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Letters from Sichuan

Peter Hessler

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By Peter Hessler

On May 13th, I filed a web report on the New Yorker’s site, based on what I heard from former students in the early days of the disaster. Since then, I’ve continued to receive notes, and I’ve copied a few below.

When I lived in Sichuan, I was most impressed by the sense of place. The landscape was rugged and beautiful, and the people had a distinct character. They seemed more emotional than in other parts of China; they laughed more freely and their street arguments were more vicious. It wasn’t any surprise that in 1999, after NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the most violent protests occurred in Chengdu. People sometimes blame it on the spicy food, which seems a shallow explanation. I sensed it had something to with the land itself—so many mountains and rivers, so many people.

Emotions have always moved fast in Sichuan, and over the past week they’ve moved even faster.

May 14, 2008:

Mr Hessler, When I am writing the e-mail to you. I am really sad and my heart is still blooding. My school was destroyed, and many of my students were killed in the earthquake. In my hometown, Guangyuan, the earthquake is really bad, I was teaching in class when I heard the terrible sound, all of us ran out of the classroom. Then the school is in trouble. I heard students crying sadly. I saw the teaching building fall down, we had two floors, I was on the ground floor, most of us escaped the building before it fell down. In our school, there are 400 students and so far 27 students died and about 40 were badly wounded, some of them are in Guangyuan, and some of them are in Mianyyang. I am now with my husband in my sister’s home in Neijiang City. I really miss my students at school, I think I will go back tomorrow morning. How I wish I could be with my students, my headmaster told me in my class 6 students died. They are all my favorite students. They died so young and small, around 14 years old. If I can make calls in Guangyuan, I will call Mr Dai and tell him the news, I want him to email you, I have no internet connection in my school area.

I wish that everything will be fine

Yours

Olivia

May 15, 2008:

Pete-

My father called me, he told me that it had been raining the whole day. People in Sichuan’s Bazhong City said that the fowls and the animals are running like mad, people say that there will be aftershocks. So my family are still very terrified. My nephew has stored the computer I sent him and the TV set in the cupboard. My whole family has to sleep in the chicken house which can be used as the shelter because it is low, and even it collapses, it does no great harm, my parents are afraid that the quake is like the one in 1976 in Tangshan.

Take care,

Willy

May 16, 2008:

Thanks for your letter.

This is my experience in the earthquake below. Close to the earthquake.
5.12 noon. Our group leader said: "The ground is shaking, earthquake!" My office is on the first floor. We ran out of the office and shouted to students on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th floor "ran, ran, ran to the playground." In fact, at that moment we should stay under the desk. My student held my clothes and cried "Will it shake again, Mr Yu?" I said "Never. Don’t worry. Just stay in the playground. Don’t move." That moment my thinking was very simple: If the children in our school are OK, my daughter Zoe will be OK. Fortunately, all people around me are OK.

No doubt we are luck enough. Not far away, Qingchuan, a county of Guangyuan, the mountains were down, the river was up, the road was broken. The teaching buildings were down. Many students and teachers were covered under the teaching buildings, It was not hopeful for most of them to be saved.

In Guangyuan downtown 80 or so persons were killed in the earthquake. The first night we slept on the playground, we dared not go back home, some building were down, some building will be down. The whole city were camping. No tents, the second day we slept under the color-strip cloth, which was set for rain.

My cousin’s daughter who is almost 2 years old, was frightened. She cried all night “Dad, let’s go home. Dad, let’s go home.” Du Yiquan, our school’s computer teacher, he took his son Zouzou to the playground, Zouzou did good, he just said softly to his Mum “Mum, My nose is uncomfortable” and repeated the sentence again and again. My daughter Zoe is just 50 days, she didn’t know what happened, slept in my wife’s breast. Many of my colleague said “poor child! How poor the baby is.” My nephew, 7 years old, is studying in our school. I told him “Your house fell down in your hometown.” He didn’t know it means too much, at least no place to live. And he continued to play in the playground happily.

Our school cooked porridge for the victims of the earthquake. I realized if there was not enough food for my wife to eat, my little Zoe would not take the breast. So the second day I sent them back to my wife's Laojia (hometown), where her parents once lived. There the earthquake did not affect the peasants too much. They slept outside at night because of the earthquake and got up early the second morning to harvest their wheat. In hometown I watched TV and knew many people died and tears came to my eyes.

Many volunteers went to the earthquake area. The 4th day after the earthquake, I went back home. I checked my email. When I was writing to you, my Mum in next room shouted to me “it is shaking again.” The chair I sat was shaking and I felt it. But I don’t care. I am accustomed to it.

Today I subscribed, anyway I am still alive and I can write email. I went to school and prepared for beginning class again later.

Thanks again, I will be OK. Zoe will be OK. Everybody will be OK.

Roger.

May 18, 2008:

These days I am really sad for the situation in Sichuan and Chongqing. Tonight’s show really moves me, I am really proud that China is getting stronger and stronger, and I really think Chinese government is so open and tries its best to help the people in the earthquake. I think the people in the disaster areas will get all the problems over. By the way, I am fine, all my students are fine, the earthquake did not affect us so much, but we are still afraid of it, some people say there may be one quake in Chongqing soon.

Jackson

May 19, 2008:
Mr Hessler, these days too many tears ran down from my eyes. These days I have been so proud of being a Chinese, I am proud of the government’s quick actions, and I am proud of the unity in China. Last night I watched the CCTV Charity Show, I was deeply moved, and today China held the national mourning day for the victims. I was touched again. I am sorry for Sichuan People, I know we will have a hard life for a long time, but I am willing to overcome the difficulties with my students. Thanks so much for caring us, we are very fine.

Chuck Du

May 20, 2008:

Hi, Pete. Here the people in Yueqing are having all kinds of activities to send condolence to the death in Sichuan. I am really sad to see the rising death toll and I am really moved by the policy about the National Mourning Days for the victims. And these days I am likely to shed tears for my hometown fellows. Yesterday when it was the time for us to show condolence in silence, I taped the scene on the express way, what I saw made both sad and happy, most of the cars and bus did not stop and they ran very fast as usual, only a few did. But I think all of the cars and buses tooted their horns at least, which is the drivers’ favourite (It is like what you wrote in River Town, maybe several hundred times a minute.) My school had a grand donation rally, and the school raised around 500,000 yuan, it is a big deal as for a school. Many people had their eyes full of tears when the host mentioned the sad stories during the quakes.

And these days, it seems that the aftershocks come one after another. People in Sichuan are still living in terror. All the people fled their home in Nanchong, they either go to the countryside or sleep near the Jialingjiang River. Nanchong has become a ghost city, my mom told me that the gate of my apartment in Nanchong is completely open the whole day, and the security guards have also fled leaving the whole area empty. The tents are sold 500 yuan compared to the price 50 yuan not long ago.

Friends in Nanchong told me yesterday evening the International food chain shop –Macdonald’s in Nanchong was smashed by some young people, some people said some university students were behind the incident. The restaurant was named the TieGongji (iron cock) or miser. It is said that some people are taking actions against the Nokia Agency in Nanchong because it also falls behind others when it comes to the recent donation for the victims in Sichuan.

Willy