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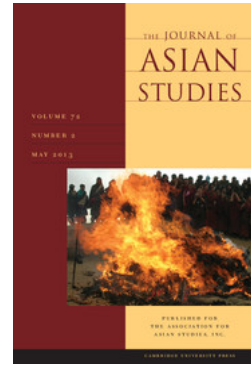
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Peter Hessler: Teacher, Archaeologist, Anthropologist, Travel Writer, Master Storyteller

PAUL A. COHEN

In the first decade of the present century, Peter Hessler published three acclaimed works on China, mostly (although not exclusively) dealing with the present period. Many of the parts of the second and third volumes, in particular, initially appeared as articles in the New Yorker and National Geographic, where the deftness of Hessler's writing and his superb skills as a storyteller attracted attention well beyond the academic world. Hessler's books have also been widely and generously praised—and used in class—by teachers of contemporary China. Yet, to my knowledge, no China specialist has yet attempted a comprehensive assessment of their contribution to the deepening of American understanding of the complexities of Chinese life today. Such an assessment is the modest aim of this essay.

I WENT TO THE Coop bookstore in Harvard Square recently to buy a copy of Peter Hessler's *River Town*, a book I had read years ago but that somehow had disappeared from my shelf. To my surprise, the Asian Studies section of the store not only did not have *River Town*, it also did not have either of the other two books Hessler had written dealing with China. I asked one of the customer service people if they had *River Town* in stock. He smiled and promptly led me to the Travel section, which had all three of Hessler's "China books." This got me thinking. Classifying Hessler as a popular writer of books on China obviously reflected my personal priorities, since I happen to be in the China field. But it appeared that other people, with different priorities, could think of Hessler's books in a quite different way, noteworthy for some other reason. I took this as a hint that I needed to enlarge my sense of what Hessler does in his writing. After rereading *River Town* and *Oracle Bones* and reading for the first time the final volume of the China trilogy, *Country Driving*,¹ it occurred to me that even to characterize Hessler as a travel writer—albeit a very good one—does not do him or his work justice. If I were still teaching, I would encourage my students, among other things, to pay close attention to the ways in which Hessler thinks and behaves alternately as an archaeologist, seeking to find out through interviews with participants (a form of

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¹The full titles of the three books: *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (New York: Harper Perennial, [2001] 2002); *Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time in China* (New York: Harper Perennial, [2006] 2007); *Country Driving: A Chinese Road Trip* (New York: Harper Perennial, [2010] 2011). References to the three books in this essay are indicated parenthetically, using the abbreviations *RT*, *OB*, and *CD*.

digging) what happened in China's pre-Deng, Maoist past, or as an anthropologist, mapping in exquisite detail the lives of young Chinese engaged full-throttle in the building of China's future.

One thing that struck me as I made my way through the trilogy is that, apart from differences in content and core themes, there is a progression of another sort. In *River Town* (2001), Hessler gives an account of his and a colleague's experiences as Peace Corps teachers of English and American literature at a small teachers college in a backwater Yangzi River town called Fuling, situated not far downstream from Chongqing. In 1996, when he arrived in Fuling, Hessler was a young twenty-seven, had only a smattering of Chinese language capability, and aside from a brief orientation in Chengdu had visited China only once, some years earlier. In short, during his time in Fuling, he was a learner as well as a teacher. Everything in China was strange to him, and he spent a lot of time trying to figure the Chinese out. Especially during his first year in Fuling, Hessler was the quintessential outsider, and that is exactly how he was made to feel by the inhabitants of the town, who for many years had had virtually no contact with non-Chinese people.

Hessler makes it clear at the very outset that *River Town* is not a book about "China"; it is about a very small part of China at a specific (and in many ways very special) moment in time. The students at Fuling Teachers College were largely from poor farming backgrounds in Sichuan, and the adults the author befriended in the town of Fuling, people with whom he often spent time chatting over noodles and beer, were local Chinese with little formal education. Teaching and living in Fuling was not the same as teaching and living in Shanghai or Beijing. And the sounds were different too, different not only from those one might have heard in a large Chinese city, but also from any Hessler had heard before anywhere. The steady clinking of chisels at construction sites, the crush of rocks being broken up with a sledgehammer, he tells us, were the sounds of a place where much of the work was still done by hand. On reading this, I was reminded of the first time I visited China—it was in May 1977. I took an early morning walk along Chang'an Avenue in the capital. It was rush hour, and I was struck by the fact that practically everyone was riding a bicycle. Although this was a major thoroughfare in a major Chinese city, the sound that predominated, aside from an occasional blast from a bus trying to muscle its way through the crowd, was the incessant tinkling of bicycle bells. People went to work by leg power. China, in many respects, was still a place that had not entered the machine age.

Being an outsider at the beginning of his stay in China, Hessler sometimes misinterpreted—or failed to fully understand—what he saw and heard. He missed the boat, for example, in his allusion to the ancient Daoist fable about "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," which he says he especially disliked. Seeing the fable as "Mao's story"—"Mao had made this sort of nonsense the foundation of economic policies that affected hundreds of millions of people" [*RT*, p. 134]—he showed little sense of the centuries-old presence of the story in Chinese culture. A few years ago, I had occasion to leaf through the 1974 editions of the Nationalist government's Chinese-language textbooks for primary and middle school students, published in Taiwan while the Cultural Revolution was still raging on the mainland and the ideological conflict between the Communists and Nationalists was at its most intense. One of the lessons in each work contained a rendering of the "Foolish Old Man" story, the point of

which was simply that, with sufficient resolve, any goal could be achieved, no matter how great the difficulty. Another lesson in the elementary school primer applied the fable to the engineering feat involved in the construction of the Zengwenxi Reservoir in southern Taiwan. Not only was the fable used both on the mainland and in Taiwan, it had been used in hundreds if not thousands of other settings long before Mao's day, many of them entirely benign. In other words, Mao could make use of this story for his own purposes, but it was not *his* story. And, from the perspective of many Chinese (including, according to Hessler, his own students, for whom the story was a "favorite"), it was no more nonsensical than the thousands of other stories that formed a vital part of China's cultural heritage.²

Another example of Hessler's naïveté early on: before he learned the reason behind the military training to which first-year students were subject, he understood it as simply one of the routines of Chinese college life and gave it little thought. Only later, on reading the journal of one of his students, did he discover that this was something the government had introduced after the Tiananmen events of 1989: "the marching and the distant gunshots" he had been hearing "were the echoes of the Tiananmen Square protests" [RT, p. 16]. Since his Chinese was not yet good enough to converse with the townspeople, Hessler confides, much of what he learned in the early days in Fuling was from the students in his classes, which were conducted in English.

Although his aim in life was to be a writer, Hessler was a good teacher, ever sensitive to the environment within which his students thought and felt about things. There were no clichés in their responses to Shakespeare. They began from scratch, responding to Hamlet as they might respond to a person with Hamlet's qualities in a Chinese setting. Thus, a student who had adopted the name Lily commented in her journal: "Mr. Hessler, do you like Hamlet? . . . I dislike him. I think he is too sensitive and conservative and selfish. . . . What's more, I dislike his hesitation. As a man he should do what he wants to do resolutely." "You couldn't have said something like that at Oxford," Hessler reflected. "You couldn't simply say: I don't like Hamlet because I think he's a lousy person. Everything had to be more clever than that" [RT, pp. 46–47]. Lily's response reminded me of something an English teacher at a public middle school in Manhattan wrote recently on her experience teaching reading enrichment to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to beef up their "cultural capital" in preparation for high school. The students, she wrote, did not always read classic works of literature "from the expected perspective": "Holden Caulfield was a punk, unfairly dismissive of parents who had given him every advantage. . . . I had never before seen the parallels between Scarface and Macbeth, nor had I heard Lady Macbeth's soliloquies read as raps, but both made sense; the interpretations were playful, but serious."³

Not long after his arrival in Fuling, Hessler began to wonder "how the city worked and what the people thought, especially since no foreigner had done this before" [RT, p. 62]. Again, it was not like living in Beijing or Shanghai, where there were plenty of

²Paul A. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. xix, 241–42, notes 5–6.

³Claire Needell Hollander, "Teach the Books, Touch the Heart," *New York Times*, April 22, 2012, p. 4 (Sunday Review).

Westerners who had long since discovered what the city had to offer and could serve as ready-made guides. Hessler's sensitivity to local setting (spatial and temporal) and the danger of making assumptions based on one's own prior (foreign) experience helped him in this project. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, for example, was destined to have a huge impact on the lives of Fuling residents. But while this impact might seem "massive to an outsider," it was really less massive when one considered the recent history of the city's inhabitants: "Within the last fifty years, China has experienced Liberation, the radical (and disastrous) collectivization of the 1958–61 Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Reform and Opening," in addition to which, for Fuling, there was Mao's Third Line project, begun in the 1960s and involving the relocation of China's coastal defense and aeronautical industries to the remote mountainous areas of the southwest, centering on Chongqing [RT, pp. 108–9]. Habituation to radical and abrupt change over a half century affected how Fuling people responded to the Three Gorges Dam. They were used to massive changes.

As he became more familiar with his Chinese surroundings, Hessler showed a growing awareness of the complexity of Chinese society. We encounter fewer stereotyped statements—"the Chinese smile that served as a mask against deeper feelings" [RT, p. 131] or "the Chinese have always been pragmatists, much more so than Westerners" [RT, p. 135]—and a greater sensitivity to the differences *among* Chinese. During the 1990s, the Chinese government bombarded the educated sector of society with anti-imperialist sentiment (it was called Patriotic Education and was another after-effect of Tiananmen). This rhetorical onslaught reached peak intensity in 1997, not long after Hessler's arrival. For months, he notes, the students and teachers at the college had been drilled in the shamefulness of the history of imperialism, and the imminent return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty was portrayed as "a redemption that would have a real impact on their lives." But when Hessler chatted with a Chinese photographer, who was one of his pals in town, he got an entirely different perspective. The photographer was completely uneducated, a true member of the common folk. "If Hong Kong hadn't been British for so many years," he told Hessler, "it wouldn't be as rich as it is today. If it had been Chinese, it would have had the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and all the other problems, and those would have affected its development. We would have ruined it like everything else." Hessler's students, he told the photographer, would totally disagree with him. The photographer's response, delivered with undisguised scorn: "Of course they have different ideas than me! . . . What do they know? They're too young! They don't understand the real world; they have no experience." When Hessler told his friend that even the older teachers at Fuling Teachers College would not agree with him, the photographer remarked: "Of course! They have those political classes every week—they have to believe whatever the Communist Party says. We Old Hundred Names can have our own ideas. I don't have to study that stuff they study in the college." Hessler concluded—and it raised uncomfortable questions concerning what he himself was doing teaching at a place like Fuling—that "as a thinking person his [friend's] advantage lay precisely in his lack of formal education. Nobody told him what to think, and thus he was free to think clearly" [RT, pp. 172–73].

After a year and a half in China, Hessler no longer felt foreign. Over the Chinese New Year holiday, he was the only foreigner in Fuling, as a result of which he lived

the entire time (as he liked to put it) in his Chinese identity, He Wei.⁴ His Chinese language teachers invited him to dinner several times, but no one in the English Department asked him over or would have anything to do with him. He later discovered—another instance of his early naïveté—that the school authorities, from the beginning of his stay at the college, had told the English faculty not to associate too closely with the American teachers. Although grounded in “a vague and pointless paranoia,” it was an effective policy, one result of which was that Hessler spent much more time with the uneducated family that ran the local noodle restaurant than with English-speaking members of the college faculty. Ironically, although he was the only foreigner in the city during the holiday, he wrote, “for the first time I no longer thought of myself as being alone” [*RT*, p. 295].

Wherever he happened to be, it seems, Hessler collared strangers, talked with them, even got invited into their homes. This of course became easier as his Chinese improved and, increasingly, he was able to communicate with people on different levels. Other changes also took place in the course of the two years he spent in Fuling. There were many things at the college that continued to annoy him—the interminable anniversaries and commemorations, the twisted history, the propaganda-laced textbooks—but from the student journals, which are frequently excerpted in *River Town*, it is clear that Hessler’s relations with the young people in his charge became more informal and relaxed over time. After their graduation and the completion of his two-year stint in the Peace Corps (at which point he moved to Beijing), he maintained close contact with some of them, visiting them in the various parts of China to which they had migrated, taking a serious interest in their lives, hopes, and dreams.

These visits constitute one of the important connecting threads between *River Town* and *Oracle Bones*, which was researched between 1999 and 2004 and first published in 2006. As in *River Town*, although much more so, Hessler continues to write in episodic fashion, a result of the fact that many parts of the trilogy, especially in the second and third volumes, were initially published as magazine pieces in the *New Yorker* and *National Geographic*. The coherence in Hessler’s writing is supplied in great measure by the personality and voice of the author himself, as revealed through the conversations he has with all and sundry, plus his private musings on his experiences in China. Through Hessler’s exchanges with people, their responses to his persistent questioning, he brings out the variety of perspectives, the contradictions, and the diversity among Chinese as individuals, quite different from some of his early impressions of students and teachers in Fuling, who seemed at times to have only the ideas that had been drummed into them in the highly politicized environment in which they lived.

The most distinctive parts of *Oracle Bones* are Hessler’s periodic allusions to the deep temporal dimension of the Chinese experience through time. Very early in the book, a young Chinese archaeologist directing fieldwork at the Shang archaeological site in northern Henan says to him: “You have to look at the landscape in a dynamic way. . . . It might be completely different from what it was three thousand years ago. . . . You can look all around here and see nothing, but in fact this was the first city in the area. If you don’t add [the dimension of] time, you’ll find nothing.” Archaeologists, in

⁴This spelling, given in *RT*, p. 8, is correct; elsewhere in the trilogy the surname is spelled Ho.

effect, read the earth. When they pick up a shovelful of dirt containing fragments of pottery or metal or whatever, they can make a shrewd guess as to what used to be there—a wall, a rubbish heap, a tomb—and when. The dirt plugs are like words that convey meaning [*OB*, pp. 4–5]. As with oracle bones—a term that is used in the book both literally and figuratively—they offer up in incomplete form the notes to a composition that was performed long ago. But they do not give us the music. This, the Shang scholar David Keightley suggests, we have to figure out ourselves to the best of our ability [*OB*, p. 250].

The mystery of the distant past—the vastness of what we do not know—intrigues Hessler. He is fascinated by some of the unconventional ideas put forward by another student of ancient China, Victor Mair. Mair first saw the recently discovered Xinjiang mummies in the Urumqi provincial museum in the late 1980s and noted that they had long noses, deep-set eyes, and blond hair. The facial features and the clothing worn by the corpses confirmed Mair's initial impression that the mummies were Indo-European in origin. As more scholars began to study the mummies, concluding that they were something other than Chinese—and thus undermining Chinese political claims to Xinjiang as part of China—the government placed restrictions on foreign access. Mair also conjectures that the Great Wall as a defensive structure has been overemphasized by the Chinese historically, that trade with neighbors to the north may have been more important than defense, that the fact that early Chinese culture took root in the north may have been related to such contacts, and that the idea behind early Chinese writing may also have been developed through contacts with already literate cultures in the Near East.

Of course, accidental finds like the Xinjiang mummies—ironically they were discovered as a result of Beijing's efforts to develop the far west and make it more indelibly Chinese—need to be handled with extreme care by modern scholars. As Hessler observes, “the formal history [of the Tarim Basin] is thin and scattered; the past seems as empty as the landscape. All you need is a spark—some amazing artifact—and then the human imagination begins to fill all that space.” By the time the Chinese got around to restricting access to the mummies, it was too late for them to control the mummies' meaning. “Less research only meant more imagination. Nowadays, thousands of mummy theories serve thousands of agendas” [*OB*, pp. 328–29].

Hessler's cautionary thoughts—he would have made a fine historian—can be extended to cover many of the archaeological finds that have been a by-product of the rapid changes that have taken place in China, especially over the past several decades. Many artifacts, although not perishable, will not be found because, in the China that is under construction, particular decisions are made concerning what homes to demolish, where a highway is to be built, what is to be erected in place of what used to exist in a given location. Other forms of evidence about the past, including items that may be of towering significance, will never be unearthed because they were constructed of perishable material and no longer exist in China's vast underground museum. Contingency is vitally important. If the Chinese had invented paper two thousand years earlier than they did and the Shang had used it—instead of bones—for divination purposes, we would know far less about the early origins of Chinese characters than we do, and *Oracle Bones*, if it had been written at all, would have had to be titled differently.

At first glance, *Oracle Bones* seems to be two different books, one dealing with ancient China and focusing on the origins of Chinese writing, the other illuminating the vast changes—and the remarkable pace of change—that characterize the lives of Chinese today. The near past—it is symbolized in the book by the Ming-era courtyard home in Beijing belonging to a retired English teacher, Zhao Jingxin (Old Mr. Zhao)—is demolished to make room for some new development. But when construction workers accidentally unearth an ancient site, archaeological specialists are called in and, working “like salvage crews,” do their utmost to preserve the ancient past. Both processes—the destruction of the near past and the preservation of the remote past—are by-products of China’s relentless effort to make itself over into a modern society. This interplay between destruction, construction, and preservation relates to China’s physical landscape, past and present. But there is a parallel set of themes in *Oracle Bones* that addresses the changes that have taken place in the lives of the Chinese as people.

There are two major divides in regard to people in the book. One is the generational one between young and old: on one hand those Chinese, born in the late 1970s, who in the early years of the twenty-first century became directly involved in building the new China, and on the other the generation of their parents and grandparents, who experienced the trauma, suffering, and craziness of the Maoist era. The second divide is a social one. Most of the young people Hessler focuses on are former students of his who, after graduation from Fuling, migrated elsewhere to work either as teachers or in factories, often in such coastal economic hot spots as Shenzhen (in Guangdong) or Wenzhou (in Zhejiang). The older Chinese Hessler pays special attention to are for the most part highly educated individuals, often Western-influenced, who suffered greatly under Mao and by the early years of the new century have, whether dead or still living, become quiet emblems of a China that no longer exists except in the minds of a rapidly shrinking sector of the population.

One of Hessler’s favorite students at Fuling was a young woman who had named herself Emily after Emily Brontë. Once, when he asked the students in his class to transcribe a recent conversation, Emily recalled the day when her older sister made the most important decision of her life: “I’ve decided to go to Shenzhen,” her sister told her. After the sister had been in Shenzhen five months, Emily wondered if she still remembered that conversation and if she was “still full of energy” [*OB*, pp. 77–78]. Emily herself left home immediately after graduation, traveling south with her boyfriend in search of work. After spending a few months in Kunming, where she could find nothing better than a low-paying secretarial position, they parted company, the boyfriend heading for Shanghai, she joining her sister in Shenzhen. Her first job in the Overnight City (so called because it had grown so fast) was with a Taiwanese trading company whose boss was impressed by her English. The company dealt mainly in the area of fashion, costume and shell jewelry. Emily kept in close touch with Hessler, writing letters and sometimes phoning him at night. She confided in him, and he offered his advice freely when she faced problems with men or at work. In one phone conversation, Emily told Hessler that her sister had found a job with “a lonely hearts hotline, talking on the telephone with people who felt lost in Shenzhen.” Everyone in Shenzhen, it seemed, had troubles, and Emily’s sister got plenty of calls. When Hessler asked Emily why so many people in Shenzhen were unhappy, she replied: “There are many troubles about

affections. . . . Some people say there is no real love in Shenzhen. People are too busy with earning money to exist.”

The Shenzhen area was divided into two worlds, which were described by residents as *guannei* and *guanwai*, “within the gates” and “beyond the gates.” There was a fence dividing the two. Emily’s job was in a satellite town beyond the gates, where land was cheaper and law enforcement relatively lax. Most of the satellite towns, Hessler reports, were “squalid and unplanned. In this sprawl of cheaply constructed factories and worker dormitories, wages were lower. The typical workweek was six days instead of five. Labor accidents and factory fires were more frequent than they were in Shenzhen proper” [OB, pp. 79–87].

The fence that had been erected in Shenzhen served as a physical and political boundary, but it also constituted a cultural divide, and, according to Hessler, “frames of reference changed dramatically once you crossed the barrier.” On his visits to the city, he tried to spend time on both sides of the divide. The patron saint of the blue-collar part of Shenzhen, where Emily lived and worked, was a woman named Hu Xiaomei, whose phone-in radio show, “At Night You’re Not Lonely,” was the most popular radio program in Shenzhen. On a visit to the city, Hessler made a date to interview Hu Xiaomei. They had dinner together and, as so often happens in his writing, her personal story got piggybacked onto Emily’s.

If Hu Xiaomei was the quintessential blue-collar heroine, the best-known personality in the white-collar section of the city, the area within the gates, was a novelist named Miao Yong. Hessler made it a point to get to know Miao Yong also. She had grown up in Gansu Province, the daughter of two doctors from the east coast who had been sent to Gansu in the 1960s as part of a political campaign to develop the western part of the country. Miao Yong’s first novel, *You Can’t Control My Life*, became a best seller. After it sold seventy thousand copies, it was banned by the government because of its racy contents. This of course only heightened interest in the book, which continued to sell well in pirated versions. Miao Yong told Hessler that materialism was the key to the novel. “Everything,” she said, “has to do with money; it’s the first thing for everybody.” Neither Emily nor Hu Xiaomei liked the novel, Emily because the heroine had no heart and cared only about money and sex, Hu Xiaomei because the book was immoral. Miao Yong was equally dismissive of Hu Xiaomei, whose radio program, in her view, “was of interest only to poorly educated women who lived in factory dorms” [OB, pp. 159–61].

Much has been written in recent years about the phenomenon of migrant workers in today’s China. What is special about Hessler’s approach to the topic is that he is personally involved with the people he writes about, which gives him an inside track into their lives and experiences. It also does not hurt that he is less than a decade older than many of his subjects, virtually a member of the same generation. Another advantage he has is that, as an outsider himself in China, it is relatively easy for him to understand and identify with the adjustment problems his former students experience as migrants to parts of China where the food is different, the dialect spoken is often barely intelligible, and they often feel like strangers in their own country. Like China in general, a new city such as Shenzhen is complicated, much too complicated to be summed up in a sentence or two. Hessler is at his best in his penetration and illumination of this complexity.

Although Shenzhen was a particular place with its particular characteristics, some of these characteristics were more widely spread across China. Many other parts of the

country were also undergoing change “overnight.” Young people, in particular, were driving this process, and as so often happens in situations of rapid change, where competition—in China’s case for jobs, visas, examination success (for both schools and students), and market share (for just about everything)—was intense, the temptation to cut corners, to behave in illegal or extralegal ways, to use money to buy whatever one wanted or needed, was rampant. In these circumstances, it was not unusual for the boundary between the authentic and the counterfeit, between telling the truth and lying, to be honored in the breach. Cheating and dishonesty became part of the culture. It is not, of course, that such behavior had not existed in China in centuries past or that it is unknown in other societies around the world, but the sense one gets from Hessler, as well as from many other observers of the contemporary Chinese scene, is that in recent years it has been greatly facilitated, if not encouraged, by an authoritarian political system that is itself corrupt at all levels and treats the rule of money more seriously than the rule of law.

Hessler illustrates the problem with a number of his experiences in Beijing. The Qianmen subway stop in the capital was famous for its dealers in phony receipts, which were used by corrupt cadres visiting from the interior to pad their expense reports. The market at Yuting Qiao “was devoted entirely to unofficial electronics—used goods, display models, test units, smuggled sets, factory leaks, fakes. . . . Every product came with a tale that was intended to soothe suspicions: a narrative warranty.” One morning, when wandering through the market, Hessler talked to a man who trafficked in Taiwanese-made Panasonic stereos; the price was cheap, the man explained, “because he saved on duties—his friend worked customs down in Xiamen” [*OB*, p. 103].

Emily told Hessler that many of the employees in her factory used fake identity cards, and in front of a Shenzhen Wal-Mart the author himself encountered vendors selling “bogus bachelor’s degrees for less than a hundred dollars” [*OB*, p. 164]. But the most elaborate instance of truth fabrication Hessler describes was related to his Uighur friend Polat’s preparations for going to America. For the princely sum of \$8,800, a “visa consultant” manufactured a new identity for Polat, including an advanced degree from a Chinese university, ownership of a large trading company, a bank statement showing the equivalent of nearly \$300,000 in his account, and a new Chinese residence card attesting to the existence of four children. “With so many kids to take care of, and so much money in the bank, Polat could be expected to return to China after a trip abroad. There was no reason for anybody in the U.S. embassy to suspect him.” When Polat explained his plan, Hessler writes, “he emphasized that, technically, the documentation was not fake. The papers themselves were completely authentic; it was simply the information conveyed within the documents that was false. Polat’s new life was as real as paper could get” [*OB*, p. 132].

Like Emily, Willy (short for William Jefferson) Foster, another of Hessler’s former students, encountered a world in which money ruled. Willy and his girlfriend Nancy (named for Nancy Drew), after graduating from Fuling, went to Yueqing, a city in Zhejiang under the administration of Wenzhou, where they taught English at a private school. The competition among schools at exam time was fierce, and every year teachers and administrators cultivated relationships with powerful individuals who were in a position to leak information about the exams. One official in the Wenzhou city education bureau was notorious for giving subtle hints concerning the contents of the exams. So

schools all over the area invited him to give lectures to their instructors. He accepted only those invitations that made it worth his while. Every June, at exam time, an exasperated Willy wrote to Hessler: “The same thing happened again in Yueqing. Many other schools got the info about the high school entrance examinations. Our school got a little second-hand or maybe third-hand info. So we are doomed to failure. Again the fucking guy from the education [sic] administration let out the secret of examination in English.” Hessler tells us that although Willy was bothered by the cheating, he did not know how to handle the situation. “That was part of the migrant’s new environment: when you left home, the basic rules of morality changed” [OB, pp. 211–13].

The rules of morality also changed during the Mao era, and the sufferings of an older generation of educated Chinese who were unwilling or unable to adapt were often unspeakable. The person in *Oracle Bones* who most clearly represents this generation’s experience is a man named Chen Mengjia. Chen haunts Hessler and, although not first introduced until halfway through the book, is plainly linked, directly and indirectly, to the book’s title. Even before his actions invited trouble, Chen Mengjia’s family background and early life experiences made him a sitting duck for it when it came. Born in Nanjing in 1911, the son of a schoolteacher and a Presbyterian minister, Chen wrote romantic poetry in his youth. Although abandoning Christianity early on, “he sensed a mysticism about the distant past which he described as an almost religious feeling” [OB, p. 244]. Soon he became interested in ancient Chinese writing, drifted away from poetry, and by his early thirties at Yenching University spent much of his time studying the inscriptions on oracle bones and ancient bronzes. Chen’s wife, Lucy Chao (Zhao), was the daughter of one of modern China’s foremost Protestant theologians, T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen). A student of English and American literature, she published the first Chinese translation of *The Waste Land* at age twenty-five and taught at Yenching University until 1937, when she was forced to flee because of the Japanese invasion. She and Chen married at this point and spent most of the war in Kunming. In 1944 the two were granted a joint humanities fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation to do research in the United States. During their stay in America, while Lucy studied literature at the University of Chicago, Mengjia scoured the country for ancient Chinese bronzes in the hands of museums and private collectors and in 1947 completed a book containing photographs and descriptions of 850 of them.

A few years after Chen’s return to China, the Korean War broke out and China and the United States found themselves at war. While waiting for the political climate to improve before doing something about his bronze manuscript, which had been entrusted to Langdon Warner at Harvard, Chen busied himself deciphering oracle bone inscriptions and in 1956 published *Yinxu buci zongshu* (A comprehensive survey of the divination inscriptions from the Wastes of Yin). In the 1950s, a campaign was started under Mao’s aegis to reform the Chinese writing system. Chen felt traditional Chinese writing should be retained and during the Hundred Flowers period went public with his criticisms of the idea. When the Hundred Flowers movement was eclipsed by the anti-Rightist campaign, he was branded a Rightist, after which he was sent to Henan to be reformed through manual labor. Not long after the launching of the Cultural Revolution, Chen Mengjia committed suicide. “He was a proud man,” Lucy’s brother told Hessler, “and he couldn’t bear the insult” [OB, pp. 228–29].

Hessler first learned about the story of Chen Mengjia on a visit to the Shang archaeological site in Anyang (apparently in 2000). While interviewing the supervising archaeologist in the library of the Anyang Archaeological Work Station, he noticed a book lying on a table with the title *Mei diguozhuyi jielie de woguo Yin Zhou tongqi tulu* (An illustrated record of our country's Shang and Zhou bronzes looted by American imperialists). Although the author was not listed, Hessler was told that it was compiled by an oracle bone scholar named Chen Mengjia. It was edited by the Chinese Institute of Archaeology and published in 1962. Although Chen's notes had served as the basis for the book and everyone knew he had been the real compiler, he could not be named because Rightists were not allowed to publish.

After the publication of *River Town* in January 2001, Hessler received from a Chinese-born American citizen, Wu Ningkun, a transcript of a review Wu had done for the Voice of America. Wu attached a note to the review briefly describing his own history and noting that he had spent time in the 1940s studying American literature at the University of Chicago. Hessler wrote him asking whether he had known Chen Mengjia during his time in Chicago. Wu replied that he had indeed known Chen, that in fact it was Chen's wife who helped persuade him to return to China after 1949. Wu suggested that Hessler read the memoir he wrote about the hardships he and his family experienced after returning to China, and when Hessler read it he realized that Chen's wife Lucy was the sister of Zhao Jingxin, whose courtyard home had been bulldozed by the state.⁵

Periodically, in the remainder of *Oracle Bones*, Hessler engages in his own archaeological spade work, stubbornly digging away at what happened to Chen Mengjia (focusing in particular on the circumstances surrounding his death) and, in the process, unearthing the disturbing experiences during the Mao years of a number of individuals who were either related to Chen or figured prominently in his travails. Hessler's instrument of choice in his work as excavator of the near past is the probing, in-depth interview. One example is the conversation he has with Chen Mengjia's younger brother Chen Mengxiong, an eighty-five-year-old retired hydrogeologist living in Beijing. Mengxiong takes him back to August 1966, right around the time the Red Guards began their campaign against old things. Mengjia had just made the first of his attempts at suicide and had been taken to the hospital. The next day, when Mengxiong heard the news, he went to his brother's home and found it already occupied by Red Guards. He was captured and, along with Lucy, forced to sit down while Red Guards first shaved off half their hair (the infamous Yin-Yang haircut) and then started beating them with leather belts, first with the leather part and then, in his case but not Lucy's, with the buckle. He began to bleed profusely and was allowed to go to the local clinic to get bandaged after promising to come right back. When he got to the clinic, he phoned his work unit and they sent people over to explain to the Red Guards that he was a good person, after which they let him go. Mengjia was still hospitalized at the time but killed himself around a week later. There was no funeral.

⁵Wu's fine memoir, with contributions by his wife, was titled *A Single Tear: A Family's Persecution, Love, and Endurance in Communist China* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993).

Chen Mengxiong had his own political difficulties in the early 1970s in connection with hydrogeological recommendations he made relating to the Gezhouba dam site of the Three Gorges Dam project. But there was no campaign against him. Too much else was going on at the time and the project was abandoned on orders from Zhou Enlai in 1973, not to be resumed until after the start of the Deng era. Mengxiong's troubles in relation to his wife, a physics teacher, were far more serious. She had become so frightened at the time of the anti-Rightist campaign that she became mentally ill and was hospitalized for a year. Not long after Chen Mengjia's death, she was transferred to a new work unit and was asked to make copies of revolutionary songs. She wrote the words "Ten thousand years to Chairman Mao, ten thousand years, ten thousand years!" over and over. But at one point she wrote the character *wu* (meaning "nothing, nil") for *wan* (ten thousand), causing what she wrote to say "No years to Chairman Mao." She was promptly taken into custody and was held for five years in Hebei Province, part of the time in a pigsty. When finally allowed to return home, in the early 1970s, her health steadily deteriorated and in her final years she was in a vegetative state. She died in 1982.

Hessler takes note of the irony that while the simplified characters for *wu* and *wan* were similar in appearance, the traditional forms of the two characters were not at all alike. He leaves it to the reader to connect the dots: if Chen Mengjia had had his way in regard to the traditional way of writing Chinese, the inadvertent error made by his sister-in-law would never have been made and her life might have taken a very different turn.

The interview concludes with the words of Chen Mengxiong, in which the old man draws attention to the terrible waste of the Mao years and the almost total erasure of connecting ties between the generations of the Mao and post-Mao periods: "That was an awful time," he says. "Many people died. There were so many famous scholars and artists who were lost. Nowadays, the young people in China don't know anything about Mengjia. They don't know his poems or his scholarship. It's been almost forty years since he died" [*OB*, pp. 434–36].

Another interview conducted by Hessler, very different from the one just recounted but no less revealing about the moral climate of the Mao years, is with Li Xueqin, who as a young archaeologist and former student of Chen Mengjia's published a review criticizing Chen in 1957, not long after Chen had been named a Rightist. Li is brilliant and prolific, and Hessler is told that "he has the rare ability to do excellent research while also deftly satisfying the Communist Party." Before interviewing Li, Hessler discusses it with a friend who works for Xinhua. The friend tells Hessler that Li, now seventy, is at the pinnacle of his career. "When he looks at that review, I doubt that he thinks, 'I shouldn't have attacked my teacher in this way.' Instead, he probably thinks, 'Look how much I understood when I was so young.'" Chinese scholars were like that, he continues, "many of them did things that they shouldn't have done. I've heard that after Chen Mengjia killed himself, scholars went through his office, reading his notes, and some of them later published his ideas as their own. There are many scholars who did things like that in the past, but they won't admit it. The Chinese don't like to examine themselves in this way. It's rare for them to admit that they were wrong."

Hessler's reporter friend suggests the existence of yet another form of corruption that was pervasive in turn-of-the-century China. In the event, the interview with Li Xueqin, which takes place in Li's office at Tsinghua University, turns out to be very

different from what Hessler was led to expect. They talk initially about the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project, which had begun in 1995 and was now directed by Li. After a half hour or so, Hessler changes the subject. He takes the critical review from his bag and places it on the table between them. Initially, Li has no visible reaction. Hessler points to Chen Mengjia's name, which appears in the title, and tells Li that he is interested in this oracle bone scholar. He asks Li whether he was Chen's student. Li says that he was not exactly a formal student of Chen's, but beginning in his late teens he had become fascinated by the puzzles presented by the oracle bones and wanted to figure them out. He had some success and eventually was brought to the attention of Chen and others, and they asked him to work on the oracle bones at the Institute of Archaeology. So he was essentially a research assistant to Chen Mengjia. Li says that at the time that Chen killed himself, he was working at another institute and did not hear about it until months later. "When I found out, I was very upset. He was a great scholar. And after the Cultural Revolution was finished, we took good care of his things, his notes and books."

Li's story finished, Hessler opens the review. In the center of the last page, the personal attacks on Chen Mengjia stand out in ugly phrases. Li says this is something they should not talk about: "Chen Mengjia was a great man, and I'd rather not discuss these things." Hessler tells him that he is just trying to figure out what happened. "Everybody tells me that it's the way things were at that time. As a foreigner, it's hard for me to understand this kind of thing, so I wanted to ask you about it." Li now realizes why the interview is taking place. But, Hessler observes, "the emotions that I expected to see—annoyance, defensiveness, even anger—haven't materialized. If anything, the man just looks tired, the bags sagging heavy beneath his eyes." Li tells Hessler that what happened is not only difficult for foreigners to understand, it is difficult for young Chinese as well. "At that time, there was a kind of pressure on us to write this sort of thing. The Institute of Archaeology asked me to write it. I was very young and I couldn't refuse. You'll notice that I avoided saying anything political. I never used the word 'Rightist,' or any of those terms. And I put all of that criticism into a single paragraph, at the end." After the essay appeared, Li rarely saw Chen Mengjia. But when they did meet, he did not feel at ease talking to him. "I just couldn't hold a conversation, because my heart felt bad. I always regretted that article. . . . It's hard to understand, apart from the fact that it was a horrible period," Li continues. "By the time the Cultural Revolution happened, if people criticized you, then you truly believed that you were wrong. I was also criticized at that time, and I believed the things that people said. Everybody was like that. . . . There were so many enemies—everybody was an enemy, it seemed" [*OB*, pp. 386–92].

After leaving Li's office, Hessler wandered around the Tsinghua campus. Near Li's office was an old tablet dedicated to the memory of another oracle bone scholar who had taken his own life, the ultraroyalist Wang Guowei. The inscription on it was dated 1929, two years after Wang drowned himself out of despair on hearing that the advance of the National Revolutionary Army had placed Chiang Kai-shek's forces in a position to threaten North China. One of Wang's friends wrote a memorial essay, stating: "Whenever a culture is in decline, anyone who has received benefits from this culture will necessarily suffer. The more a person embodies this culture, the deeper will be his suffering" [*OB*, p. 392]. Wang himself left a brief testament addressed to one of his sons, which said: "Now at the age of 50, all I owe to myself is death. Having

passed through so many political upheavals, as a matter of principle I see no reason why I should be humiliated once again.”⁶

On his way to Tsinghua, Hessler had told himself “that it was necessary to take the professor by surprise, because otherwise this detail of the past might disappear. But it would have felt better if the man had become defensive or angry; it was much worse to see the regret. The author of that criticism had been twenty-four years old” [*OB*, p. 392]. In the moral environment of the Mao years, the sense of humiliation, above all for those Chinese who identified most deeply with their culture, was pervasive and victimizers suffered along with their victims. “The historical events” of the period, Hessler writes toward the end of *Oracle Bones*, “were unimaginable, as if they had come from another world,” and “instead of trying to decide who was in the wrong, it was far more important to understand how the political campaigns had damaged lives and friendships and families” [*OB*, pp. 455–56].

On the last page of the book, Hessler translates three lines from Lucy Chao’s Chinese rendering of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (published in 1991) back into English:

I, the singer of painful and joyous songs, the uniter
of this life and the next,
Receiving all silent signs, using them all,
but then leaping across them at full speed,
Sing of the past.

He then invokes once again the words of David Keightley: “Those are the notes. We have to provide the music ourselves” [*OB*, p. 458].

This is the key, if you will, to the unorthodox structuring of *Oracle Bones*. The book is broken up into regular numbered chapters, but interspersed among the chapters are lettered “artifacts,” sometimes just a few pages in length, often much longer. The material on oracle bones, archaeology, ancient Chinese history, Chinese language, and Chen Mengjia is found in the artifact portions, and the rest is in the chapters. Artifacts are generally thought of as an important part of the data from which archaeologists form their interpretations of the distant past: the “silent signs,” the “notes.” In *Oracle Bones* the artifact sections supply the silent signs and notes for the picture of Chen Mengjia and his concerns that Hessler seeks to understand and elucidate. The search for the meaning of the real oracle bones in the remote past thus forms a parallel to the author’s search for the meaning of historical events in the near past in which Chen was embroiled.

The third book of Hessler’s China trilogy, *Country Driving*, is about the present and the future, not about the past at all. It is divided into three parts—the wall, the village, and the factory—and in each part the accent is on the dramatic changes China is undergoing in the early twenty-first century. One of the biggest of these changes is driving. Many years ago, John Fairbank cautioned that, given the size of its population, if China ever fell in love with the automobile it would be a calamity. That calamity, according to Hessler, is now happening and it is likely to get worse. Most drivers today are young, and their lack of experience on the road has resulted in some pretty awful

⁶“Biography of Wang Kuo-wei (Wang Guowei),” in *Dictionary of Republican China*, ed. Howard L. Boorman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 3:390.

driving. But getting a license, even if you do not have a car, is *de rigueur* for young Chinese, who think it looks good on their résumés.

Hessler does not own a car, so he uses a rental on his automotive excursions. His mode of travel affords him opportunities no ordinary tourist staying in big city hotels every night would be likely to have. On the first of the trips described in the book, in which he travels west, tracking pieces of the Great Wall as he proceeds, he sleeps out most nights in a tent. Since there is very little public transportation in northernmost China, the roads are filled with hitchhikers. Hessler often picks them up, which brings him into contact with ordinary Chinese of all sorts. One night, on another trip, this one in Shandong Province, he spent the night at a truck stop where, in conversation with the truckers, he got a ground-level picture of the role these people played in the burgeoning Chinese economy. One truck had just dropped off computerized mah-jongg sets and picked up elementary school textbooks; another had carried leather loafers one way and recycled plastic the other. Apart from police fines, theft was the truckers' biggest concern.

On his Great Wall route, Hessler notes how few young people are left in the villages; they have all gone to the cities to work. At one point, he picks up an old man and his pretty granddaughter. The granddaughter has just visited her parents in a small village. "All the young people leave our village," she said. "Nobody stays there anymore. I'm not planning to go back." Hessler notes that often, when he stopped in a village, he saw "only the very old, the disabled, and the very young, because migrants left their children behind to be raised by grandparents. . . . For many of the northern villages this might be the last generation where a significant number of children were still growing up in the countryside" [CD, pp. 89–91]. Hessler reaches Dunhuang but keeps going, as he has no interest in stopping at famous tourist sites. On reaching Qinghai in the Tibetan Plateau, he returns to Beijing on a newly built superhighway.

The second excursion dealt with in *Country Driving* focuses on the small village of Sancha (Three Forks), two hours north of Beijing by car and located within spitting distance of the Great Wall. Hessler and a friend rented a getaway house in the village in 2001, which he intends to use as a retreat where he can write. The village is very poor. Fewer than 150 people live in it. No one owns a car. Nobody has a cell phone. The local school was shuttered in the early 1990s for lack of students. There are no restaurants or shops, "not a single place where a person could spend money" [CD, p. 129].

The rental of the house Hessler and his friend occupy, mainly on weekends, is handled by a local man named Wei Ziqi, the most literate person in Sancha. Wei lives with his wife and five-year-old son, Wei Jia. He also supports a younger brother who is deaf and dumb and is universally known in the village as the Idiot (*shazi*). When he is in Sancha, Hessler spends a good deal of time with the Wei family. He often takes his evening meal with them and eventually becomes pals with Wei Jia, sometimes on his way to Sancha on Friday afternoons picking him up at school—the boy boards during the week as the school is 20 miles from home—and taking him annually to Beijing for a few days of fun. At one point, when Wei Jia is of kindergarten age, he comes down with a blood ailment of some sort. Hessler drives the family first to a hospital in Huairou, a city halfway between Sancha and Beijing, and then after finding out that the ailment is serious, to the Children's Hospital in Beijing. There follows a frenzy of trips back and forth between Sancha and the capital, worried e-mails from Hessler to

doctor friends in the States, and phone calls in search of the best hospital in Beijing. A spot is arranged for the boy in the children's ward of the Peking University Health Center Number Three, which is supposed to have good blood specialists. But after almost a week in the hospital, Wei Jia is still running a fever and his platelet count has fallen to a dangerously low level. Hessler's American doctor friends say that the boy should be given a blood transfusion, and soon thereafter the Chinese doctors concur in this recommendation. After determining that the blood supply at the hospital has an unblemished safety record, Hessler goes to the payment division and pays for the blood, and the transfusion takes place. Wei Jia's fever breaks, and within two days his platelet count returns to normal. The worst has passed [*CD*, pp. 156–77].

Hessler's unusual involvement in the Wei family crisis reflects the same qualities of sensitivity and caring that he also showed at various points in the two earlier books. His capacity to form bonds across both cultural and class boundaries, and to relate to the lives of the people he has befriended, gives him a rare human perspective on the vast changes China is undergoing. These changes are manifest even in a poor, remote village like Sancha. Once a place that people wanted to leave, by 2002 the traffic was beginning to go in reverse. A major cause was the paving of the village's only road: "The new road allowed new cars to bring new people to Sancha, and they brought new money that could be used for construction. New sounds, too—all year the village rang with the pounding of hammers and the hum of drills and saws" [*CD*, p. 206].

Aside from embarking on a road-building campaign in rural areas like Sancha, in 2003–04 the government also, in response to the car boom in Beijing and the promise of expanded tourism, decreed that all settlements must decorate their roads with crenelated structures mimicking the Great Wall. The road-building and other projects created jobs for Sancha residents and put money in their pockets, and as city folks began to drive to the countryside for recreation, Wei Ziqi and his wife started serving "authentic peasant food" to visitors from the city, an operation that they later expanded into a real restaurant and guesthouse. Of course, the claim of traditional rural fare was subject to a certain amount of entrepreneurial fudging. Elm-bark noodles turned out to be not nearly as tasty as rainbow trout, originally from Swiss stock, which trucks had begun to carry live into the hills for delivery to small operators like Wei Ziqi. Wei built his own holding pool, cement-lined and fed with spring water. For the equivalent of around four dollars he grilled the fish for customers, while his wife prepared other tasty dishes on a large wok. In 2003, Hessler reports, Wei and his wife earned 50 percent more from their farming and business than the year before, and in 2004 their income became the highest in Sancha.

Wei's business interests led him eventually to join the Party. In 2005, when funds became available for the support of rural businesses catering to the new motorized tourism, he applied for and received a cash grant to remodel his kitchen—a perk of Party membership and a symbol of his enhanced status in the village. As the Wei family became more affluent, its members became physically less healthy. When cable television came to Sancha, Wei Jia spent most of his weekends and vacation time watching cartoons, began consuming a lot of junk food, and soon became overweight and flabby. His mother, suffering from the same problem, tried to lose pounds by taking medicine, but she put them on again as fast as she took them off. Wei Ziqi, the only member of the family who did not gain excessive weight, smoked incessantly and

drank too much; both of these activities were reflections of his growing political importance in Sancha.

Progress was a double-edged sword for Sancha. It not only had health consequences, it also resulted in an unfamiliar buildup of trash. When Hessler first began spending time in Sancha in 2001, there was not much waste, almost everything was reused, and people seldom ate packaged food. By 2006 the county government, responding to the growing rubbish problem, instituted regular garbage truck collection. Sancha was discovering that not all change was good.

Progress also could generate tensions in human relationships. How Chinese responded to rapid change was something that worried Hessler a lot. He was not opposed to progress and understood people's eagerness to escape poverty. But there were costs, the greatest in his view being of an emotional sort. He saw this clearly in Wei Ziqi's wife, Cao Chunmei, who felt isolated and insecure as a result of the changes that were beginning to affect Sancha in the 1990s. Along with many other Sancha residents, she found a calming structure in the Falun Gong movement, which became enormously popular at the time in the economically troubled countryside of northern China. Wei Ziqi also joined the faithful. "It was good for our health," Cao told Hessler years later. "Wei Ziqi didn't drink or smoke in those days, because Falun Gong says you shouldn't do that. And he wasn't so angry then. It seemed that people in the village were happy; we all spent time together in the mornings." After the banning of Falun Gong in 1999, Cao took refuge in Buddhism. Hessler's diagnosis of the problem: "Many people were searching; they longed for some kind of religious or philosophical truth, and they wanted a meaningful connection with others. They had trouble applying past experiences to current challenges. Parents and children occupied different worlds, and marriages were complicated. . . . It was all but impossible for people to keep their bearings in a country that changed so fast" [*CD*, pp. 202, 263–64].

How old one was when the economy began to grow at breakneck speed had a bearing on how one responded—as did the part of China in which one happened to be living. This becomes clear in the final part of *Country Driving*, where Hessler's focus shifts to the explosion of light industry in Lishui, a city in southern Zhejiang, 75 miles northwest of Wenzhou. In his first long driving trip, Hessler had followed artifacts of the past, portions of the Great Wall that passed through dying Chinese villages. In Sancha he had found a meaningful personal connection with the countryside of the present, as it responded to rapid change. But in Zhejiang his attention was drawn mainly to the future. "In southern China," he observed, "nothing changes the landscape faster than a new expressway: farmland disappears, and factories sprout up, and entrepreneurs and migrants pour into town." Hessler wanted to catch this process of change just as it was taking off, to find out what life was like for pioneering factory owners and workers [*CD*, p. 283].

The expressway that connected Wenzhou with Lishui was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2005. It followed more or less the old Highway 330, which had originally been completed in 1934 and finally paved in the late 1970s. Hessler figured that the new road would have the same effect on the countryside it passed through as Highway 330 had earlier. In the early Reform period, people in areas close to Wenzhou, who traditionally raised rice and fish, left their agricultural lives behind and started producing just about everything else imaginable, adding luster to southern Zhejiang's reputation as the home of "prototypical peasant-entrepreneurs" [*CD*, p. 291]. One village, Xiaxie,

now specialized in the manufacture of playground equipment, another town made one billion decks of playing cards annually (half of China's domestic market), and still another one-fourth of the world's plastic drinking straws. The town of Qiaotou had 380 factories that made 70 percent of the buttons for clothes made in China and had come to be known as Button City. As Hessler drove through, he saw that many of the button dealers were women with small children, who sat on the cement floor. When the children cried someone would toss them a handful of buttons to play with. He wondered "how much of Button City was being processed by tiny intestines on a daily basis," and it occurred to him that, "with a little organization, these kids could be shipped out to Xiaxie every morning to play on the jungle gyms. But there was no overlap between the towns, and moving from one to the other, at least in the economic sense, was almost as absolute as crossing an international border" [CD, pp. 283–85].

The "Wenzhou model" of rural development, which was praised by the central government, "couldn't have been simpler: low investment, low-quality products, low profit margins." And, Hessler adds, "low education, too—even today, after two decades of a booming economy, nearly 80 percent of all Wenzhou entrepreneurs have fewer than nine years of formal schooling." But for some mystifying reason, the model worked: although relatively poor in the 1970s, by the early years of the new century Zhejiang had "the highest per capita urban and rural incomes" of any province in China [CD, p. 291].

After scouting the terrain, Hessler decided to follow the evolution of a factory in Lishui, where the creation of a new development zone was in progress. When he returned to the city in early 2006, the factory had been largely built and the bosses were testing the machinery. The factory would make two things: a tiny ring and a thin band of steel covered with plastic at both ends and shaped like a U. Although baffled at first concerning the function of these items, which he had earlier been told would be "clothing accessories," after an unobtrusive gesture by one of the factory's bosses, Hessler realized that the bands, when placed open side up, were support structures for brassieres. The boss told him they came in all different sizes: "Some are small and some are big. Some are *really* big." The really big ones, he said, were for Russians. The tiny ring turned out to be another component of brassieres, called a bra ring [CD, pp. 295–96]. This was specialization with a vengeance.

In his account of the various phases of the operation, Hessler is at his most anthropological. Nothing is described *generally*; everything is broken down into its most minute parts, giving the reader a nuts-and-bolts sense of how things really worked. Take the making of bra rings: "To a consumer a bra ring seems simple to the point of invisibility. It consists of thin steel coated with nylon, and it weighs only half a gram; the average bra contains four such rings. They connect to nylon straps, and hardly any woman in America or Europe gives the objects a second thought. But in fact the rings are the most technically complicated component of the garment. In order to coat a steel ring evenly with high-gloss nylon, a manufacturer must have an assembly line with three distinct stages, each of which heats the ring to over five hundred degrees Celsius. All of it must be computer-controlled: the temperature, the oscillating mechanism of the powder mixer, the speed of each conveyor belt" [CD, pp. 297–98]. The new bra ring machine's first trial run was a complete flop, and the technician whom the Lishui bosses had poached

from a competing bra ring factory had to spend two weeks taking the whole thing apart and replacing parts before he got it to work properly.

The factory was now ready to go, and a few days after firecrackers were set off in front of the building to announce its opening, a “workers wanted” sign was posted next to the factory entrance. Thirty female workers and fifteen male workers were needed. Qualifications: (1) ages eighteen to thirty-five, middle-school education; (2) good health, good quality; (3) attentive to hygiene, willing to endure hardship and really work. The bosses strongly preferred young, inexperienced girls from the countryside: “I like it if she enjoys being with her family,” one of them said, “or caring for her mother, or something like that.” Simple people, who are not too highly educated, have average looks, play by the rules, and are not lazy. As he had observed in regard to Chinese driving cars, Hessler made the point that managers had not been doing what they did for very long. A decade earlier, “most Chinese employment was government-assigned, and in those days it was rare for a Chinese person to embark on an independent job search.” Since that time people had learned quickly, but the routine was still new, and factory managers did not have the time or the polish to behave like people in an American human resources department: “There are no euphemisms, no indirections; nobody talks about ‘becoming part of the team’ or ‘opportunities for growth’ or a desire for ‘highly motivated, creative individuals.’ People say exactly what they think, and they make brutally sharp evaluations; they feel free to act on any whim or prejudice” [CD, pp. 314–19].

The pace of change in Lishui astounded Hessler. Every time he returned to the area, it looked different. In traditional Chinese rice farming, when the available land was too hilly farmers resorted to terracing. In China’s burgeoning industrial age, if a hill happened to be in the way, taking up valuable space that factories could be erected on, people did what the Foolish Old Man did in the ancient story. They moved the hill. In Lishui there was just such a hill, located not far from the bra ring factory. When Hessler had first gone to Lishui, he visited the hill and was told by a foreman that they had already been working at the site for more than a year and in that time had removed 1.2 million cubic meters of dirt and stone. Of course, now, after breaking up the hill with charges of dynamite, the dirt and stone were taken away by large trucks, not shovelful by shovelful as in the old fable [CD, pp. 308–11]. The irony, which Hessler appears to have missed, was that the removal of the hill in this instance was part of a massive process of construction that was powered by ordinary Chinese and, in the end, benefited ordinary Chinese. During the Mao years, when the ancient story was on everybody’s lips, the processes unleashed by an overreaching leader were tearing China apart.

In his thick description of the workings of the Lishui bra ring factory, Hessler sometimes tracks the activities of the members of the Tao family, originally from Anhui Province. The youngest daughter of the family, Tao Yufeng, was responsible for making the underwires. It was basically piecework, but eventually she got so good at it that she was able to make eighty cents an hour, nearly double Lishui’s minimum wage. She felt freer not working with a machine: “I can work whenever I want, for as long as I want. . . . I work alone and there’s nobody to bother me.” Yufeng’s sister also worked in the factory. Their parents, who had followed the daughters to Lishui looking for work, ran a small dry goods stand near the factory, and the mother did seamstress

work on the side, mainly altering the uniforms the factory provided female workers, who often felt they were too baggy [CD, pp. 326–29].

Hessler also tells the story of Xiao Long (Little Long), a Miao native in his early twenties, who was the bra ring factory's chemist. He was good-looking, dyed his hair red and wore it past his shoulders, and liked to flirt with the Tao girls and other girls at the factory. Despite his youth, Xiao Long had already worked in other factories, including another bra factory in Guangdong, and tended to see foreign lands, as Hessler put it, "through a tight network of straps and rings." "The Japanese like to have little flowers on their bras," he said. "They like that kind of detail. The Russians don't like that—they don't want flowers and little patterns. They just want bras to be plain and brightly colored. And big!" Xiao Long was well-paid because of his knowledge of chemistry. His goal was to save enough money to return home and start his own business. He also thought a lot about the sort of person he wanted to be and often consulted inspirational books like the Chinese rendering of *The Harvard MBA Comprehensive Volume of How to Conduct Yourself in Society*. "Somebody as young as me needs help," he told Hessler, "and this book can provide it. If I have some kind of problem, I don't have anybody that I can talk to—I'm lonely in that way. But books like this give me ideas about how to handle situations" [CD, pp. 348–55].

In this section on "The Factory," Hessler conveys a vivid sense of millions of people on the make, looking to get the most out of the opportunities that come their way. It is a fast-paced life, mostly dominated by work. But in the spaces not filled by work, other things manage to get squeezed in: mobile entertainment shows for factory workers in the evening, classes that teach everything from literacy to English to machine-tooling, electric wiring, welding—anything that might prove useful. People also learned all kinds of things on the job, and as they accumulated experiential knowledge, their wages often went up, in many instances despite their having had little or no formal education. Most of the Chinese working in places like the Lishui development zone had grown up poor on farms. Thrust into a world where there were few rules, removed from the natural constraints of family and village they had been born into, it was easy for them to cut corners of every kind, to lie about who they were and how old, to make promises they knew would never be kept—nobody cared.

The remarkable thing, which Hessler alludes to at various points in the trilogy, was the frequency with which individual Chinese, despite everything, continued to adhere to the more wholesome values of the past: family feeling, hard work, idealism, the importance of distinguishing between right and wrong. This was true of his students, Emily and Willy. It was true of Cao Chunmei in Sancha. It was true of Tao Yufeng, whose ambition, like Xiao Long's, was to start a company of her own. "If I could, I'd make a lot of money and go home and build a house," she told Hessler. "A real house, two or three stories." She said that her grandparents, who had cared for her during the initial period of the family's migration, when she had been too young to accompany her parents, could live in the house she built. Once, when Hessler asked her what her grandparents were like, she "fell silent and her eyes filled with tears." He did not ask about them anymore [CD, pp. 328–29].

Over the past century and more, many Americans have spent time in China and written popular accounts, fictional as well as nonfictional, about the country and its people. Years ago I taught an introductory course titled “China in Outside Perspective,” in which we read such authors as Pearl Buck, John Hersey, Ida Pruitt, George Kates, and Graham Peck. In other courses, I sometimes assigned works by the likes of Theodore White, Edgar Snow, Jack Belden, and William Hinton—people with a more political focus and often zeroing in on wartime China or China in revolution. These were all good writers and, although varying widely in subject matter and approach, for the most part they were widely read in their time and taught Americans things about China that they had not previously known.

What is different about the contribution of Peter Hessler? For one thing, Hessler, unlike at least some of the others, is not really concerned with what we can do to make China different. “When Americans looked across the Pacific,” he writes at one point, “the critical question wasn’t how they could change China. It was far more important to understand the country and the people who lived there” [*OB*, p. 303]. This does not mean that Hessler applauds all the changes he documents so meticulously in the trilogy. He despises the kinds of changes Mao sought to bring about. Although he sometimes comments on it with sardonic humor, he certainly does not admire the rampant corruption and fraud he finds in post-Mao China. And his impatience is barely concealed when he describes some of the political rituals Chinese are routinely subjected to or the unfairness and bureaucratic inanities they so often have to put up with in their lives. But at no point in the three books does Hessler call attention to China’s dissidents, advocates of human rights and democratic reform, individuals who are expressly committed to changing the system—the sorts of people who regularly capture headlines in the Western press. Some readers might find this a problem. I did not. In my view, Hessler is at bottom a humanist, holding to moral values that, explicitly or implicitly, are made clear throughout his writing. Given the subject matter of the trilogy, I did not feel any need for him to articulate his thinking on where China is headed politically, and certainly, in view of his stated approach, the last thing he could be expected to do would be to tell the Chinese how to get there.

The China that most Americans encounter in our everyday lives is the one sometimes referred to as “the workshop of the world,” the China that produces the cornucopia of goods we buy in our stores. This, for us, is the most visible manifestation of the industrial revolution China has been undergoing since the early 1980s. But it tells us nothing of what is going on in the hearts and minds of the Chinese themselves. What Peter Hessler offers in these three immensely enlightening books is a selection of deep forays into the human side of China, what Chinese lives are like and how Chinese of different ages and in different parts of the country have responded to the incredible changes that have taken place over the past thirty years.

Among the many strengths of Hessler’s work, apart from his magical skills as a storyteller, the greatest, in my judgment, is his overall approach to China and to his role as an explainer of China to Americans. He observes, he describes, he explains, but, although occasionally dismayed at the behavior of individual Chinese, he almost never is judgmental about the Chinese collectively. On the contrary, his basic humanity enables him, consistently, to enter thoughtfully into the feelings and behavior of people who are different in just about every way from himself. Three examples will serve to illustrate the point.

One is Hessler's attitude toward his Fuling students: "It was easy to laugh at their ridiculous names, or smile at their childlike shyness, and it was easy to dismiss them as simple young people from the simplicity of the countryside. But of course nothing was farther from the truth—the Sichuan countryside is not simple, and my students had known things that I had never imagined" [*RT*, p. 22]. A second example is the author's ability to befriend—and in the process enable us to get to know—people who are poor and not well-educated. Hessler not only seeks out the company of such people, he also cares about them, respects them, and, without romanticizing the unwashed, finds much to admire in their homegrown wisdom. And, lastly, there is Hessler's deeply empathic approach to the older, highly educated individuals he tells us about in *Oracle Bones*. These are people who suffered terribly during the Mao years. Each person now responds to his or her experiences differently, but the author says he "never met a survivor whose response seemed foreign" [*OB*, pp. 455–56], and he does not feel it is his place to stand in judgment of how, individually, they have dealt with their pasts. This seems to me like the right note to strike.

I still do not think Hessler's trilogy belongs in the travel section of bookstores. He is a superb travel writer. But his work touches on so much more than travel. Part journalism, part archaeology, part anthropology, perhaps in largest measure the record of a young man's effort to make sense of a world that is nothing like anything he has known before, it is not at all obvious how it should be categorized. And maybe it does not matter, given that the rich array of approaches Hessler musters in his unraveling of the complexities of China has very likely been a major reason his work has found its way not only into course syllabuses but onto the night tables of legions of Americans who have no special knowledge of the country. For people who are curious about what China is like at this moment in time, you really could not ask for a finer introduction.

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