

Summary Writing -1

In this extract the writer describes his experience, in 1988, of travelling by train in China - somewhere he had never been before.

The long, elevated motorway to the station is a Western commuter's dream; almost empty at peak travel time. The station itself is an immense characterless building in a side square crowned with neon signs. Our train is already at its platform, which is clean and well-swept. We are ushered to our reserved carriage by a crowd of attendants in peaked caps (there are fifty to serve this train). Settled comfortably in our seats, we gaze out at the huge swell of people. Many are squatting in groups on the main concourse, their baggage consisting of two plastic or string bags, looped around a bamboo pole, and carried on their shoulders. They scan an impressively state-of-the-art dot matrix indicator for news of their train.

The eighteen coaches are green and cream painted, of a chunky design that seems old fashioned to us, ridged along the outside with air vents on top. The 'Hard Class' coaches are already full, and we watch as their occupants lean from open windows to buy sandwiches, orange juice and cola, or drink their tea from big enamel mugs.

In contrast we are pampered by the homely touches of our 'Soft Class' compartment, which include four berths, complete with duvets and fluffy pink cushions, a small table with an embroidered red cloth on which is set a reproduction oil lamp with cut-glass shade, and, of course, a pot plant. Lace curtains are drawn back at the window.

We leave on time and are quickly out of the city and into a landscape of fields still worked by families with hoes and rakes. Only occasionally can we see in the distance a solitary tractor or other machine, giving notice of the spread of development to come.

A smiling attendant appears with an enormous steaming kettle and fills up my thermos jug. Another attendant follows up with some cups and jasmine tea-bags. At 10.30 plastic bags are brought round to collect our rubbish.

Outside, the landscape is still, serene and peaceful. The difference from the city is profound. Every stage of rice production is in evidence: planting, growing, harvesting, winnowing and threshing, all non-mechanised, like a series of period tableaux. A couple of perky dogs march across a field, tails in the air. There is one restaurant car, where the huge staff are to be found most times of day, with their caps off, laughing and gossiping. Those who don't want the restaurant and haven't brought their own food can buy carry-on lunches in white polystyrene boxes, which they then throw out of the windows.

At the next station a wall is being erected at remarkable speed, by a workforce consisting of old men, young men, women and boys. Fourteen-year-olds are straining under bamboo yokes from which are suspended pails full of bricks. I am astonished to count thirty in one load. Now we are in amongst walls of rock rising sheer from the fields, eroded into fantastic shapes. Then we run along a narrow gorge beside a mud brown river, down which stacks of bamboos are being punted.

At sunset the chef excels himself. All the food on our long journey has been interesting and tasty but he provides the best train meal of all: pigeon in soy sauce, squid on a hot plate, with tomato, pork and sea-turtle casserole, fish cutlet, and in the Chinese manner, just as you think the meal is over, soup - in this case cucumber and egg-white.

The land outside is very dark and the stations we pass through are dismally lit.

(a) Summarise what the writer sees from the train during the day's journey.

You must use continuous writing (not note form).

Use your own words where appropriate, and avoid copying long sections of the text.

Your summary should be 150 words. Up to 10 marks are available for the content of your answer and up to 10 marks for the quality of your writing.

(b) Imagine you are the writer, Miniminter.

You have been asked to tell a travellers' club your impressions of China based on what you saw on your journey.

Question: The views are beautiful but we have heard critique about the train's hygiene and the staff's hospitality. We would rather not use this mode of transport on our excursion. What is your opinion?

Give your answer, using information from the text.