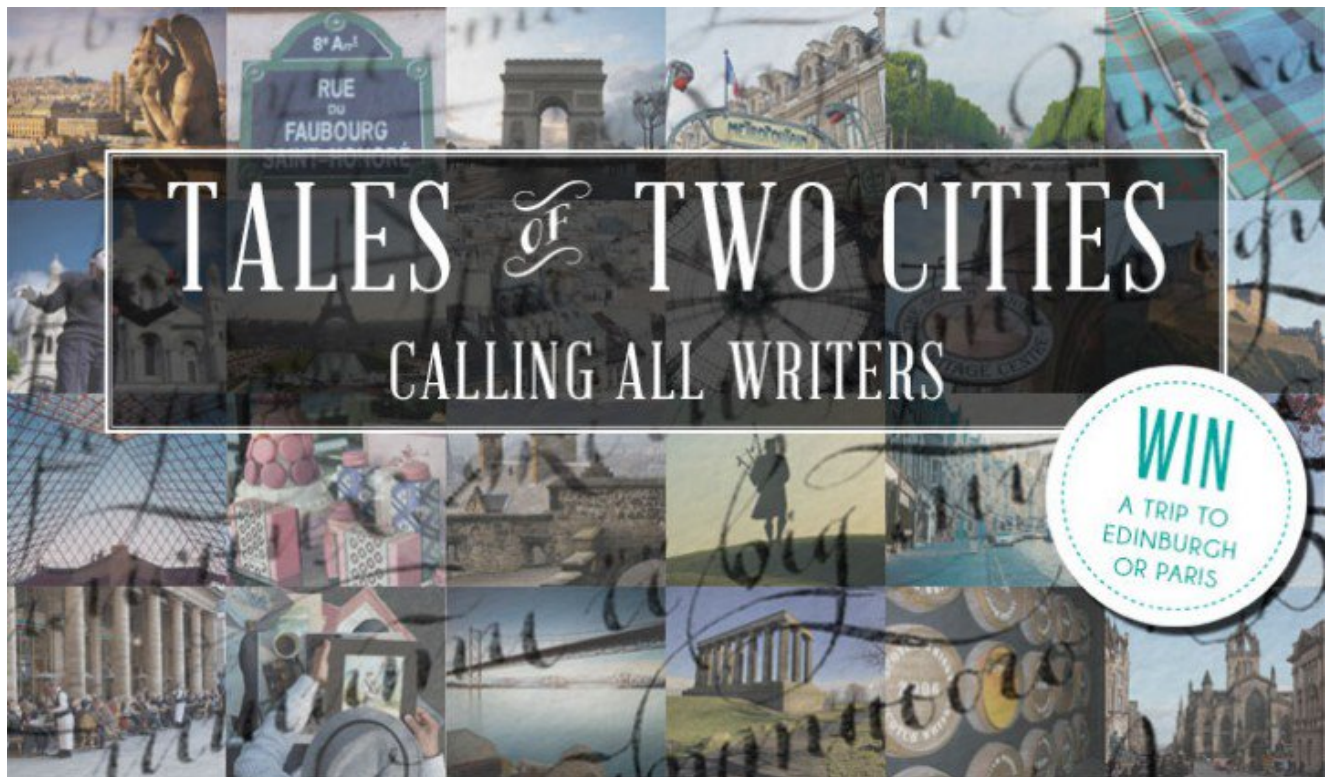


# A tale of two cities

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Our winning story, 'From Tianjin to Tokyo' by Kathryn Macleod takes you on a culinary journey from the bright lights and dumpling dinners of northern China to the technological wonders and fresh seafood of Tokyo. An informative and personal piece, Kathryn's story managed to charm even the cynics on the panel, and captured the essence and surprises of Asia perfectly....

## FROM TIANJIN TO TOKYO BY KATHRYN MACLEOD

It started at a street food stall.

We didn't know then that a journey was about to begin, but it did, right there at 4am one October morning in Tianjin, China. There were laughs, smiles, and drunken deliberations over mantou, kou rou, and other undistinguishable local delicacies.

That street food stall saw the start of a personal journey inseparable from the travels that helped sustain it. I was a Brit teaching English to teenagers; he was an American interning on the outskirts of the city. Two ex-pats in town for a temporary time only. After that first food-infused encounter, we spent every spare minute of six weeks together exploring our small corner of Asia.

We engaged in non-stop conversation as we got to know each other over hot pot in the center of the city. By the banks of the Hai He river, we lit a traditional Chinese lantern for luck, watching as it disappeared into the smoggy night sky. Long weekends in Beijing were easy too: we hopped on the high-speed train and arrived in time to watch the sunset over the rooftops of the Forbidden City, followed by a dinner of dumplings.

It was on one of these early occasions, after I had embarrassingly spilled soy sauce all over myself while eating xiaolongbao, that he suggested a weekend in Shanghai. Did I want to go with him?

Two weeks later, the two of us touched down in China's largest city. I fell head over heels for Shanghai, this city of striking contrasts – but maybe I fell for the place because I was falling for the person I shared it with. Released from our regular routines, we were free to explore the city, as well as the emotional journey we had embarked on.

There were drinks in bars at the top of the Shanghai skyline; tasty Thai food in Xintiandi; and an amble through the European-style avenues of the French Concession. We spent a rainy afternoon admiring art in the warehouse galleries of 50 Moganshan Road, and enjoyed a night-time walk on the Bund, peering up at the futuristic picture of Pudong.

Not long after our sojourn in Shanghai our journey seemed as if it might stop. While he went back to the Big Apple, I stayed in Tianjin, the city of 12 million souls about to enter the depths of a northern winter. We said a brief goodbye – there was a plane to be boarded – before I undertook my solo subway ride back across town, tears flowing fast and disconcerting my fellow passengers.

But Tianjin was not the end of the line.

After a few detours (New York, Edinburgh, Arizona), our journey from Tianjin took us to Tokyo, that amazingly modern subwaypolis of efficiency and organisation, tradition and technology. I was mesmerised by it all: the sheer mass of people navigating Shibuya Crossing; the cute-yet-cool way Tokyo women dress; the excitement of spotting kimonos amid a sea of suits; even the strange experience of sitting on singing, heated restroom seats.

On a walk through the temple grounds at Asakusa, we celebrated the New Year, found our fortunes, and filled our stomachs with seaweed-sprinkled noodles. At Sengaku-ji we lit incense to pay our respects to the resting places of the famed 47 Ronin, while in Harajuku we joked around trying to spy teens in cartoon-esque costumes.

It was here, in an izakaya under the Yurakucho train tracks, full of shochu and fresh seafood from Tsukiji, that our journey ended. It was also here that – two years after a serendipitous meeting at a Chinese street food stall – another one began with a bended knee, a diamond ring, and a celebration.

Never turn your nose up at a street food stall.