

Uighur minority, a people who were “often middlemen,” serving as intermediaries between the Mongols and other Asian powers, shifting their religion when it seemed pragmatic to do so, even changing their alphabet from runic to Arabic script. While the title of the first chapter obviously points to Polat, who worked as a “middleman for deals between foreign traders and Chinese wholesalers,” the opening scene where Hessler is caught up in the middle of the Nanjing demonstration shows how the author himself is also a “middleman,” an outsider. This is a position shared by several of the authors (and their protagonists) whom Hessler has named as favorite writers: Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway.

In later chapters, Polat illegally immigrates to the U.S. and legally obtains asylum, taking up residence in the multicultural margins of Washington, D.C. As Hessler visits him there, the book widens its scope to offer a perspective of lives on the margins of global powers: life for Polat in D.C. is easily as difficult and dangerous as it was for him in Beijing. As Hessler observes America through the eyes of this Uighur outsider, Polat, he discovers that his own perspective has changed. When he first came to China, he noticed mainly how different it was from the U.S. But after living there for years that included the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, he was now noticing more similarities than differences: “The language had new phrases: the war on terror, the Axis of Evil, code orange, the Patriot Act. I boarded the plane in the Motherland and disembarked in the Homeland. I had always thought it was a bad sign for nations to use words like that, and living in China had convinced me that it was unhealthy when people became

obsessed with days on which terrible things had occurred.”

The most elusive and possibly the most central character is Chen Mengjia, an oracle bone scholar who killed himself during the Cultural Revolution, nearly thirty years before Hessler first set foot in China. This intriguing narrative thread turns up from the mention of this scholar in interviews with an archeologist, and in discussions with scholars and finally with close friends, relatives, and professional rivals. Chen’s ill-fated opposition to Mao Zedong’s plans to replace Chinese characters with an alphabet leads to a long section on the origins and nature of the Chinese writing and interviews with experts such as John DeFrancis.

The story of Chen Mengjia, the man who devoted most of his life to decoding and cataloguing the oracle bones, is a tale that Hessler must excavate and decode, and it reaches from the Shang Dynasty ruins, through Cultural Revolution betrayals, to present day enigmas. Like the rest of stories that comprise the book, the narratives on Hessler himself, his former students, Polat, and others, this search to discover what happened to Chen Mengjia weaves in and out of the fabric of the book, and this one offers the pull of a mystery.

Oracle Bones is not a memoir or a travel book, nor is it an academic study, nor is it really conventional journalism—though it has elements of all of these forms. Hessler tells us that he is not cut out to be a journalist, since he loathes talking on the telephone and distrusts the authoritative sound of third-person reportage. He believes that most newspaper stories and even longer features cannot deliver a meaningful picture of what China is and is

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becoming through the kinds of pieces that most journalists file—they may give true information, but generally they lack context, resonance, and a sense of the people and places. His own method for uncovering the real news involves going there alone; living among the people; taking long unplanned trips; observing closely; learning the language; and talking to all kinds of people, forming and maintaining personal relationships over an extended period of time. He is an informal anthropologist, a “participant observer.” Or, to follow the metaphor he plants in the title, he is an archeologist, and he works with a Luoyang spade—a tool developed by grave robbers and thieves, but adopted by archeologists to discover and map artifacts or even whole cities that are invisible on the surface. The spade has a long, tubular blade mounted on a pole, and when pounded into the earth and then turned about, it brings up a core for the archeologist to interpret: “The dirt plugs reflect the meaning of what lies below; they are like words that can be recognized at a glance.”

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**Invitation to International Conference on Religion and Culture
Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand
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Participants are invited to submit papers for presentation at the conference on a variety of topics related to the relationship between religion and culture in various religious and cultural settings. Papers may focus on a topic or theme from a particular religious tradition, or they may be comparative.

The paper should be 15-25 pages, double spaced, and in a legible font like Times New Roman or Courier in size 12. The deadline for submission of abstracts is February 1, 2007 and the full paper by March 15, 2007.

For further information, please contact Payap University’s Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture at isrc@csloxinfo.com, or check ISRC’s website at <http://isrc.payap.ac.th/>.