An. The silence in each city we visited acted as a window into that city’s history and culture.

We arrived in Saigon at around noon to a bustling city filled with locals and tourists alike. While trying to locate the more busy parts of the city for a hostel, it was hard to avoid the noise of the streets. It was not until the War Remnants Museum that we found our first moments of silence. Streams of tourists laughed and talked as they walked up the road leading to the fenced museum. Excited visitors chatted away in various languages as they got off tour buses and excitedly lined up to buy entrance tickets. They continued to converse as they snapped pictures and selfies in front of the planes and tanks on display. Only when the three of us turned into a narrow alley on one far end of the museum grounds did all the noises stop. Rows of tourists stared at a display on a brick wall in silence. The alley was an exhibition about the brutal methods used to torture Vietnamese prisoners during the war. A central panel described, in a disturbingly simple list, each method of torture in detail. More panels on either side had pictures of victims corresponding to each item on the list. In a corner of a museum, through a combination of human sentiment and historical recollection, we found a pocket of silence amidst the clamour of Saigon.

The moment we walked into our compartment on the train, we encountered our second bit of (somewhat awkward) silence. A family of three, two parents and a small child, were sitting on the bottom bunk opposite us. The father left, leaving the mother holding her child, who smiled at us. We politely smiled back and then sat there, not quite sure what to do next. The compartment shut out all the sounds of the other train passengers and a cultural gap led to our second experience with silence. After the train departed, we opened up the windows and watched as villages, rice paddies, and towns passed by. Here we experienced a different kind of silence, despite the sounds of the train in the background. We stood next to each other and just admired the areas betwixt and between that most people miss as they pass by in a plane.

In Hoi An it seemed even harder to find silence than it was in Saigon; tourists flooded in swarms to the UNESCO world heritage site. What few times we found away from the general crowd we were often approached by vendors trying to sell wares or people on motorbikes peppering us with questions of our nationality and offers of housing. The second day we were there we rented our bikes to go down to Cua Dai beach. After finding the beach underwhelming and overly touryst, we decided to just take our bikes and see where
the road would take us. We decided to follow a group of children off the main road. After biking down a rocky slope that made me feel like my bike would fall apart, we reached a river that we followed, free of all noise, back to the main road. We decided to then bike across a bridge to one of the small islands in Hoi An. At first we were greeted with a three-star resort but, as we pedaled off the main streets, we found our next bit of silence on a winding road. With it came another departure from the general tourism of Hoi An and a peek into a more local lifestyle.

After taking an overnight train, we found ourselves in the middle of Hanoi at roughly 3 A.M. in the morning. We groggily made our way over to Old Quarter and sat down on a bench in front of the lake. Despite the area usually being the busiest part of Hanoi, we were able to observe the city in near complete silence, seeing a different side of the city as it slowly stirred to life.

Our train travels in Vietnam demonstrated to us both the feasibility and applicability of our ideas. Each moment of silence provided new views and angles of our destinations, remaining some of our most vivid memories. In addition, we learned a great deal about long-distance train travel, day-to-day logistics, and our capability to work together as a team.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Transit</th>
<th>Approximate Transport Cost ($USD)</th>
<th>Proposed Arrival/Departure from Origin Location and Travel Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Singapore Woodlands → JB Sentral, Malaysia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>May 10/May 10/1 Hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>JB Sentral → Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>May 10/May 10/7 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>KL → Penang, Malaysia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>May 10/May 11/7 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Penang → Chumphon, Thailand</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 11/May 14/7 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Chumphon → Bangkok, Thailand</td>
<td>Penang → Bangkok: 54</td>
<td>May 15/May 18/7 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Bangkok → Aranyakpather, Thailand</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>May 18/May 19/5.5 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Aranyakpather → (Tuk-tuk) Poiphet, Thailand</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>May 19/May 19/30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Poiphet → (Shuttle to Transit Station) → Siem Reap, Cambodia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>May 19/May 19/4-5 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Siem Reap → Phnom Penh, Cambodia</td>
<td>35 (Boat) or 10 (Bus)</td>
<td>May 19/May 23/4-5 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Phnom Penh → Saigon (HCMC), Vietnam</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>May 23/May 25/7 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>Saigon → Da Nang, Vietnam</td>
<td>Saigon → Hanoi: 70</td>
<td>May 25/May 26/1 Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>Da Nang → Hanoi, Vietnam</td>
<td>Saigon → Hanoi: 70</td>
<td>May 27/May 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>Hanoi → Nanning, PRC</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>May 29/June 1/1 Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>Nanning → Guilin, PRC</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>June 1/June 1/5 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV</td>
<td>Guilin → Fuzhou, PRC</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>June 1/June 4/1 Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVI</td>
<td>Fuzhou → Beijing, PRC</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>June 5/June 10/12 Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVII</td>
<td>Beijing → Ulan Bator, Mongolia</td>
<td>Trans-Siberian: Approx. 1000 Total</td>
<td>June 10/June 14/1 Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVIII</td>
<td>Ulan Bator → Irkutsk, Russia</td>
<td>Trans-Siberian: Approx. 1000 Total</td>
<td>June 15/June 20/1 Day For Gorkhi Terelji.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIX</td>
<td>Irkutsk → Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>Trans-Siberian: Approx. 1000 Total</td>
<td>June 21/June 25/3 Days For Listvyanka/Bolshie Koty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX</td>
<td>Moscow → St. Petersburg, Russia</td>
<td>Trans-Siberian: Approx. 1000 Total</td>
<td>June 28/July 1/Half-Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXI</td>
<td>St. Petersburg → Hesinki, Finland</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>July 1/July 5/Few Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXII</td>
<td>Helsinki → Kemijärvi, Finland</td>
<td>Eurail Pass*</td>
<td>July 5/July 6/1 Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIII</td>
<td>Kemijärvi → Kemi, Finland</td>
<td>Eurail Pass*</td>
<td>July 7/July 9/Few Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXIV</td>
<td>Kemi → Lulea, Sweden</td>
<td>Eurail Pass*</td>
<td>July 10/July 10/Few Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXV</td>
<td>Lulea → Stockholm, Sweden</td>
<td>Eurail Pass*</td>
<td>July 10/July 10/1 Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Eurail Pass for 2 Countries: $234USD.

Fig. 1 Proposed Route

Safety & Risk Management (Outline)

Health

- Travel/Medical Insurance.
- Global Medevac, e.g. International SOS.
- First Aid Kits
Medication

Security (Safety remarks from US Department of State)

- KL & Penang, Malaysia
  - Considered generally safe, though caution is highly advised for tourists.
- Bangkok, Thailand
  - Southern Thailand is an area of regional unrest, especially Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and to a lesser extent Songkhla provinces.
  - However, the main rail line from Singapore to Bangkok passes through the largely-unaffected western end of the Malaysia-Thailand border via Padang Besar. It does not pass through any part of Pattani, Yala or Narathiwat provinces.
  - There is just a relatively short 80 km (50 mile) stretch through the northern part of Songkhla province via Hat Yai.
  - Group will remain on train throughout this section.

- Aranyaprathet, Thailand
  - Train to Aranyaprathet does not enter unsafe regions.

- Poiphet and Thai-Cambodia Border
  - Territorial disputes occur farther north of Poiphet (170km) near the Phanom Dong Rak district and the Preah Vihear temple area.
  - No civilians have been involved in these disputes.
  - Poiphet border is heavily frequented by foreigners and regarded as safe.

- Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, Cambodia
  - Above mentioned Thai-Cambodia border issue.
  - Land mines remain a very small risk. “Travelers in these regions should never walk in forested areas or even in dry rice paddies without a local guide. Areas around small bridges on secondary roads are particularly dangerous.”
  - Group will remain on main paths, away from secondary roads, forested areas, etc.

- Saigon and Hanoi, Vietnam
  - Border areas with China and Cambodia are sensitive with Vietnamese government.
  - Group will be on bus and train through these areas, which proceed without difficulty.
• Nanning, Guilin, Xiamen, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing; PRC
  ○ China considered generally safe in these major areas, aside from minor theft
• Russia
  • Train route passes very far north (900km) of the North Caucasus region, which is considered highly unsafe due to general threat of ethnic/racial victimization, by both public and police. Group will remain mostly in major cities aside from possible stopover in Siberia, and will stay in heavily frequented areas + exercise general caution.
  • The situation between Russia and the Ukraine will be monitored.
• Europe, including Finland and Sweden.
  ○ Exercise general caution

**Communication**

• International SIM card, e.g. GoSim or OneSim
• International SIM card for each group member, with a designated SIM card for calling Singapore/USA, etc.
• GeoPro? Satellite communication/GPS.
• GPS