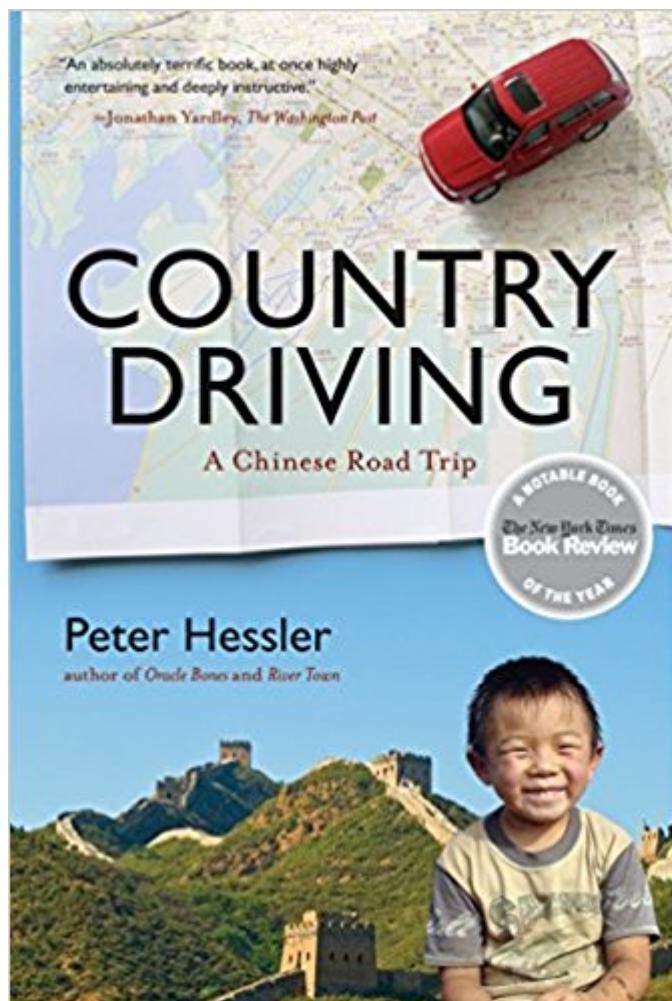


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Country Driving: A Chinese Road Trip



Synopsis

One of The Economist's Best Books of the YearFrom the bestselling author of *Oracle Bones* and *River Town* comes the final book in his award-winning trilogy on the human side of the economic revolution in China. Peter Hessler, whom the Wall Street Journal calls "one of the Western world's most thoughtful writers on modern China," deftly illuminates the vast, shifting landscape of a traditionally rural nation that, having once built walls against foreigners, is now building roads and factory towns that look to the outside world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, February 2010: There is, as everyone knows, no place in the world changing as fast, and at such scale, as China. Accounts of the upheaval can be breathless and even alarming, but Peter Hessler is the calmest and most companionable of correspondents. In his reporting for the *New Yorker* and in his books *River Town*, *Oracle Bones*, and now the superb *Country Driving*, he's observed the past 15 years of change with the patience and perspective--and necessary good humor--of an outsider who expects to be there for a while. In *Country Driving*, Hessler takes to the roads, as so many Chinese are doing now for the first time, driving on dirt tracks to the desert edges of the ancient empire and on brand-new highways to the mushrooming factory towns of the globalized boom. He's modest but intrepid--having taken to heart the national philosophy that it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission--and an utterly enjoyable guide, with a humane and empathetic eye for the ambitions, the failures, and the comedy of a country in which everybody, it seems, is on the move, and no one is quite sure of the rules. --Tom Nissley

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Starred Review. In his latest feat of penetrating social reportage, New Yorker writer Hessler (Oracle Bones) again proves himself America's keenest observer of the New China. Hessler investigates the country's lurch into modernity through three engrossing narratives. In an epic road trip following the Great Wall across northern China, he surveys dilapidated frontier outposts from the imperial past while barely surviving the advent of the nation's uniquely terrifying car culture. He probes the transformation of village life through the saga of a family of peasants trying to remake themselves as middle-class entrepreneurs. Finally, he explores China's frantic industrialization, embodied by the managers and workers at a fly-by-night bra-parts factory in a Special Economic Zone. Hessler has a sharp eye for contradictions, from the absurdities of Chinese drivers' education coursesâ "low-speed obstacle courses are mandatory, while seat belts and turn signals are deemed optionalâ "to the leveling of an entire mountain to make way for the Renli Environmental Protection Company. Better yet, he has a knack for finding the human-scale stories that make China's vast upheavals both comprehensible and moving. The result is a fascinating portrait of a society tearing off into the future with only the sketchiest of maps. (Feb.) Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If you wish to have an informative and thoughtful view of rural China during the years when the country was just emerging from wide spread conflict and poverty, you should enjoy this book. Mr. Hessler's narrative provides clear and insightful pictures of rural places and people. The pace of narrative is somewhat leisurely but very enjoyable. Perhaps my brief visit to some of the same settings during that time period helped me enjoy this well written book.

Peter Hessler's Country Driving was an assigned reading for my Chinese Civilization class, as part of our final section about Chinese modernization. I have been lucky enough to have this professor before, and she has always been great at assigning readings that are genuinely interesting as well as educational and relevant. She has previously assigned both "The China Fantasy" by James Mann and John Pomfret's "Chinese Lessons", both excellent reads. This book is a work of autobiographical non-fiction recounting Hessler's time in China. I want to start where my first impressions began, with the cover. Normally I don't tend to care much about covers of books, but this one struck me negatively at first. Something about it seemed unnecessarily artsy and

pretentious. However the cover is actually an image from Hessler's travels in China, and that policeman statue is actually one of many that the Chinese government used to place along the nation's new highways, because they did not yet have the infrastructure to effectively police the new expanses of road. So the cover went from seeming pretentious to being pretty hilarious rather quickly. Anyway, the book is divided up into three sections titled "The Wall," "The Village," and "The Factory." Each is about a different period of Hessler's travelings around China, and explore different parts of how the Chinese people are reacting to the new economic paradigm in the country. "The Wall" is basically just about a road trip Hessler went on, traveling Westward from Beijing following the fragments of the Great Wall toward the Tibetan Plateau. The best part of this section to me was the historical information. Between notable encounters on the road Hessler explores the history of the Great Wall (a misnomer, as the wall is actually more like many fragments of defensive infrastructure than one long wall). It was also great for de-sensationalizing the Great Wall. To the locals it is just part of the scenery, and historically it was pretty common to simply steal bricks and materials from the nearby wall in order to complete local construction projects. Traditionally the Chinese did not even refer to it as the Great Wall (or any one word at all, in fact), but the Western notion caught on and actually transmitted backward into the Chinese lexicon as 长城 (Chángchéng) literally "Long Wall." "The Village" was my favorite section. Hessler and a friend of his rented a home in the rural town called Sancha, and got to experience first hand how the changing economy affect rural Chinese life. The growth of enterprise, specifically tourism, molded the village's economics and environment. He also got to be a part of the local village politics with the Communist Party and saw the subtle power struggle that went on beneath the surface of village life. The bond he formed with the Wei family and his personal experiences with them made for a great read, and a pretty emotional experience. "The Factory" was probably my least favorite section, but also arguably the most important in the larger scheme of things. This chapter handled the growth of manufacturing in Southern China, and raised such issues as migrant workers, corruption, quality control, and the health concerns of working in Chinese industry. It has a generally darker tone, as there is a lot of financial struggle and stressful business dealings involved, but this seems to be the new reality of Chinese economics. It is important information for East Asian scholars to understand. In way of a summary I will just remark that I plan to read Hessler's other books based on how much I enjoyed this one, which is generally uncommon for me. Highly recommended to interested individuals!

I expected this book to be similar to Rob Gifford's book China Road--an account of a Chinese road trip. This was only partially true. His approach in this book is to look closely at three different areas of China and how the increase in drivers and the mobility that it has afforded has influenced these areas. The book is divided into three distinct, unrelated sections: "The Wall", "The Village", and "The Factory". Each of these sections could be read independently. It is almost like three books or stories in one. In "The Wall" he describes his adventures driving the entire length of the Great Wall, from the ocean in the East to deep into Xinjiang and Qinghai Provinces. This constitutes several individual trips in rented cars. Along the way he visits many small towns along the ancient Great Wall. Like Gifford, Hessler speaks Chinese having been a long-term resident of Beijing as a correspondent for The New Yorker. His ability to speak Chinese allows him to interact on a close personal level with many regular Chinese people who live off the beaten track. Many of the individuals and towns that he describes in this section of the book seem to have been left behind the rapid modernization and development in the more populated areas of China. In fact, in almost every small town he encounters he rarely finds young people. They have all left the small towns to find work in the cities. This work ranges from working in factories to beauty parlors. In these forgotten small towns he only finds the very old and the very young. In the next section of the book, Hessler finds a small village on the Northern outskirts of Beijing and rents a farmers house. He befriends a family in the village and recounts his rather intimate interactions with them over the course of several years. He discusses the development and modernization efforts in this small village (less than 300 individuals) and how that impacts this family and their neighbors. Among other things, he discusses the Chinese education system, the world of small, private businesses in China, the health care system, Chinese tourism, real estate and development, and so on. Through Hessler's eye for detail the reader really gets to know this peasant family, their joys, struggles, and triumphs. The last section describes Hessler's many trips to Zhejiang Province and the factory towns springing up along a new highway. He meets two enterprising men who open a factory that makes the tiny fabric covered metal rings used in brassieres. He describes in detail how these men start and run their business, from building and outfitting the factory to hiring employees. Along the way we meet a migrant family that work in the factory. There are huge numbers of migrant workers in the factory regions of China's East. Hessler helps the reader understand how this huge migration of people is impacting China, on the larger scale as well as at the individual level. I enjoyed this book for the intimate portrayals of individuals living on the edges of society--particularly peasants and migrant workers. It is not easy to have access to these classes of people in China. Undoubtedly, Hessler would never have been able to approach and get close to these people without a sound understanding of Chinese behavioral

culture and good facility with the language. I admire him for being able to do that. I think this book is much stronger than his previous book, *Oracle Bones*. I felt that book wandered and lacked focus. Though interesting in parts, I found it more difficult to follow the multitude of overlapping and sometimes unrelated stories.

As a Chinese American who moved to America at a young age and has not been immersed in Chinese culture for most of his life, the one complaint I had about this book was that it was over too soon. Peter Hessler writes with humor and grace, but most importantly he sincerely tries to portray the characters in his book as people, not stereotypes or caricatures. He mentions many aspects about authoritarian China but doesn't force the point down people's throat. All too often have I read books and articles that portrayed the Chinese people as helpless and oppressed, with little agency of their own. Hessler does describe the constraints the people live in but show them as resourceful and adaptive, people making the best of a bad situation, not brainwashed slaves or democracy loving martyrs. It's refreshing to read about the common people who are often left behind in literature and Hessler is one of the best at letting us curious readers a glimpse into that world.

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