Laima Vince, Contributor
Writer, Poet, Playwright, Literary Translator. Author of THE SNAKE IN THE VOKDA BOTTLE and JOURNEY INTO THE BACKWATERS OF THE HEART

A Postmodern Juxtaposition: Windows of the World and Splendid China: Shenzhen, People's Republic of China

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MINIATURE MANHATTAN WITH THE TWIN TOWERS

I squeeze onto a train headed in the direction of Shenzhen's Windows of the World theme park. Windows of the World consists of displays of the iconic sites of the world reproduced in miniature. The park opened up in 2004 with the vision of cramming all the wonders of the world into one space. Because most Chinese people cannot afford to travel outside of China, the park brings the world to them. Or perhaps the park was erected to discourage travel outside of China?

The train smoothly accelerates. I cling to the hand strap and sway forwards with the crowd. Glued onto the train's window I read a peculiar message: *Watch out for pinching!* As the train travels through its route, I muse over whether this means to watch out for people who indulge in pinching others on the train or whether pinching is being used here in the antiquated British sense of the word, meaning, "to steal." Lost in thought over the meaning of this cryptic message, which is the only information in English available on the train, and therefore obviously intended for us foreigners, I arrive at the Windows of the World metro stop.

I step out of the metro and climb the stairs up to the street. I enter the Windows of the World through the Glass Pyramid of the Louvre and am greeted by two gigantic plastic mushrooms with pink tops. Cutesy larger than life sheep cut-outs with big happy smiles are arranged in front of the mushrooms. Aha, this is the Chinese New Year display. It is the year of the ram in the Chinese horoscope. Just behind the gigantic mushroom a massive waterfall sprays water upwards in an arc. Up the stairs from the waterfall is the entrance to the park, marked by a life-size reproduction of the Brandenburg Gates of Berlin. Another set of Brandenburg Gates stand about twenty feet away. Giant Greek sculptures are positioned every few meters apart between the two Brandenburg Gates. Jumbo sized red Chinese paper lanterns hang down from the spaces between the columns. Yellow Chinese characters mark each of the lanterns; however, as an illiterate in the Chinese language, I cannot read them. The Eiffel Tower looms over the entire scene. A Chinese New Year character made of plastic carnations is strategically placed in front of the L'arc de Triumph. The skyscrapers of Shenzhen in the background add their own dimension to the visual experience. I am dizzied by the disparity of images crowded together in one space. Seemingly randomly symbols from disparate cultures are arranged together on some sort of a mad palette. If this is not postmodernism gone mad, then I don't know what is.

Meanwhile, Chinese families pose for photographs in front of the displays or take selfies. The older generation tersely pose for photos. Just to be cute, I snap a selfie of myself with the Eiffel Tower in the background, and send it to friends with a text: *Ha ha, you thought I was in Shenzhen, well, I'm in Paris!*

I climb the stairs to the Brandenburg Gates. I pay my entrance fee and enter inside this postmodern world. In front of me the Eiffel Tower looms with a massive Chinese New Year floral display plunked down in front of it. A woman at the turnstile courteously hands me a brightly colored map of the park in English. I open it up. The park is massive. It will take me hours to walk through it. Studying the map, I read that the postmodern cacophony I've just passed through is called "The World Square." The park is divided up into six sections: The Area of Asia; The Area of Oceana; The Area of Europe; The Area of Africa;

The Area of America; The Sculpture Park; The International Street. The number of displays in the park is dizzying: One truly can see the world in a day here. There is no need to travel anywhere—that message is clear. The Chinese authorities have appropriated the world and brought it to China for the people to enjoy.

I read through the extensive list of displays and try to make up my mind where to start: The Grand Palace of Thailand; The Throne Hall of Kyongbok Palace, South Korea; Itsukushima Shrine, Japan; Shirasagi Castle in Himeji, Japan; Katsura Detached Palace, Japan; Mount Fuji; Burobudur, Indonesia; The Angkor Wat, Cambodia; Taj Mahal, India; Shwedagon Pagoda, Mynamar; The Tower of Kuwait; The Merlion, Singapore; Arabian Square of Islamic Mosque and Coffee Pot; Southeast Asian Waterside Village; Modhere Sacred Well, India; Bhaja Chaitya Hall, India; The Maorish Dwelling House; The Sydney Opera House, Australia; Eiffel Tower, France; Buckingham Palace, Britain; Houses of Parliament, Britain; Stonehenge, Britain; Court of Lions in Alhambra Palace, Spain; Alcazar Castle, Spain; The Pisa Leaning Tower and Church, Italy; Notre Dame, France; Saint Michel Abbey, France; The Colosseum, Italy; The Spanish Steps, Italy; Versailles Palace, France; Cologne Cathedral, Germany; Triumphal Arch, France; Venice, St. Mark's Square, Italy; The Idyllic Sights of Windmills and Tulips, Holland; The Piazza Della Signoria, Italy; The Acropolis of Athens, Greece; The Wall and Clock Towers of Kremlin, Russia; London Tower Bridge, Britain; The Fountain of the Observatory, France; Cross Europe; Paris Spring Shopping Plaza; Guell Park, Spain; Pyramids of Giza, Egypt; The Great Tempel of Abu Simbel, Egypt; Kenyan National Park; The African Dwelling-House; Pyramid Fantasy; Flying Over America; The Niagara Falls; Mount Rushmore National Memorial, U.S.A.; The White House, U.S.A.; Skyscrapers in Manhattan, U.S.A.; Mount Corcovado, Brazil; The Statue of Liberty, U.S.A.; The Houses of Parliament of Brasilia, Brazil; The Totem-Pole of North American Indians; The Statues of Warriors, Mexico; The Capitol, U.S.A.; Jefferson Memorial, U.S.A.; Lincoln Memorial, U.S.A.; The Globose, Mexico; The Statues of Easter Island, Chile; Linear Drawings at Nasca, Peru; Venezuela Mountain Torrents; Hawaii Volcanoes; Greenland Underground Exploration; Colorado Adventure Rafting; Inca Rock-Climbing; Amazon Bobkart Slide; Indian Archery; The Indian Dwelling-house; Alps Ice and Snow World; Neptune Square; Jurassic Dinosaur Park; Roman Holiday Plaza; Caesar's Palace; Asian Street; Islamic Street; Church, European Street; European Bar & Pub Street; Glass Triumphal Arch.

By the time I've reached the last item on the list of iconic symbols of the world, I am experiencing vertigo. Gazing at the detailed map in front of me, I think, indeed, in this park at least, the Chinese have conquered the world. They have recreated all the world's spoils within the park's territory.

I decide to start with the garden of Japanese cherry blossoms. I walk into the Japanese garden and find to my delight that my timing is perfect. I've arrived at the height of cherry blossom season! However, upon closer inspection I find that the cherry blossoms are plastic and perpetually in bloom. From the Japanese garden I step inside Cambodia, where I view a miniature version of the Angkor Wat temple, which I'd seen for real last year in Cambodia. I am impressed with the detail on the temple's façade. The reproduction is convincing. A few footsteps away I marvel at a concrete model of Mount Fuji that reminds me of the papier-mache volcanos I used to make with my kids when they were small. We'd fill them up with baking soda and vinegar and watch them "erupt."

From Asia I meander into Europe, where familiar landmarks greet me in miniature, as though all the doll houses I'd ever dreamed about as a child were now set out in front of me. There's always that one guy who will climb into the Lilliputian size display and stomp around like some sort of a demented Gulliver while his friends snap photos of him on their iPhones. He makes his appearance now, as I walk past, tromping and stamping his feet inside the courtyard of Buckingham Palace. While gawking at Gulliver's antics, I practically step on the brightly colored Kremlin when it pops up in front of me on the gravel walking path. When I enter "The Area of America," I am surprised to see the twin towers still standing in lower Manhattan. I swivel my head just the slightest and spy the colossal busts of the four presidents on Mount Rushmore. On an artificial lake the Niagara Falls empties its vast waters in miniature. As I exit the area an elephantine plastic tyrannosaurus rex reveals a toothy grin from behind a cluster of fern trees.

I find myself laughing out loud every time I enter a new exhibition site. Everything makes me laugh in this theme park, and yet it is not funny. The Windows of the World fulfils everyone's deepest desires, whether it is to see the cherry blossoms in bloom in Japan; to visit the Eiffel Tower in France; or to see the great Cathedrals of Europe. With the Windows of the World the Chinese have conquered the heart and soul of almost every nation on the face of the earth by conquering their symbols. They have taken over the iconic symbols of almost every culture on the face of the planet, and have rebuilt them here on Chinese soil. At Windows of the World they have conquered the world, metaphorically speaking. And yet, on many of the displays the paint is cracked and peeling. The plaster is crumbling. Many of the wonders of the world are badly in need of renovation.

I leave the Windows of the World Theme Park and walk down the shaded street to Splendid China, a theme park that focuses on Chinese culture and the cultural icons of China.

This 74 acre park opened up in 1989 and is comprised of two sections: The Splendid China Folk Villages, which recreate Chinese life in China's many distinct provinces through live performances and buildings and reconstructions of villages that one can enter and explore, and Splendid China Miniature Park, where one can visit the Great Wall of China, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, the Three Gorges Dam, Potala Palace, and the Terracotta Army all in one day, among hundreds of other important landmarks of ancient China. Splendid China celebrates the pride that the Chinese have for their vast and diverse country, and everywhere you wander that sense of pride is evident.

The park is decked out for Chinese New Year with red paper lanterns lined up in a stunning array. On a hillock close to the entrance of the park, I see the Potala Palace, and am reminded of my journey to Tibet last summer. Considering the contentious politics surrounding the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the miniature symbol of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist spirituality, the ancient traditional home of the Dalai Llamas, shrunken to a diminutive size, seems to flaunt how China has scooped up the Tibetans' revered Potala Palace and has transplanted it here, where people can buy tickets to come and gawk at it like they would at the spoils of war.

Indeed, the question of Tibet feels even more uncomfortable when I walk over to the Tibetan village in the Folk Village section of the park and watch a Tibetan show. Girls dressed in cheap silks that I recognize from the Lo Wu fabric market prance about provocatively on stage, tossing white silk scarves—a powerful symbol of blessing in Tibetan culture—this way and that, smiling and gyrating their hips to a Chinese pop music beat. A faded photograph of the Himalayas provides ambiance and serves as their Tibetan backdrop. They end their performance by playfully spinning copies of sacred tin prayer wheels displayed at the back of the stage as they jog off stage.

I enter the Tibetan temple where everything has been copied, including the Tibetan prayer flags. The temple accurately portrays a Tibetan temple, minus the centuries of pulsating spirituality one feels coming through the walls when one enters an actual Tibetan temple. However, inside this temple the red paint is too bright and the Buddhist statues are too shiny and the prayer flags are too crisp and clean. Otherwise, I might have been fooled. And this provokes a question: having copied an actual temple, is this "temple" a legitimate religious site or not? Isn't spirituality about intent? So, if you build the temple without the right intent, is it still a temple? Or, can that intent be brought to the temple by worshippers nonetheless?

I had the same questions about the mock miniature cathedrals I saw over in Windows of the World. Have they now been reduced to mere works of great architecture without the

prayer and meditation and intent that saturates a cathedral's walls for centuries?

I leave the Tibetan village and walk the length of the miniature Great Wall, feeling like a giant who has climbed down from Jack's beanstalk. I follow the Great Wall to an outcropping of rocks, beyond which the gray smog-hidden skyline of Shenzhen looms in the distance. It is time to go home. I leave the park with an image in my mind of the Great Wall curving its way around the park boundaries with the Eiffel Tower on the horizon behind it, just beside a cityscape of newly built apartments that are already looking the worse for wear.

From DIGGING A HOLE TO CHINA: A MEMOIR ON TEACHING AND TRAVELING

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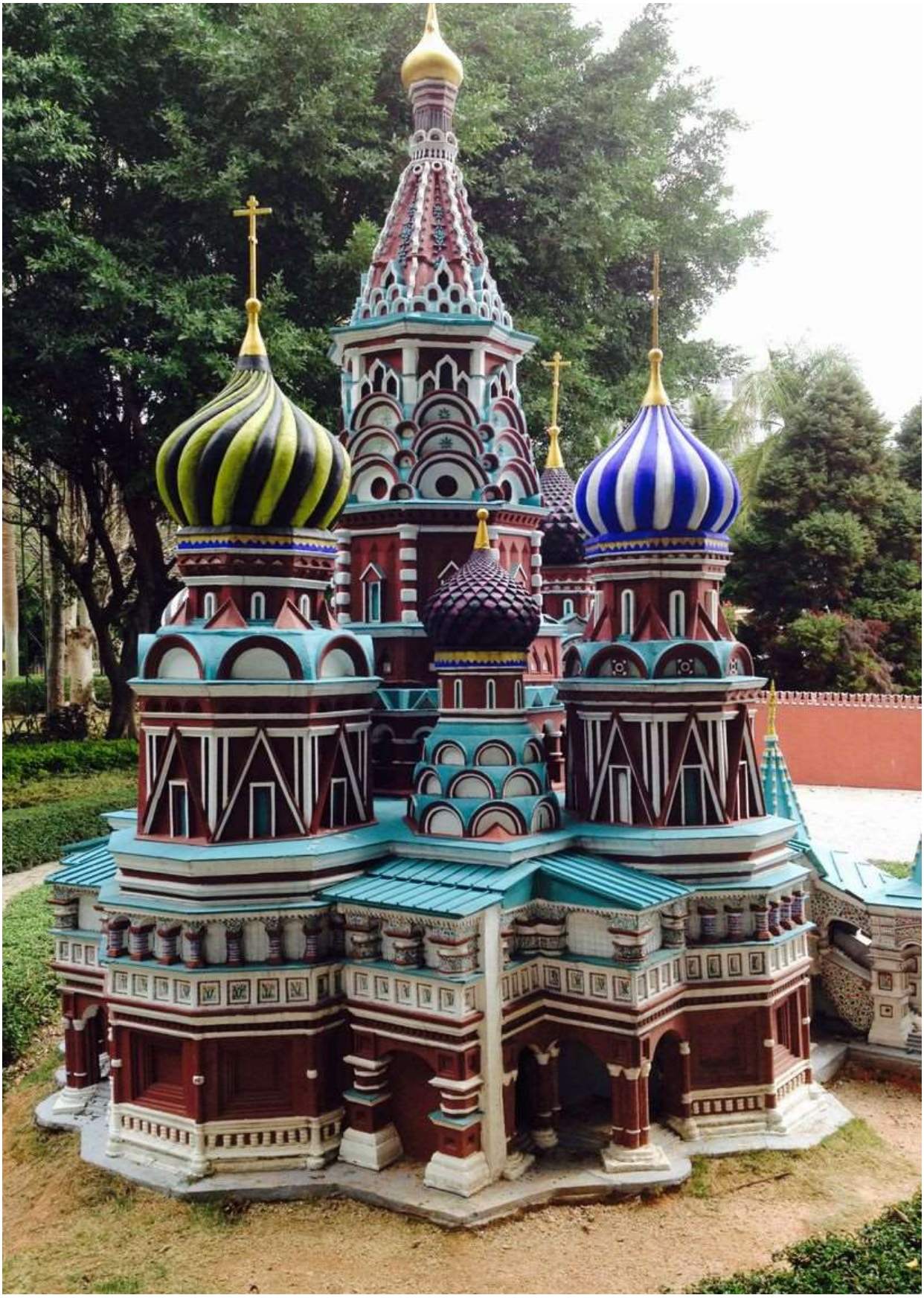

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