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'ORACLE BONES,' BY PETER HESSLER

Letters From China

Review by JONATHAN SPENCE

HOW can one catch today's China in words? It is a country in constant motion, defying the laws of economic gravity, reaching out insistently around the world for raw materials to fuel its growth, eating up its land and its past, enticing outsiders to help it achieve new levels of wealth and power, opening up class fissures that were thought to be closed, testing the limits of rapid urban growth while giving its people chances for self-exploration and intellectual transformation they have not known for over half a century.

Fortunately, Peter Hessler has not been dismayed by the challenge. Instead, after teaching English and freelancing as a journalist, he decided to give up the world of deadlines and throw himself into this boisterous hurly-burly of noise and images as the Beijing correspondent for The New Yorker. Serenely confident, he has a marvelous sense of the intonations and gestures that give life to the moment; he knows when to join in the action and when simply to wait for things to happen. Today's China could have been made for him. If you don't believe me, dip into the chapters in "Oracle Bones" called "Starch" and "Wonton Western," which focus on the worlds of industry in Manchuria and film-making on the edge of the Tarim Basin. You will be hooked.

Hessler must have spent a good deal of mental energy developing a structure for his book, determined to strike an aesthetic balance between the personal lives of the individual Chinese whose stories he tells and the physical and historical spaces they inhabit. He achieved this by constructing a narrative scaffolding some readers may initially find distracting. But rest assured: everything soon falls into place.

What you might call the horizontal level is provided by 24 chapters covering Hessler's experiences in China from May 1999 (when the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was bombed by American planes during NATO's intervention in the Balkans) to June 2002 (when Hessler, on a return trip to the United States, visited two elderly Chinese scholars at a retirement home in Reston, Va.). Intersecting these modern chapters are 13 others, the vertical shafts that Hessler calls "Artifacts" since each is related to events deep in China's past — or to those who excavate and study that past.

The "oracle bones" of Hessler's title, found in profusion in and around the ancient city of Anyang, date from the second millennium B.C. and are incised with divination texts written in the first known form of what we now call Chinese. When the diviners applied searing heat to the bones — many were in fact the flat lower carapace of tortoises — the surfaces cracked, yielding patterns that predicted the chance of success for a given enterprise. Though the inscriptions are often brief and fragmentary, they are a source of passionate interest to scholars, both Chinese and Western. They also provide a rich metaphor for the search for meaning in China's past — and for prognostications about its future. In these separate "Archives" chapters, Hessler plays elaborate and intriguing games with the possibilities of the bones: with the scholars who have

excavated and interpreted them and with the Chinese written language as it developed from these beginnings.

Elsewhere, Hessler offers unexpected views of the West. Particularly chilling is a vivid portrait of hostility to the United States, in part due to the Belgrade bombing and the downing of an American spy plane two years later, that spilled out in the days after 9/11, when China was flooded with doctored DVD's of the wrecked twin towers and the damaged Pentagon, interspersed with clips from miscellaneous Hollywood disaster films and vignettes of American leaders uttering random, often unintelligible, pronouncements.

A good part of the modern story line is provided by the coming-of-age of three of Hessler's Chinese students from his language-teaching days in Sichuan Province in the late 1990's (the subject of his first book, "River Town"), conveyed through their letters and their occasional meetings. Written in an English that is idiomatic and frank with just occasional slips of usage or spelling, the students' letters are entrancing and genuinely moving. ("My parents and relatives all wanted to introduce girlfriends to me," one of his former student wrote. "So they introduced one and one, but the one and one passed me and didn't become my wife.") The students provide an absorbing view of the difficulties faced by young Chinese from remote provinces as they try to find decent jobs in the sweatshops and the sleazily managed schools of boom areas like Shenzhen or Wenzhou. Their new world is fiercely competitive: through their eyes, Hessler shows us the difficulties of maintaining honesty in the cutthroat system of present-day China. Their stories also contain intriguing subsidiary characters like the radio-show call-in hostesses, often from rural backgrounds themselves, whose sympathy and common-sense advice play a crucial role in boosting the morale of hundreds of thousands of migrants.

Appearing at intervals in various locales is another figure who also provides narrative continuity: a middle-aged Uighur from Xinjiang Province whom Hessler calls Polat, to prevent him from being identified by the authorities in either China or the United States. Polat and Hessler became friends in the spring of 1999 in a Uighur restaurant in Beijing, after Polat defended Hessler against Chinese diners angered by the Belgrade bombing. The Uighurs, many of whom are Muslim and have distinctly un-Chinese features, have been designated as one of the state's official "minority peoples." Some are also separatists and support the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which the Chinese government eventually persuaded the United States to designate a terrorist organization.

Though Polat does not seem to have had terrorist contacts, he operated a host of illegal commercial activities, including black-market money-changing. He and Hessler, both stuck in grubby and unattractive lodgings, used to meet at a restaurant in the former Russian section of Beijing for beer and dumplings and to talk about the world. Some time later, a Chinese "visa consultant" created a fictitious identity for Polat, which enabled him to obtain a visa and enter the United States. After a brief stopover in Oklahoma, he moved to Washington, D.C., and found a job delivering takeout Asian food. His is an astonishing story, full of racial tensions, finely told — and not one to inspire readers who are security-conscious.

Demonstrating his versatility, Hessler intersperses Polat's story and those of his other Chinese acquaintances with accounts of the different archaeologists who featured in the hunt for and decipherment of the oracle bones. Here too there are dark ripples, some of them circling out from the death of one of China's finest scholars, Chen Mengjia, who was denounced as a "Rightist" in 1957 and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. At least one of those who denounced him is still living, and in a rare burst

of moralistic posturing, Hessler confronts him, pushing him to make a confession of regret.

Hessler is surely right about the echoes that still vibrate from China's unvarnished past. The bones, like the country, need endless deciphering. But as an 80-year-old Chinese scholar, who suffered humiliations of his own, says to Hessler, there is little point in trying to settle old scores. "The things that people said and wrote in those days don't count," he explains. "The ones who criticized me the harshest, I hardly remember them. I don't hate them."

The bones, like the lives of China's people, can swirl into unexpected conjunctions.

Jonathan Spence teaches modern Chinese history at Yale. Among his books are "The Death of Woman Wang" and "The Search for Modern China." He is currently writing a book on the fall of the Ming dynasty.

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