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Coming Distractions: Country Driving

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By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

I made my initial foray into China studies in the fall of 2000, when I took a course called "Travelers in History." Beginning with *The Travels* of Marco Polo, we moved forward through the centuries, reading a sampling of China-related travel narratives as well as works by historians looking back at those who had journeyed to and from China (such as *The Question of Hu* by Jonathan Spence and Peter Hopkirk’s *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*). For the “modern” period, we read Paul Theroux’s *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train Through China* (1988). Although I thoroughly enjoyed Theroux’s book, and thought of it often in later years when I embarked on my own Chinese train adventures, if I were designing a book list for “Travelers in History” in the fall 2010 semester, *Riding the Iron Rooster* probably wouldn’t make the cut.

Why? Because in the past decade, there has been something of an explosion in excellent writing by foreigners who have lived and traveled in China — to the extent that an entire semester could now be devoted to discussing only books published in the past ten, or even five, years. In the fall of 2000, the professor teaching “Travelers in History” had just a handful of post-1980 books to consider when he designed the course (Theroux’s *Iron Rooster*, Vikram Seth’s *From Heaven Lake*, and Mark Salzman’s *Iron and Silk* are the three that come to my mind). Today, he could pick from a variety of works that do not fall neatly into a single genre, but which bring together elements of travel writing, personal memoir, and China reportage.

This mini-publishing boom began, as I see it, with Peter Hessler’s *River Town* (2001), and while the publication next week of Hessler’s *Country Driving: A Journey Through China From Farm to Factory* does not (I hope!) mark an end of these cross-genre works, it does conclude a China trilogy penned by Hessler (the second title being 2006’s *Oracle Bones*). Hessler, a *New Yorker* correspondent, as well as an early China Beat contributor (though I should note that I’ve never worked with him — nor any of the other authors I discuss here), has written so prolifically about contemporary China, in fact, that his work has inspired a humorous blog post, “How Peter Hessler Ruined My China Life.” Hessler, however, is one of a number of authors who have recently produced thoughtful and insightful books that offer a taste of the China experience to armchair travelers — and students. With *River Town* and *Country Driving* serving as bookends to the decade, what other titles might I consider for a 2010 iteration of “Travelers in History”?
I would probably give some thought to Rachel DeWoskin’s 2005 memoir, *Foreign Babes in Beijing*, a sharp and funny account of a young American woman’s life in China during the late 1990s. Another option would be *Smoke and Mirrors*, written by Pallavi Aiyar and published in 2008. Aiyar’s perspective as an Indian woman living in China makes her work doubly fascinating, as most of the other books out there are authored by American males, and it’s refreshing to get a different take on China’s recent development.

I might consider assigning a book that focuses on the transformation, both physical and social, of China during the past 15 years. In that case, Hessler’s *River Town* or *Oracle Bones* would both be strong candidates, as would *The Last Days of Old Beijing* (2008) by Michael Meyer. For a more traditional travel narrative along the same theme, I would think about Rob Gifford’s *China Road* (2007), which I’ve written about previously for *China Beat*. These four books are, in some ways, rather similar: all are well-researched and well-written works of narrative non-fiction that look at China’s increasing urbanization and the effects of that process on the lives of people across the country.

I might also give some thought to three books that fall more toward the “journalistic” end of the spectrum than the “memoir/travel narrative” one. The first of those would be James Fallows’s *Postcards From Tomorrow Square* (2009), a collection of his columns about China written for *The Atlantic*. Another likely candidate would be *China Underground* by Zachary Mexico (2009); Leslie T. Chang’s *Factory Girls* (2008) also comes to mind. Fallows, Mexico, and Chang all primarily write about China, not about their experiences in China, so perhaps they wouldn’t fit very well on a “Travelers in History” syllabus, but their books are excellent contributions to the literature on China and shouldn’t be missed.

I have read, enjoyed, and recommended to others each of the books I’ve mentioned above, and any of them would be a fine choice for my imaginary course next fall. But if I were forced to pick one book that would convey to students what it was like to explore China during the first decade of the 21st century, my final selection would be *Country Driving*.

Hessler divides the book into three clearly delineated, yet linked, narratives, each of which deals with the repercussions of China’s new car culture. His story begins with “The Wall,” a travelogue detailing Hessler’s wild road trips along the Great Wall at the beginning of the decade. Part two, “The Village,” is a stirring look at Sancha, the small village outside Beijing where Hessler made his weekend home. The section focuses in particular on a peasant couple, Wei Ziqi and Cao Chunmei, and their young son as all three struggle to deal with the impact that the slow creep of urbanization from Beijing toward Sancha has on their lives. Finally, “The Factory” follows the overnight growth of a bra-parts manufacturer in Zhejiang Province, describing the experiences of both the factory’s owners and its migrant workers, all of whom have been drawn to the region by newly paved roads penetrating what were once endless swaths of farmland (for a taste of part three, check out “China’s Instant Cities,” a piece Hessler wrote for *National Geographic* in 2007).

*Country Driving* is thoroughly researched, and Hessler possesses the admirable ability to explain complex aspects of Chinese history and society in a few well-placed sentences. His observations are sharp and thought-provoking; I found it fascinating to read about the ways in which Sancha’s increasing contact with urban centers, and urbanites, affected Wei Ziqi and Cao Chunmei differently. While much of *Country Driving* will ring true to readers who have spent time in China (and likely encourage them to share their best “I once had this crazy taxi driver . . .” stories), I think the book will prove equally captivating to those who have not yet had a chance to visit the country.

What elevates *Country Driving* above all the other excellent books I’ve mentioned is the quality of Hessler’s writing, which also shines through in this *Why I Write* interview that he conducted recently with *Urbanatomy*. Hessler’s quiet, measured tone throughout the book is occasionally pierced by flashes of dry humor that truly made me laugh out loud (his descriptions of driving schools in China make for some particularly hilarious moments). *Country Driving*, like both *River Town* and *Oracle Bones*, strikes me as a volume in which every word and every phrase has been carefully selected to convey the most vivid picture possible, and the superb craftsmanship of Hessler’s prose impressed me time and time again. For example:
The year that I received my driver’s license, I began searching for a second home in the countryside north of Beijing. Empty houses weren’t hard to find — occasionally I came across whole villages that had been abandoned. They were scattered around the front ranges of the Jundu Mountains, in the shadow of the Great Wall, where the farming had always been tough and the lure of migration was all but irresistible. Sometimes it felt as though people had left in a rush. Millstones lay toppled over; trash was strewn across dirt floors; house frames stood with the numb silence of tombstones. Mud walls had already begun to crumble — these buildings were even more broken-down than the Ming fortifications. Whenever I saw an empty village, I thought: Too late (129).

*Country Driving* is a great book about China, but it’s also, quite simply, a great book — the kind that I love to recommend to others and hope that they enjoy as much as I do. And, in my hypothetical “Travelers in History” course, it would be the book that I’d choose to represent the post-Reform era in China because Hessler so movingly expresses what it feels like to be a traveler in China at a time of constant change. Whether the traveler is Hessler himself, or the millions of Chinese who are on the move today, *Country Driving* beautifully captures the uncertainty and exhilaration of taking to the road in China during the early 21st century.

The Asia Society of New York will be holding a conversation between Peter Hessler and Emily Parker on February 9; more information about the event, as well as an excerpt from *Country Driving*, can be found [here](#). China Beat readers in Southern California can see Peter Hessler in dialogue with UC Irvine historian Ken Pomeranz on Tuesday, February 16 (details [here](#)). Hessler and Leslie T. Chang will be speaking together at the World Affairs Council of Northern California on February 23; see [here](#) for info about the event.

**Tags:** [Country Driving](#), [Peter Hessler](#), [travel books](#)