



China's Journey

Published: May 2008

## China: Inside the Dragon

Chinese history has become the story of average citizens. But there are risks when a nation depends on the individual dreams of 1.3 billion people rather than a coherent political system with clear rule of law.

By Peter Hessler

My students wrote essays on paper so cheap and thin that it felt like the skin of an onion. The brittle pages tore easily; if held to the light, they glowed. The English was flawed, but sometimes that only gave the words more power. "My parents were born in poor farmer's family," wrote a young man who had chosen the English name Hunt. "They told us that they had eaten barks, grass, etc. At that time grandpa and grandma had no open minds and didn't allow my mother to go to school because she is a girl." Another classmate described his mother: "Her hair becomes silver white, and some of her teeth become movable. But she works as hard as ever." Those were common themes—my students valued patience and diligence, and they liked to write about family. National events often left them perplexed. "I'm a Chinese, but I feel it difficult to see my country clearly," wrote a woman named Airane. "I believe there are many young people are as confused as I'm."

Her teacher felt the same way. In 1996 I had been sent to China as a Peace Corps volunteer, and that was the first time I had lived in the country and studied the language. The only thing I knew for certain was that the place was bound to change. Deng Xiaoping was still alive, although there were rumors that he was in poor health. Hong Kong still belonged to the British; China had yet to join the World Trade Organization; Beijing had recently failed in its bid to host the 2000 Olympics. On the middle Yangtze, the government was building the world's largest hydroelectric dam, the Three Gorges project, and I was assigned to a teaching job in Fuling, a small city that would be affected by the new dam. The Yangtze was visible from my classroom, and with every glimpse I wondered how this mighty river could ever become a lake.

In the beginning much of what I learned about China came from reading the onion-skin essays, layer by layer. The past could be painful for my students—when they wrote about history, it was usually personal. Even a distant event like the 19th-century Opium War made them indignant, because the Chinese believed that such foreign aggression had initiated the country's long decline. When it came to modern disasters—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution—they left much unsaid. "If I had been Mao Zedong," wrote a tactful student named Joan, "I wouldn't have let the thing happen between 1966 and 1976." But they refused to judge their elders. Eileen wrote: "Today, when we see [the Cultural Revolution] with our own sight, we'll feel our parents' thoughts and actions are somewhat blind and fanatical. But if we consider that time objectively, I think, we should understand and can understand them. Each generation has its own happiness and sadness. To younger generation, the important thing is understanding instead of criticizing."

They were the first Chinese to grow up in the post-Mao world. Most had been infants in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping initiated the free-market changes that eventually became known as Reform and Opening. Nearly all my students came from the countryside, and when they were small, the nation's population was still 80 percent rural. Many of their parents were illiterate; some of their grandmothers had bound feet. A number of my students were the first people from their villages to attend college.

They majored in English—a new subject for a nation hoping to overcome a history of troubled foreign relations. Ever since the Opium War the Chinese had wavered between perceiving the outside world as a threat or as an opportunity, until Mao's xenophobia resulted in over two decades of isolation. But Deng took the opposite approach, encouraging foreign trade, and in the 1990s all middle schools and high schools began to institute mandatory English courses. The nation faced a severe shortage of instructors, and most of my students would go on to teach in small-town schools.

Sometimes the old xenophobia flashed across their essays. Once, I assigned the topic "What Do You Hate?" and never had those brittle pages contained so much anger. They hated the Japanese for invading their country in the 1930s; they hated the Nationalist government for ruling Taiwan. "I hate all the countries in the world that obstruct our country developing," wrote Sean. History was personal, and so were international affairs; a student named Richard hated a man he had never met, the president of Taiwan. "Lee Teng-hui don't follow the mandate of the heaven and comply with the popular wishes of the

people," Richard wrote. "He want Taiwan continue to be an independent kingdom which is under his control."

But already it was becoming more common for Chinese to see the outside world as an opportunity, and usually my students showed intense curiosity. They asked endless questions about American customs, laws, products. Don, who had grown up in one of the poorest homes of all my students, composed a letter to Robert J. Eaton, then the CEO of the Chrysler Corporation. "My hometown is Fengdu, I hope you have heard its name," Don wrote. "But my hometown's economy hasn't been developed. So I want to establish a factory for making cars and trucks." They were dreamers, and I could tell that some of them were bound to wander far from home. In every class certain students stood out, like a young woman named Vanessa. She was beautiful, and her English was among the best in the class, but mostly her ideas were different. "Someday, I will visit U.S. to see the wide, eternal Midwest Prairie," she wrote. "And I want to know what the Indians look like, and what kind of life they lead. 'Dance with Buffalo' is my dream."

After finishing the Peace Corps, I stayed in China as a writer, eventually spending more than a decade in the country. During that time I witnessed a number of major events: the death of Deng Xiaoping, the return of Hong Kong, the successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics. Occasionally the old anger flared up, like the massive demonstrations that followed NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999. That same year, protests by Falun Gong practitioners made headlines; a few years later the outbreak of SARS briefly occupied the world's attention.

But these incidents were most remarkable for how little they affected the lives of average Chinese. It was different from the narrative of the 20th century: After 1900, when the Boxer Rebellion swept across Beijing, every decade included at least one major political upheaval. Usually these events were violent, ranging from the Japanese invasion to the Cultural Revolution to the massacre around Tiananmen Square in 1989. Together they made for a troubled century, which was why my students wrote so delicately about the past.

Perhaps this awareness of a painful history was also why the 1990s turned out differently. It became modern China's first decade without a major upheaval, and thus far the 21st century has also been peaceful. And yet despite the lack of political change, the nation has been radically transformed. For three decades the economy has grown at an average annual rate of nearly 10 percent, and more people have been lifted out of poverty than in any other country, at any other time. China has become home to the largest urbanization in human history—an estimated 150 million people have left the countryside, mostly to work in the factory towns of the coast. By most measures the nation is now the world's largest consumer, using more grain, meat, coal, and steel than the United States. But apart from Deng Xiaoping, it's difficult to credit these critical changes to any specific government official. The Communist Party's main strategy has been to unleash the energy of the people, at least in the economic sense. In today's China, government is decentralized, and people can freely start businesses, find new jobs, move to new homes. After a century of powerful leaders and political turmoil, Chinese history has become the story of average citizens.

But there are risks when a nation depends on the individual dreams of 1.3 billion people rather than a coherent political system with clear rule of law. China faces an environmental crisis—the nation has become the world's leading emitter of carbon dioxide, and there's a serious shortage of water and other basic resources. The gap between rich and poor has become dangerously wide. The difference between urban and rural incomes is greater than three to one—the largest since the reforms began in 1978. Each of these problems is far too broad to be solved, or even grasped, by the average citizen. And because the government continues to severely restrict political freedom, people are accustomed to avoiding such issues. My students taught me that everything was personal—history, politics, foreign relations—but this approach creates boundaries as well as connections. For many Chinese, if a problem doesn't affect them personally, it might as well not exist.

Over the years I've stayed in touch with more than one hundred of my former students. The cheap onion-skin paper is long gone; today they communicate by email and cell phone. Most are still teaching, and they live in small cities—part of the new middle class. Because of migration, their old villages are dying, like rural regions all across China. "Only old people and small children are left at home," a woman named Maggie recently wrote. "It seems that the countryside now is under Japanese attacks, all the people have fled."

Although my students were patient with the flaws of their elders, today they seem to feel a greater distance from the young people they teach. "When we were students there wasn't a generation gap with the teachers," wrote Sally. "Nowadays our students have their own viewpoints and ideas, and they speak about democracy and freedom, independence and rights. I think we fear them instead of them fearing us." A classmate pointed out that most of today's students come from one-child homes, and many have been spoiled by indulgent parents. "We had a pure childhood," wrote Lucy. "But now the students are different, they are more influenced by modern things, even sex. But when we were young, sex was a tattoo for us."

Recently I sent out a short questionnaire asking how their lives have changed. Responses came from across the country, ranging from Zhejiang Province on the east coast to Tibet in the far west. Most described their material lives as radically different. "When I graduated in 1998, I told my Mum, if I got 600 yuan

[about \$70] each month, I would be satisfied," Roger wrote. "In fact I got 400 yuan then, and now each month I get about 1700 yuan." When I asked about their most valuable possession, 70 percent said that they had bought an apartment, usually with loans. One had recently purchased a car. They were still optimistic. When I asked them to rate their feelings about the future on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most positive, the average response was 6.5.

I asked what worried them the most. Several mentioned relationships; one woman wrote: "The marriage is not safe any more in China, it is more common for people around here to break up." A couple of respondents who now work far from home were concerned about their status as migrants. "I am like a foreigner in China," Willy wrote. But the most common source of worry seemed to be mortgage payments. "Ten years ago, I worried that I could not have a good and warm family," Belinda wrote. "Now I am worried about my loan at the bank." None of her classmates expressed concern about political reform, foreign relations, or any other national issue. Nobody mentioned the environment.

For years I didn't hear from Vanessa. Finally, half a decade after I had taught her, I received an email. She had found a sales position with a company that produced electronic components: "I am changed a lot. I am in Shenzhen now, which is a big city in China.... Do you know American companies like America II or Classic components corp? They are our customers. I am little proud to have opportunity to co-operate with them. Because they are very big companies in the world, President Bush even visited America II last year. And the big reason I like my work now is I can use my language I learned."

The next time I was in Shenzhen, we met in the lobby of the Shangri-La Hotel. "Did you see my car?" Vanessa said, and then she looked disappointed that I had missed her arrival. She explained that her fiance had just given her the vehicle as a gift. "He's the boss of my company," she said.

She was still quite pretty, and I couldn't help but conjure a stereotypical boss image: a leering man in his 50s, smoking Chunghwa cigarettes and shouting into a cell phone. But I said I'd like to meet him.

"Oh, he's waiting," Vanessa said. "He had to drive, because I don't have my license yet. I've been too busy!"

We walked outside. In the parking lot sat a silver BMW Z4 3.0i convertible coupe—in China, a hundred-thousand-dollar car. I peered inside: no cigarettes, no cell phone. Crew cut, acne, rumpled clothes. He smiled politely, stepped out of the car, and shook my hand. The company boss was all of 27 years old.

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