

Book Review

Peter Hessler's *Oracle Bones*

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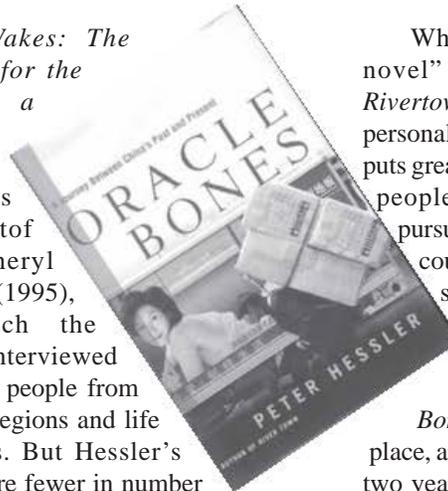
Peter Hessler's *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present* (Harper-Collins, 2006) is a more ambitious book than his first, *Rivertown: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001). It offers a wider-ranging, more deeply-informed and substantial account of China, which should land it on more Asian studies reading lists than the first; but by the same token, its appeal to readers in general may be somewhat less.

Rivertown captured readers with its account of the author's initiation to China in Fuling, a small industrial city where Hessler was posted in the Peace Corps as a teacher of English at the local teachers college from 1996-98. That book proved popular partly because it unfolded as the story of a young man's encounter with an alien place, struggling with the challenges of a demanding job, and overcoming obstacles as he develops a more complex identity and deeper understanding of his students, the city, and China itself. *Rivertown's* clear narrative arc and understated richness in his evocation of people, places, and events made it inviting to all sorts of readers.

I made *Rivertown* required reading for study abroad courses in China aimed at Luther College students from any discipline during January 2003 and 2006, and many other teachers have used it in similar fashion. The book has, along with other Hessler articles on China, found its way onto academic reading lists and into courses on contemporary Chinese history, political science, intercultural communication, and of course, writing classes (including "The Literature of Place and Travel" at Hessler's alma mater, Princeton).

Hessler says that his goal in *Oracle Bones* was "to follow certain individuals across this period [1999-2004], recording how their lives were shaped by a changing world." In some ways the book recalls

China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn (1995), for which the authors interviewed dozens of people from different regions and life situations. But Hessler's subjects are fewer in number and he treats them with more complexity. Moreover, his relationship with many of the people he treats is often intimate and protracted. Three of the main characters are his former students. Readers of *Rivertown* can enjoy their "further adventures" as young citizens from the interior making their way in the rising China, a tale that links up with his first book. There is much more historical material here than in *Rivertown*, and more lore on many subjects—excavations of Shang sites, the history of the Uighurs and the Chinese writing system, the Falun Gong, the Olympic Games, the



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architecture of Beijing, the rise of Shenzhen, the Chinese film business, the lives of expatriates in the United States. There is a bibliography and an index that will be especially helpful to those who use the book in teaching.

While the feel of an "education novel" or autobiography animated *Rivertown*, in *Oracle Bones*, Hessler's personal narrative is less pervasive, as he puts greater emphasis on the stories of the people he meets and the topics he pursues. The structure in the first book could not be repeated in the second, since the protagonist is older, already has a decent knowledge of Chinese, and in fact has already finished a book. *Oracle Bones* is not rooted primarily in one place, and its time span covers more than two years. The structure of both works, however, alternates between shorter "set pieces," written in the third person, and longer first-person narrative sections. *Oracle Bones* opens with "Artifact A: The Underground City," a third-person account of the archeological exploration of a Shang Dynasty site in Henan—where most of the oracle bones have been found. This is followed by a longer chapter titled "The Middleman," a first-person narrative in which the recently arrived writer suddenly finds himself in the middle of an anti-American demonstration, with himself cast as the handiest embodiment of the nation that, unbeknownst to him, had bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 7 May 1999. The alternating pattern continues, with thirteen short "artifacts" distributed amongst twenty-four longer, first-person narrative chapters.

The first major character is called Polat, a resourceful Uighur who had to give up life as a teacher in Xinjiang after being imprisoned in the eighties for protesting Chinese rule. He appears in the first chapter, and Hessler meets him during a public confrontation following the embassy bombing incident. Polat defied the Han Chinese at the restaurant where this discussion unfolded, pointing out that "If the Americans were trying to kill Chinese, you'd be dead right now." Polat's story brings with it a brief history of the

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

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.”

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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