



River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze (P.S.)

By Peter Hessler

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A New York Times Notable Book

Winner of the Kiriyanama Book Prize

In the heart of China's Sichuan province, amid the terraced hills of the Yangtze River valley, lies the remote town of Fuling. Like many other small cities in this ever-evolving country, Fuling is heading down a new path of change and growth, which came into remarkably sharp focus when Peter Hessler arrived as a Peace Corps volunteer, marking the first time in more than half a century that the city had an American resident. Hessler taught English and American literature at the local college, but it was his students who taught him about the complex processes of understanding that take place when one is immersed in a radically different society.

Poignant, thoughtful, funny, and enormously compelling, *River Town* is an unforgettable portrait of a city that is seeking to understand both what it was and what it someday will be.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In 1996, 26-year-old Peter Hessler arrived in Fuling, a town on China's Yangtze River, to begin a two-year Peace Corps stint as a teacher at the local college. Along with fellow teacher Adam Meier, the two are the first foreigners to be in this part of the Sichuan province for 50 years. Expecting a calm couple of years, Hessler at first does not realize the social, cultural, and personal implications of being thrust into a such radically different society. In *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, Hessler tells of his experience with the citizens of Fuling, the political and historical climate, and the feel of the city itself.

"Few passengers disembark at Fuling ... and so Fuling appears like a break in a dream--the quiet river, the cabins full of travelers drifting off to sleep, the lights of the city rising from the blackness of the Yangtze," says Hessler. A poor city by Chinese standards, the students at the college are mainly from small villages and are considered very lucky to be continuing their education. As an English teacher, Hessler is delighted with his students' fresh reactions to classic literature. One student says of Hamlet, "I don't admire him and I dislike him. I think he is too sensitive and conservative and selfish." Hessler marvels,

You couldn't have said something like that at Oxford. 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 ... you had to dismantle it ... not just the play itself but everything that had ever been written about it.

Over the course of two years, Hessler and Meier learn more they ever guessed about the lives, dreams, and expectations of the Fuling people.

Hessler's writing is lovely. His observations are evocative, insightful, and often poignant--and just as often, funny. It's a pleasure to read of his (mis)adventures. Hessler returned to the U.S. with a new perspective on modern China and its people. After reading *River Town*, you'll have one, too. --Dana Van Nest

From Publishers Weekly

In China, the year 1997 was marked by two momentous events: the death of Deng Xiaoping, the country's leader for two decades, and the return of Hong Kong after a century and a half of British rule. A young American who spent two years teaching English literature in a small town on the Yangtze, Hessler observed these events through two sets of eyes: his own and those of his alter ego, Ho Wei. Hessler sees China's politics and ceremony with the detachment of a foreigner, noting how grand political events affect the lives of ordinary people. The passing of Deng, for example, provokes a handful of thoughtful and unexpected essays from Hessler's students. The departure of the British from Hong Kong sparks a conversational "Opium War" between him and his nationalist Chinese tutor. Meanwhile, Ho Wei, as Hessler is known to most of the townspeople, adopts a friendly and unsophisticated persona that allows him to learn the language and culture of his surroundings even as Hessler's Western self remains estranged. The author conceives this memoir of his time in China as the collaborative effort of his double identity. "Ho Wei," he writes, "left his notebooks on the desk of Peter Hessler, who typed everything into his computer. The notebooks were the only thing they truly shared." Yet it's clear that, for Hessler, Ho Wei is more than a literary device: to live in China, he felt compelled to subjugate his real identity to a character role. Hessler has already been assured the approval of a select audience thanks to the New Yorker's recent publication of an excerpt. (Feb.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

This moving, mesmerizing memoir recounts Hessler's two years as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in the city of Fuling, located in the heart of China. Before Hessler's arrival, no one in Fuling had seen a foreigner for 50 years. Hessler was rudely thrust into this forbidden land, completely isolated from the world as we know it. Armed with astute powers of observation, acute sensitivity to cultural differences, and a good command of Chinese, he explores the culture, politics, traditions, and ideas of a people completely unknown and mysterious to the Western World. Hessler also watches as the city torn between tradition and the onslaught of modern times reacts to the death of Deng Xiaoping, the return of Hong Kong to the mainland, and the inevitable construction of the Three Gorges Dam on its beloved, and sacred, Yangtze River. This touching memoir of an American dropped into the center of China transcends the boundaries of the travel genre and will appeal to anyone wanting to learn more about the heart and soul of the Chinese people. Highly recommended.

-DMelinda Stivers Leach, *Precision Editorial Svcs., Wondervu, CO*

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