



Other
Rivers

A Chinese
Education

Peter

Hessler

Author of River Town

ALSO BY PETER HESSLER

The Buried

Strange Stones

Country Driving

Oracle Bones

River Town

Other Rivers



A CHINESE
EDUCATION

Peter Hessler

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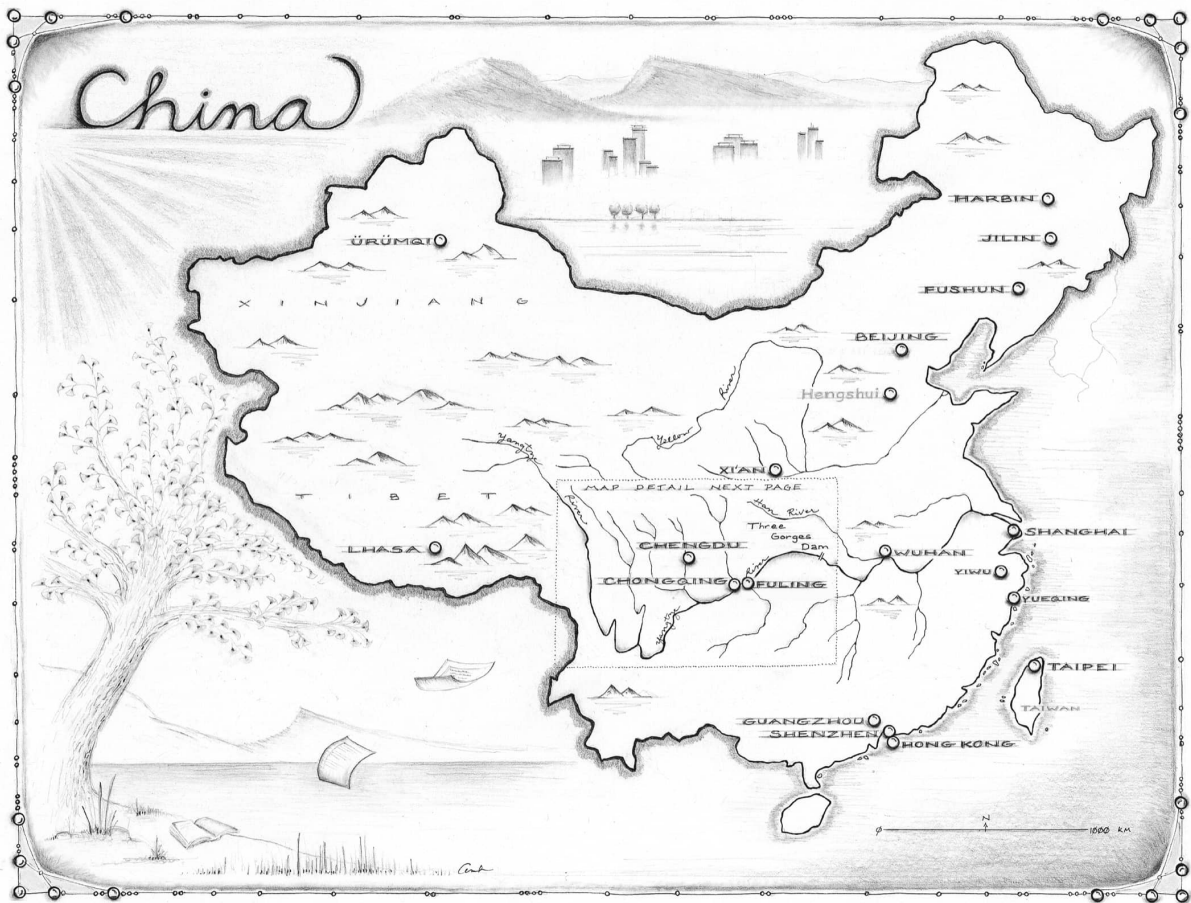
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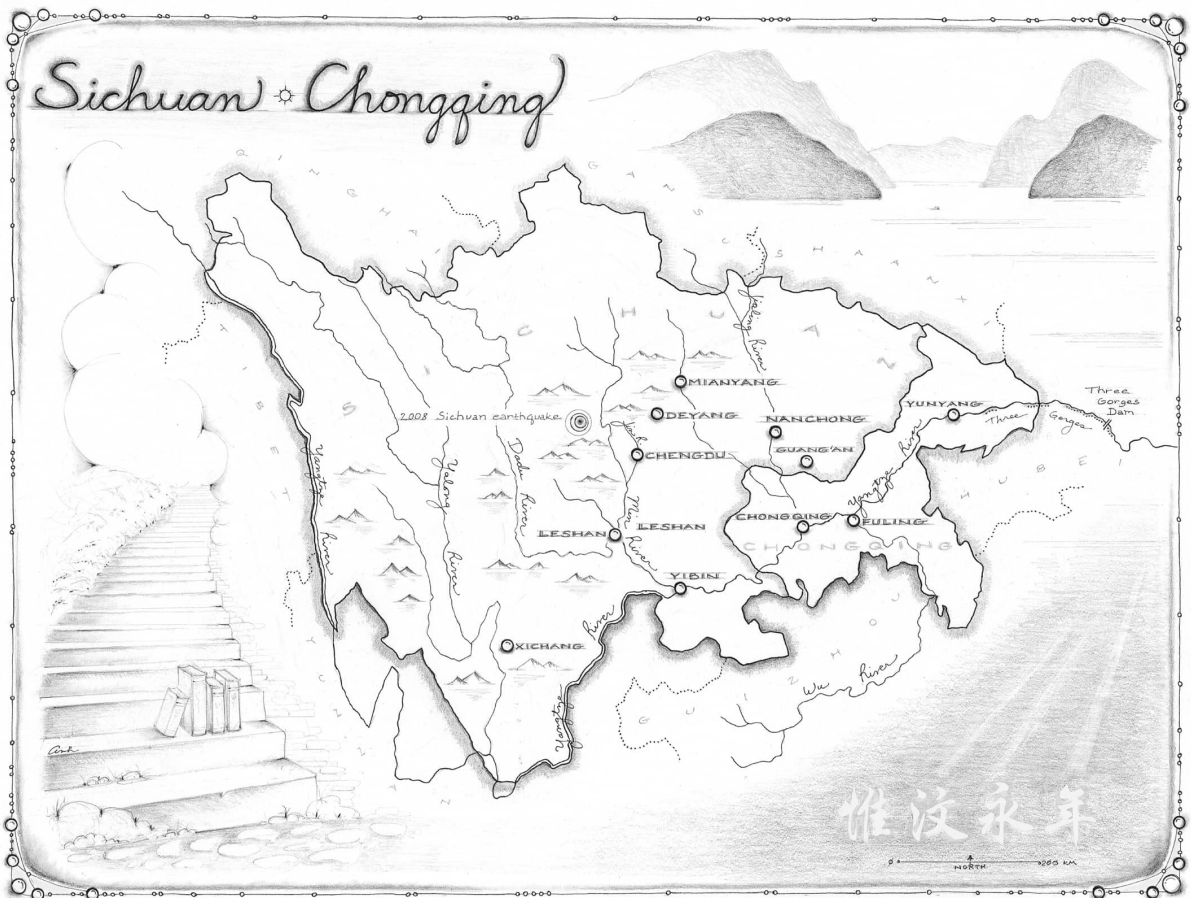
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for Ariel and Natasha

献给采采和柔柔



Sichuan * Chongqing



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Part I





CHAPTER ONE

Rejection

September 2019

THE VERY LAST THING THAT any teacher wants to do—and the very first thing that I did at Sichuan University, even before I set foot on campus—is to inform students that they cannot take a class. Of course, some would say that rejection is a normal experience for young Chinese. From the start of elementary school, through a constant series of examinations, rankings, and cutoffs, children are trained to handle failure and disappointment. At a place like Sichuan University, it's simply a matter of numbers: eighty-one million in the province, sixteen million in the city, seventy thousand at the university. Thirty spots in my classroom. The course title was Introduction to Journalism and Nonfiction, and I had chosen those words because, in addition to being simple and direct, they did not promise too much. Given China's current political climate, I wasn't sure what would be possible in such a class.

Some applicants considered the same issue. During the first semester that I taught, a literature major picked out one of the words in the title—*nonfiction*—and gave an introduction of her own:

In China, you will see a lot of things, but [often] you can't say them. If you post something sensitive on social platforms, it will be deleted.... In many events, Non-Fiction description has disappeared. Although I am a student of literature, I don't know how to express facts in words now.

Two years ago, on November 18th, 2017, a fire broke out in Beijing, killing 19 people. After the fire, the Beijing Municipal Government began a 40-day urban low-end population clean-up operation. At the same time, the “low-end population clean-up” became a forbidden word in China, and all Chinese media were not allowed to report it. I have not written an article related to this event, and it will always exist only in my memory.

As a student of Chinese literature, I have a hard time writing what I want to write because I am afraid what I write will probably be deleted.

Applicants handled this issue in different ways. I requested a writing sample in English, and most students sent papers that they had researched for other courses. Some titles suggested that the topics had been chosen because, by virtue of distance or obscurity, they were unlikely to be controversial: “Neoliberal Institutionalism in the Resolution of Yom Kippur War,” “The Motive of Life Writing for Aboriginal Women Writers in Australia.” Other students took the opposite approach, finding subjects close to home but following the government line; one applicant’s essay was titled “The Necessity of Internet Censorship.” There was also safety in ideology. A student from the College of Literature and Journalism submitted a Marxist interpretation of *Madame Bovary*. (“Capitalism has cleaned up the establishment of the old French society, and to some extent deconstructed various resistances that limit economic and social development.”) Another student abandoned every traditional subject—politics, business, culture, literature—and instead produced, in prose that was vaguely biblical, a five-hundred-word description of a pretty girl he had seen on campus:

She was a garden—her shoots are orchards of pomegranates, henna, saffron, calamus and cinnamon, frankincense and myrrh. She was a fountain in the garden—she was all the streams flowing from Lebanon, limpid and emerald, pacific and shimmering....

My first impressions were literary: I saw the words before I met the students. Their English tended to be slightly formal, but it wasn’t stiff; there

were moments of emotion and exuberance. Sometimes they made a comment that pushed against the establishment. (“I am still under eighteen years old now, living in an ivory tower isolated from the world outside. I’m expecting to change it.”) All of them were undergraduates, and for the most part they had been born around the turn of the millennium. They had been middle school students in 2012, when Xi Jinping had risen to become China’s leader. Since then, Xi had consolidated power to a degree not seen since the days of Mao Zedong, and in 2018, the constitution was changed to abolish term limits. These college students were members of the first generation to come of age in a system in which Xi could be leader for life.

The last time I had arrived in Sichuan as a teacher was in 1996, when Deng Xiaoping was still alive. While reading applications, I imagined how it would feel to return to the classroom, and I copied sentences that caught my eye:

Only when a nation knows its own history and recognizes its own culture can it gain identity.

Just as Sartre said, men are condemned to be free. We are left with too many choices to struggle with, yet little guidance.

Actually, all of us are like screws in a big machine, small but indispensable. Only when everyone works hard will our country have a brighter future.

The range of topics made it virtually impossible to compare applications, but I did my best. I had to limit the enrollment to thirty, which was already too many for an intensive writing course. After selecting the students, I sent a note to everybody else, inviting them to apply again the following semester. But one rejected girl showed up on the first day of class. She sat near the front, which may have been why I didn’t notice; I assumed that anybody trying to sneak in would position herself near the last row. At the end of the

second week, when she sent a long email, I still had no idea who she was or what she looked like.

Dear teacher,

My name is Serena, an English major at Sichuan University, and I am writing in hope of your permission for me to attend, as an auditor, your Wednesday night class.

I failed to be selected. I have been in the class since the first week, and I sensed and figured my presence permissible.

I want to write. As Virginia Woolf thought, only life written is real life. I wish to be a skilled observer to present life or idealized images on paper, like resurrection or “in eternal lines to time thou growest.”...I started to appreciate writers’ diction not as a natural flow of expression but careful strategies and efforts, I began to put myself in the writers’ shoes, and set out to sharpen my ear as a way to hear the sound of writing—consonance or dissonance, jazz, chord, and finally symphony.

Perhaps I am being paranoid and no one will drag me out. If you can’t give me permission, I’ll still come to class in disguise until I am forced to leave.

Happy Mid-autumn Festival!

Thank you for your time.

Yours cordially,

Serena

I composed an email, explaining that I couldn’t accept auditors. But I hesitated before pressing “send.” I read Serena’s note once more, and then I erased my message. I wrote:

The college is concerned about auditing students, because the course needs to focus on those who are enrolled. But I much appreciate your enthusiasm, and I

want to ask if you are willing to take the class as a full student, doing all of the coursework.

I was violating my own rules, but I sent the email anyway. It took her exactly three minutes to respond.

When I told other China specialists that I planned to return to Sichuan as a teacher, and that my wife, Leslie, and I hoped to enroll our daughters in a public school, some people responded: Why would you go back there now? Under Xi Jinping, there had been a steady tightening of the nation's public life, and a number of activists and dissidents had been arrested. In Hong Kong, the Communist Party was reducing the former British colony's already limited political freedoms. On the other side of the country, in the far western region of Xinjiang, the government was carrying out a policy of forced internment camps for more than a million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities. And all of this was happening against the backdrop of the Trump administration's trade war against the People's Republic.

It was different from the last time I had moved to Sichuan. In 1996, I knew virtually nothing about China, and almost all basic terms of my job were decided by somebody else. The Peace Corps sent me and another young volunteer, Adam Meier, to Fuling, a remote city at the juncture of the Yangtze and the Wu Rivers, in a region that would someday be partially flooded by the Three Gorges Dam. At the local teachers college, officials provided us with apartments, and they told us which classes to teach. I had no input on course titles or textbooks. The notion of selecting a class from student applications would have been unthinkable. Every course I taught was mandatory, and usually there were forty or fifty kids packed in the classroom. Most of my students had been born in 1974 or 1975, during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's reign.

In 1996, only one out of every twelve young Chinese was able to enter any kind of tertiary educational institution. Most of my Fuling students had been the first from their extended families to attend college, and in many cases their parents were illiterate. They typically had grown up on farms, which was true for the vast majority of Chinese. In 1974, the year many of my senior students were born, China's population was 83 percent rural. By the mid-1990s, that percentage was falling fast, and my students were part of this change. During the college-enrollment process, the *hukou*, or household registration, of any young Chinese automatically switched from rural to urban. The moment my students entered college, they were transformed, legally speaking, into city people.

But inside the classroom it was obvious that they still had a long way to go. Most students were small, with sun-darkened skin, and they dressed in cheap clothes that they had to wash by hand. I learned to associate certain students with certain outfits, because their wardrobes were so limited. I also learned to recognize a chilblain—during winter, students often had the red-purple sores on their fingers and ears, the result of poor nutrition and cold living conditions. Much of my early information about these young people was physical. In that sense, it was the opposite of what I would later experience at Sichuan University. In Fuling, my students' bodies and faces initially told me more than their words.

It took a long time to draw them out. They tended to be shy, and often they were overwhelmed by the transition to campus life. We were similar in age—at twenty-seven, I was only a few years older than my senior students—but none of them had ever met an American before. They had studied English for seven or more years, although many of them had trouble carrying on a basic conversation, because of lack of contact with native speakers. Their written English was much stronger, and in literature class I assigned Wordsworth poems, Shakespeare plays, stories by Mark Twain. In essays, they described themselves as “peasants,” and they wrote beautifully about their families and their villages:

In China, passing an entrance examination to college isn't easy for the children of peasants.... The day before I came to Fuling, my parents urged me again and again. "Now you are college student," my father said.... "The generation isn't the same with the previous generation, when everyone fished in troubled waters. We have to make a living by our abilities nowadays. The advancement of a country depend on science and technology."

My mother was a peasant, what she cared for wasn't the future of China, just how to support the family. She didn't know politics, either. In her eyes, so long as all of us lived better, she thought the nation was right.... But I see many rotten phenomenons in the society. I find there is a distance between the reality and the ideal, which I can't shorten because I'm too tiny. Perhaps someday I'll grow up.

I felt like we had just gotten to know one another well when my Peace Corps service ended, in the summer of 1998. Before leaving Fuling, I collected the mailing addresses of everybody in my classes, although I doubted that we would be able to stay in touch. Postage to the United States was prohibitively expensive for Chinese in the countryside, and none of the students had cell phones or access to the internet. After graduating, most of them would accept government-assigned positions as teachers in rural middle schools.

Before we parted, students gathered keepsakes: copies of class materials, photographs with me and Adam. They prepared memory books with pictures and farewell messages. During my last week on campus, one boy named Jimmy approached me with a cassette tape and asked if I would make a recording of all the poetry we had studied.

"Especially I want you to read 'The Raven,' and anything by Shakespeare," he said. "This is so I can remember your literature class."

Jimmy had grown up in the Three Gorges, where he would now return. The government had assigned him to a middle school on the banks of a small, fast-flowing tributary of the Yangtze. In the memory book, Jimmy had pasted a photograph of him standing on campus with a serious expression,

dressed in a red Chicago Bulls jersey. The Bulls jersey was one of the outfits I associated with Jimmy. This was the era of Michael Jordan, and a number of boys wore cheap knockoff versions of Bulls paraphernalia. My pre-graduation gift to Jimmy and his classmates had been to change the schedule of their final exam, in June 1998. By pushing the exam back a few hours, I made it possible for all of us to watch live while Jordan hit a jumper with 5.2 seconds left, winning his sixth and last NBA title.

Jimmy had never been a particularly diligent student, but he had some Jordanesque qualities: he was a good athlete, and naturally bright, and things always seemed to go well for him. In the memory book, he wrote a message in neat Chinese calligraphy:

*Keep Climbing All the Way
Farewell, Farewell, Dear Friend*

When Jimmy asked me to record the poetry on the cassette, I was touched, and I promised to do it that evening.

“Also, after you finish the poems,” he said, grinning, “I want you to say all of the bad words you know in English and put them on the tape.”

When I returned to the United States, I often wondered how things would turn out for my students. For months, I received no updates; all I had were the photographs in the memory book and the characters on my address list. I imagined Jimmy in his Bulls jersey, surrounded by the cliffs of the Three Gorges, listening to the poems of Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare punctuated by strings of curse words.



In 1999, I moved to Beijing as a freelance journalist. I no longer taught, but part of my life continued to operate on the Chinese academic schedule. At the beginning of every semester, in September and in February, I sent out a

batch of letters that were hand-addressed to dozens of villages in Sichuan and Chongqing. Now that I was living in China again, it was easy for former students to write back. Their replies arrived in cheap brown paper envelopes postmarked with the names of places I had never heard of: Lanjiang, Yingye, Chayuan. Most students had beautiful handwriting—at the college, they had been forced to spend hours practicing with a traditional Chinese brush. Their graceful script contrasted with the harsh world they described:

The children show no interest in their studies. Poverty, foolishness are involved in the farmers in our hometown which is far from modern society. Several generations live with working by hand and using animals as labour force instead of tractors. The less they know, the poorer they become.

I often tell the students you must study or you won't change your stupidity.... Most of the government cadres are incapable, most of them know little. In your America, that can't be imagined. They only know eating, gambling, drinking, looking for official relations, whoring.

Over time, I was able to stay in touch with more than a hundred former students. Jimmy's brown paper envelopes proved to be among the ones that arrived most regularly at my Beijing office. His postmark read Jiangkou —“mouth of the river” in Chinese. Jiangkou had always been poor and isolated, but soon Jimmy's letters began to describe a life that he had never imagined possible:

In 1999, a charming girl came into my world, who worked in a restaurant then. In my eyes, she was so attractive that I fell in love with her, I promised I would love her forever. On March 15th, 2000, I married her eventually. Before we got married, she started to run a grand restaurant of her own. In my opinion, it is a hard work to do business, but she thinks it is a good job, which can develop her ability. At the beginning, we owed our relatives and friends much money. Now we also run a hotel, which cost us 170,000 yuan. To our joy, both restaurant and hotel are going