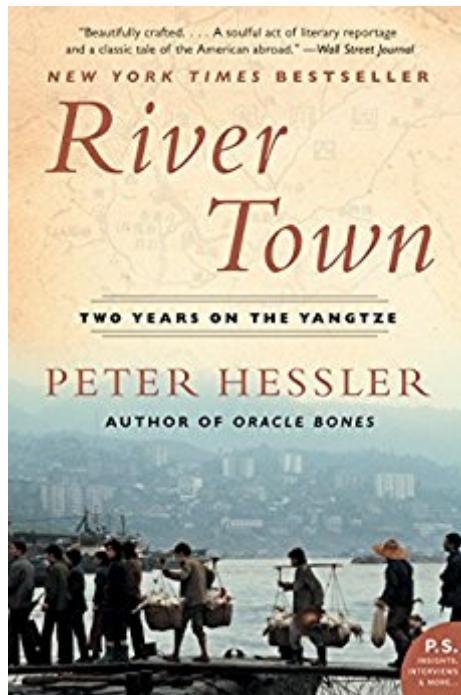




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# River Town: Two Years On The Yangtze (P.S.)



## Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book Winner of the Kiriya 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book covers the author's (Peter Hessler) experiences during the two years he spent as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English & American Literature in Fuling, China (population: about

200,000) from 1996 to 1998. So it's not a book about touring China; it's a book about LIVING in China as a foreigner. The author learned to speak and read Chinese well enough to visit with the town's inhabitants (and some of the people outside of the city as well). The author clearly gained considerable knowledge of the great changes undergone by the Chinese society -- especially since the end of World War II. More importantly, the author's day-to-day contact with Chinese individuals allowed him the chance to gain an insight and understanding of many of the philosophical differences of the Chinese as compared to his own American upbringing. This book is an interesting -- and also intensely personal -- account of living in China. I was sorry to have the book come to its end. 5 stars.

I didn't want this book to end. It was a wonderful trip to a river town in China. Peter Hessler was venturesome and open to learning the culture, language and people in this remote community. It was delightful to read of his new found friends in town and hikes into the hills and encounters with the peasants. His new friends in the community added a rich view into family life and the culture. He spent two years as a teacher and committed fully to making the most of it. And his readers gained a window into this unique experience.

and am fascinated by China. As a sometime teacher of English literature, I knew the basic problems the author faced in the classroom, but could not imagine the difficulty of doing it with Chinese students. Turns out that teaching lit was probably the least difficult thing confronting him: learning the language was more difficult and learning the culture more difficult still. The Chinese are still native lovers of poetry in ways Americans are not, so his students grooved on the stuff in ways a class of us never would. I can only suppose Mr. Hessler is brighter and more dedicated than I am: in his second year in country, he was daily conversing and reading newspapers in Chinese as a result of his private efforts, his regular classes with two tutors, and his daily practice with Old Hundred Names, the people at the bottom of the Chinese socio-economic scale. They were willing--even eager--to talk with the strange-looking foreigner, and they had a great stock of concrete knowledge of the way the country worked. It was from Old Hundred Names that Mr. Hessler got his basic anthropological understanding of the country, from the particular cast of mind shared by Chinese individuals, through the assumptions and taboos all societies possess, to the conditions imposed by Socialism with Chinese Characteristics permeating the society at all levels. I am not yet done with this book; I shall be sorry to finish it.

I heartily recommend all of Peter Hessler's writing about China. His take on life and culture in China is involving and his writing style makes reading a breeze. His interactions with those he writes about are by turn amusing and depressing, sad and inspiring. And of course, there are always the head-scratching "what were they thinking" moments that characterise many westerners experiences in China. Although almost 20 years old, the stories are still fresh and interesting. Chinese culture may have become more materialistic in that time, and large parts of the country resemble a building site, but the people are still governed by family and hopes for their children.

River Town Book Review (05-15-2010) Much like the book China Road by Rob Gifford, another very young man but heavily loaded with Western ideals of personal religious upbringing, Peter Hessler of River Town is also strongly soaked in his Western cultural upbringing but he is not so close-minded and biased without ever questioning on his own earlier perception in view of his new encounter in China. Gifford had gone to China as a college lower division (sophomore) student attracted to China by writings from Pearl Bucks except Gifford could not be a missionary. Peter Hessler came to China as a college teacher under the Peace Corp volunteer program and engaged in teaching, not preaching. But most importantly he was open-minded enough to see, though very slowly, how the Chinese people, particularly, his students and his fellow teachers view their country. It is worth noting that the strongest gift Hessler possessed while in China was his ability to observe critically not only what he sees in China but the contrasting Western views also critically as well. He noted how his students conducting themselves in class, often very self conscious but he grabs the opportunity to introduce Western perception on various cultural ideas to his students. His students, most of them, are from rural peasant background, a background none of his American readers can truly appreciate. They are poor, POOR, and going to a teacher college is almost heaven sent opportunity not to be wasted. Some of his students came to realize Hessler's style approach to his teaching and the relation with his students' informal and sincere' is a great way to build relationship with their future students. The two fellow teachers at the college to teach Hessler Chinese are two very contrasting characters in their personality as well as temperament and they both became good friends at the end but not without a very difficult struggle between Hessler and the woman teacher, with surname Liao, who is a very strong minded person with her opinion and also deep conviction with what she believes. But after long, in fact, very long last both Hessler and Liao came to recognize the strong points of each other and becoming good friends. Readers may feel frustrated with Liao because of her rigidity yet a great movie buff of Charlie Chaplin satire movie of Adolph Hitler, The Great Dictator, but the ending relationship would undoubtedly ring a cheerful

sounding bell in the mind of the readers. And this little dialogue between these two was one of the bridges connected them. There was a Catholic Father in his 80s and the readers certainly will adore this old priest particularly in the current world wide scandals of Catholic priest behaviors one would wonder why such kind of conduct is so prevalent in Western culture. Hessler is a frequent jogger and hiker in the country side that brings him in contact with rural peasants and their families. Such encounters brings wonderful visits between him and the common peasants who often invited him to their house for tea or even meal and that is a common tradition Chinese do with people they like and rarely be discouraged by the humbleness of their homes. Another daily routine of Hessler is his meals at the very inexpensive restaurants or roadside stand eating places from someone who brought simple, but tasty, food to sell on the sidewalks. But there were two ugly incidents Hessler had to confront, one was a woman who might be a part time prostitute, and the other was a small mid-aged shoe shine fellow, and these were the two incidents Hessler did not settle with kind words. While reading the incident between him and shoe shine small mid-aged man, I wrote my marginal comments in the book that Hessler was one who had gone to study at Princeton University and then two more years at Oxford, but could not take a more thoughtful gentlemanly approach toward this little fellow who clearly resented this wai guo ren (foreigner) privileges. Throughout the book Hessler introduced Chinese expressions or words and one particular expression is bu dui (wrong, incorrect) often used by his Chinese teacher Liao when Hessler made a mistakes or said things she did not agree. But I would suggest to him, and other writers of this kind of writing, to introduce certain good and helpful expressions to Western readers. It is proper and respectful to address a college teacher as Professor Smith but it is not very respectful at all to address a teacher as Teacher Liao, in America or in China. The correct and respectful way in Chinese language is Liao Laoshi (Lǎo shī - 老师 "Old Master, Honorable Teacher"). If insisted, a translation such as Master Teacher Liao. The word or character Lao (lǎo - 老 "old") should NOT be literally translated as old in American-English when used as part of a respectful title, because the word old, in American-English contains much negative, weak, bad and undesirable quality implications while the opposite is true in Chinese language; it means experience, wisdom, knowledge and maturity through life-long years. In fact, this writer of this review would be happy to testify that in his retirement years he has had much more opportunities to reflect and think as deeply as he knows how and study as widely as he is able to on various subjects he could not have done when a younger person, say at age of 50 or even 65! However, one universal aspect of not being readily to consider innovative new ideas is quite often brushed aside in many folks in more

advanced age, perhaps, undesirable characteristics of aging.(Footnote: I have read Hessler's second book Oracle Bones, so the 5-Star rating is saved for that book!)

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