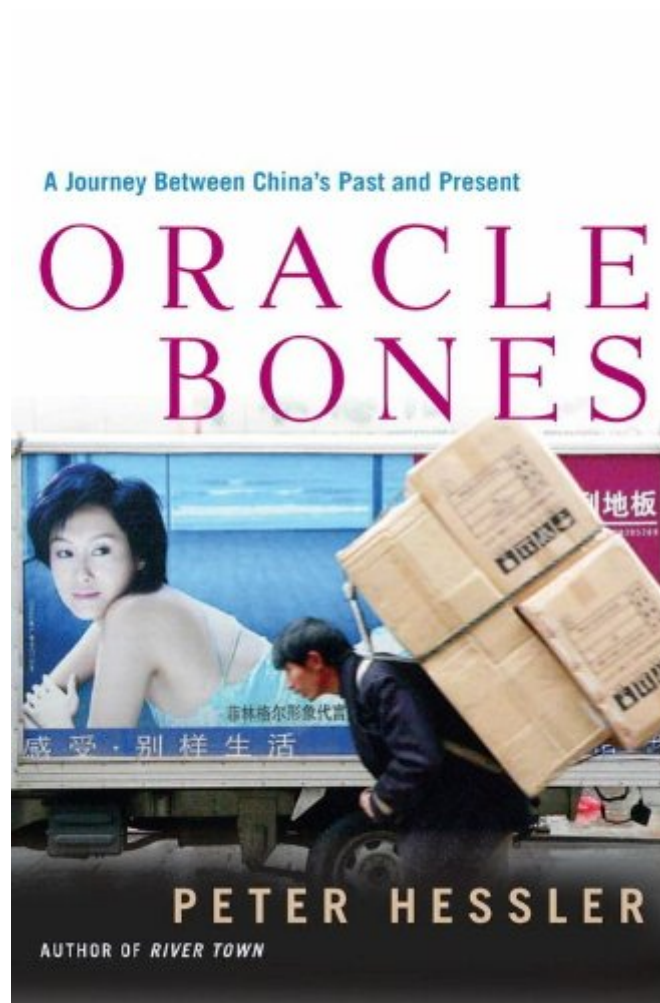


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# Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time In China



## Synopsis

A century ago, outsiders saw China as a place where nothing ever changes. Today the country has become one of the most dynamic regions on earth. In *Oracle Bones*, Peter Hessler explores the human side of China's transformation, viewing modern-day China and its growing links to the Western world through the lives of a handful of ordinary people. In a narrative that gracefully moves between the ancient and the present, the East and the West, Hessler captures the soul of a country that is undergoing a momentous change before our eyes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who might it be for? 1. People who are going to China for the first time and want an introduction to some aspects of the place and a taste of the history. 2. People who have already lived there before (like the present reviewer-- for 11 years) and experienced it as a great time in life and want to keep the memories of that time alive. There are a number of other books in this genre that I have read (i. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*; ii. *The Chinese*; iii. *Unsavory Elements: Stories of Foreigners on the Loose in China*; iv. *China Cuckoo: How I Lost a Fortune and Found a Life in China*; v. *Iron and Silk*), and this book distinguishes itself from among those

other books in several ways:1. The person who wrote this book actually had something on the ball-- a journalism career that he was getting off the ground instead of someone who washed out of their career in whatever Western country they were from or just never got one started to begin with;2. The book is organized (loosely) around historical artifacts recovered from excavations;3. There is discussion (sympathetic) of several groups of people, and the author shows us these groups of people as they see themselves and also through the eyes of other:i. Uighurs. Very few Western people even know about them, and they are often portrayed as thieves of Muslim terrorists. This author describes them as people who make a living on the margins and as middlemen-- and who have been that for a very long time (p. 28);ii. Migrant workers-- especially from Sichuan. He describes the scorn with which these Han Chinese people are viewed by other people because they have the misfortune to be born in a poor, rural part of China.4. The tone of the author:i. The observations of the people that he met were perceptive;ii. Said observations were also objective and non judgmental;iii. The author had verbal dexterity that made him a delight to read.

There are a couple of things that could have been fixed:1. The titles of the Chinese characters were often nowhere near the same thing as the topic of the chapter. One chapter was titled "Stalin" in Chinese characters, and if I had not been able to read Chinese, that joke (is that what it was?) would have flown right over my head. Ditto with almost all of the other titles in Chinese.2. There is one person that he spent a lot of time worrying about, and that is/ was Chen Mengjia. The author accidentally ends up writing a book about existentialist musings. Hessler goes to many places trying to find out about the man who knew more than anyone about Oracle bones (which very few people know anything about today) and finds that even just a few decades after his death, there is no one who can clearly say what happened to him and all the people who do remember are at the very end of their lives and want to forget. One person invested a whole lot of time trying to recover a forgotten society and then he dies and he is forgotten in the same way that they were/ are.

Verdict: Worth the time and worth the secondhand purchase price.

This is Hessler's second China book but I read his books out of order so it was my third. I was thinking this would be the book that I finally get an understanding of China . . . after all "Oracle Bones" sounds like maybe you're gonna get the answers to the big questions . . . . Yes and no. Mostly no. I must say the book really doesn't have a plot. It meanders along with the author through China, following leads . . . excavations . . . old folks who have lived through the hell of China past and young folks who are turning the wheels of China future . . . You get a feel for the oppression and the freedom . . . the astonishing history and the astonishing disregard of history . . . you get free

lessons in Chinese language, history and sociology . . . and you get no easy answers. No easy answers about economics, no obvious bad guys or good guys. What you get is like letters home from one of your family . . . total believability and realism. I would also say Hessler's rare reflection of his own original thoughts on the similarities of the U.S. and China on page 439-440 are pretty darn profound.

This is a difficult book to review because it's remarkably uneven. The author lived as a reporter in Beijing and first came to China as an English teacher with the Peace Corps. Here he relates modern-day episodes from China interspersed with chapters on the so-called "oracle bones," which are 3000+ year-old relics from the Shang Dynasty. It seems the ambition was to juxtapose these things - the current with the ancient, individual lives with broad-brush history - in order to give the reader a more complete view of today's China. The book fails in that goal, first because the method seems more and more dubious as you read through, and also because the author didn't organize the text in any coherent way. This is a shame, because he appears to enjoy a good grasp of Mandarin and has a keen eye in observing the details of everyday life in China. The problem is, there seems to be too much observation at the expense of reflection. Everything reads as if it's set up like an exercise for a creative writing workshop, where the priority is for style to pull reality up to its level. For example, a chapter on a visit to a starch factory is, as you might imagine, objectively uneventful, but has to be spiced up with tales of an enormous pile of corn and a company executive who punctuates his interview with giggles. The descriptions ring false in a way that never really goes away; the author can't let insignificance just be. Later, the author quotes one of his own press dispatches he wrote when covering Beijing's Olympics bid; his report on a meaningless meeting, which was then distributed to other journalists for their own articles, ends with "It was a fine day with clear blue skies and the wind came hard from the north." It's a funny line until you concede that he probably wasn't being ironic. What is ironic is, the author repeatedly derides a speaking style called "Special English," a streamlined grammar that he encountered with the Peace Corps, but himself writes things like, "One patch led to an abandoned village. It stood at the edge of the steep slopes; the trees were spindly and stunted. A pebbled creek lay as dry as a bone." Mostly, though, the writing workshop is in session, and we get lines like this: "[The Olympic Committee tour guide's] spoken English was poor but he handled that phrase perfectly, lingering on the last word like a weightlifter with the bar raised above his head." Not bad for a journalist's notebook dump. Grade: A-. If all this seems harsh, it's because Oracle Bones was a missed opportunity. The sections covering the author's former students are genuinely moving, because he gathers up a good deal of

detail on their lives. But there's too little effort to connect these particular stories to any broader reflection on where China's headed, what opportunities remain to be seized, what might go right/wrong, what that means for the world. Each person that passes through the book - maybe even China itself - ultimately comes to feel like an assignment, raw materials to be transformed by A Real Writer. There are hints of insight here and there, but somehow the whole actually amounts to less than the sum of its parts. For better works that take somewhat similar, but more effective approaches to understanding China, I'd go instead with *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China* or *Postcards from Tomorrow Square: Reports from China* (Vintage). Both of these books are by people who also spent a good amount of time in the country and have a reporter's eye. These authors are invested more in understanding China than in constantly proving themselves. Both are eager to grapple with China's future in a way that I'd hoped *Oracle Bones* would as well, but didn't.

Being an overseas born Chinese who doesn't know the Chinese language well, Mr Hessler's narratives of the Chinese people, past and present, the multitude of other characters he introduced in the book, they are all very real people with each their human stories to tell. There are so many sad and touching stories as well as many silently hilarious ones. I fall in love with so many of the characters, including "Willy", Lucy, the old scholars staying in the dormitory in Beijing, Chen Mengjia and many more.

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