

Convocation reading guide  
for Peter Hessler's  
*River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*

Dear Students,

Your academic journey begins in earnest on August 22nd with Convocation, when all incoming freshmen and new students are formally received into the College of Charleston. An assembly of students and faculty at the official opening of the scholastic year, Convocation is a venerated collegiate celebration recognized by institutions of higher education around the world.

The College of Charleston's Convocation will provide you with general information about academic traditions, such as the order of the academic procession, the distinctions of academic regalia, as well as those symbols and mottos unique to the College and the history surrounding various prominent campus buildings and the institution itself.

Another significant element of Convocation is the address by a speaker, a person of regional, national, or international importance who has been selected by the College for his/her contributions to the arts and sciences through writing, research, performance, artistic expression, or leadership. We are honored to have as our featured speaker Jennet Robinson Alterman.

To prepare you to participate in this year's Convocation, we have sent you a copy of Peter Hessler's *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. The following reading guide provides you with several questions to consider while you read through the book. During the fall semester, there will be events and activities on campus highlighting the book, and several courses will be including the title in their required reading lists.

Your decision to attend and study at this historic institution was well made. Over the next few years, we hope to stimulate your imagination and enhance your knowledge of the surrounding world through the College's excellent academic regimen—a program of diverse study, exciting research, and engaging intellectual debate.

I look forward to meeting you in August and officially welcoming you into the College of Charleston family.

Sincerely,  
Lee Higdon  
President

Dear Students,

On behalf of its faculty, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the College of Charleston.

It is by no light decision that the College of Charleston has chosen you and you have chosen the College. By now you must know that the College is deeply rooted in the liberal arts and sciences tradition. This tradition will engage you in many ways. The way that I want to emphasize is our intention to instill in you a passion for learning that you will have for the rest of your life. This will not be realized as a lesson or a skill, but as a transformation. With it the world will be yours to experience and change. Confidence in your ability to learn will empower you to adapt to the world as it changes around you.

The 2005 Convocation is the beginning of your transformation. Your part is to read about the metamorphosis of Peter Hessler, a young American Peace Corps volunteer sent to China to teach English in a small city. *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* is Peter Hessler's account of his experiences there and the ways in which they changed him.

The keynote speaker at the 2005 Convocation will be Jennet Robinson Alterman, executive director of the Center for Women in Charleston, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan, and a Peace Corps employee in Africa and Washington, D.C. We will be pleased to join you and listen to her insights at this important event.

We look forward to your arrival this fall.

Have a safe and enjoyable summer.

Sincerely,  
Robert Mignone  
Speaker of the Faculty

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Peter Hessler grew up in Columbia, Missouri. He majored in creative writing at Princeton University and went on to earn a master's degree in literature from Oxford. After graduate school, he joined the Peace Corps in 1996 and taught English at the Fuling Teachers College in Fuling, China, a small town on the Yangtze in the Sichuan Province. He and another Peace Corps volunteer were the first Americans to live in Fuling since the Communist revolution. His experiences inspired his writing of *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, which was awarded the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize.

Hessler has written for several publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *National Geographic*. Today, he is based in Beijing and is a full-time freelance writer.

## **THEMES/QUESTIONS**

Hessler's account of his Peace Corps service in Fuling, China, touches upon issues of communicative, cultural, ecological, geographic, historical, personal, political, and religious interest. The following questions are designed to stimulate informed reflection upon these issues as they relate to his book, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*.

## **PERSONAL ISSUES**

In *River Town*, Peter Hessler provides very few details about his life before he came to Fuling. Here are a few: he has degrees from Princeton and Oxford; he is Catholic; he grew up in St. Louis.

- **Why do you think he chose not to reveal more about himself in the first chapter of the book?**
- **What other details about Hessler do we learn?**
- **In light of this information, what kind of person do you think he was before he came to China?**
- **Did his Chinese experience change him? If so, how?**
- **What would you say are the most important lessons that Hessler learned about himself while living and teaching in China? About others?**

Altruism is defined as a selfless impulse to help others. This impulse prompts people to serve others in a variety of ways.

- **According to Hessler, what motives prompted him to join the Peace Corps and go to Fuling to teach English literature?**
- **Are his motives completely selfless, or are there also selfish reasons informing his decision?**
- **Would you be willing to do as Hessler did and leave your country to serve abroad in a place with a culture and language different from your own? Why or why not?**

Hessler provides vivid descriptions of himself, his students, and his encounters with them. He struggles to be a good teacher, and they struggle to be good students. For both, the experience is a new one.

- **With whom is it easier for you to identify: Hessler, a middle-class American dealing with the joys and frustrations of living and working in another country, or with his first-year students at Fuling Teachers College?**
- **What makes it easier for you to identify with Hessler or with his students?**
- **In what ways do you think Hessler's students would identify with you?**
- **What might these students find different about you? Charleston? The United States?**

As college freshmen, you too are about to embark on an exciting adventure of self-discovery. For most students, college is a time of immense excitement, much anticipation, some trepidation, and a great deal of personal transformation.

- **What is Chinese college life like as described by Hessler?**
- **What are the hopes and dreams of Chinese college students? How are these similar to your aspirations? How do they differ?**

In keeping a written record of his experiences in Fuling, Hessler uses the process of writing as a means of making sense of his experiences and of remembering this important time of his life. You might want to consider keeping a journal of your experiences at the College of Charleston. Doing so would be well worth the time and effort involved. Journaling offers a powerful tool for reflecting upon oneself and one's world.

### **CULTURE/COMMUNICATION**

Travel has a way of broadening our perspective of the world we inhabit, changing how we view ourselves and others. It often renders the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. When we are not able to take trips ourselves, books make it possible to travel vicariously. In *River Town*, Hessler invites us to share in his own experiences of Fuling, China.

- **Based upon your reading of Hessler's book, what do you see as some of the most important similarities China and the United States share?**
- **What differences distinguish the two countries?**
- **Can you identify similarities and differences between Fuling and Charleston, S.C.?**
- **What did Hessler expect to find in China?**
- **In what ways is China different from what he expected? In what ways does it conform to his preconceived notions?**
- **In what ways has Hessler's book reaffirmed your own perceptions about China?**
- **How has his book challenged your views?**

- **What aspects of Chinese life in Fuling described by Hessler are most interesting to you? Why?**

Ethnocentrism is the tendency people have to view the world through the prism of their own culture. Sometimes this tendency makes it hard to see things differently, and sometimes ethnocentrism leads people to believe their own culture is superior to those of others.

- **How does Hessler's ethnocentrism manifest itself?**
- **How is the ethnocentrism of his students made manifest?**
- **What tensions result from ethnocentrism?**
- **How was Hessler treated in the beginning of his stay in Fuling?**
- **How did the local people change their attitudes toward and treatment of him over time?**
- **How did Hessler change his attitudes toward and treatment of the locals?**

Like the United States, China is a diverse nation, comprised of people from many different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups.

- **As described by Hessler, what role do these diverse groups play culturally? Economically? Politically? Socially?**
- **According to Hessler, how are people outside the mainstream treated by the mainstream Chinese?**
- **How does he view them? How do they view him?**

Learning how to communicate with people from another culture requires much more than simply learning their language. The Chinese are high-context communicators. As such, they emphasize the communication process over content, tending to value indirect and formal verbalization of desires and opinions. Americans, in contrast, are low-context communicators, for whom a direct and informal content-driven, verbal style is preferred.

- **What examples does Hessler present of these two communication styles?**
- **What problems arise as a result of unintended conflict caused by Hessler's low-context method of communication and the Chinese preference for high-context communication?**
- **How does he adjust himself to Fuling's high-context culture? Is this adjustment fully successful? Why or why not?**

- **Have you ever experienced difficulty in communicating effectively with someone from another culture? If so, what caused the difficulty? Did you try to overcome the difficulty? If so, how? And were you successful?**

The Chinese culture is collectivistic. Such cultures favor group identity, needs, and rights in preference to those of the individual. American culture is individualistic, valuing the identity, needs, and rights of individuals over those of the group.

- **What evidence do you find of these two cultural perspectives in *River Town*?**
- **How does Hessler's individualism manifest itself?**
- **How is his individualism initially received by the Chinese of Fuling? Does this reception change over time?**
- **How does the collectivism of the Chinese shape Hessler's encounters with his students, college administrators, and others?**

Culture shock is the deep surprise and consequent stress people experience in encounters with cultures radically different from their own.

- **Does Hessler experience culture shock? If so, what are some of his symptoms of such?**
- **Have you ever traveled abroad, or to another part of the United States? Did you experience culture shock? Did you eventually overcome it? If so, how?**

You needn't travel to the other side of the world to experience culture shock, however. Many freshmen report that they experience a kind of culture shock during their first semester in college. This should not be surprising, as college is very different from high school.

- **What can you do to adjust to the emotional and intellectual demands of college?**
- **What resources does the College of Charleston make available to help you adjust to and thrive in your new academic environment?**

## **RELIGION**

Systems of belief about the supernatural have played an important role in shaping human history as well as our contemporary world. Such systems promote belief in one God, many gods, or no gods. In addition, they provide us with moral direction regarding how we should lead our lives. Two of the great world religions originated in China: Confucianism and Taoism. Other religions, such as Buddhism, have found fertile ground and flourished there. In *River Town*, we meet Buddhist monks, a Catholic priest, and member of a sect called Falungong.

- **What do Hessler's encounters with these figures suggest about the state of religion in contemporary China?**

- **What do these encounters suggest about the role of religion in general?**

Religious devotion takes many forms. In China, reverence for one's ancestors is an expression of traditional religious piety. Consider the wealthy man and his family who honor their ancestors' graves on White Flat Mountain.

- **What does the continued presence of such an ancient religious tradition suggest about the nature of religion? Of tradition?**
- **What are some of the other Chinese traditions – both religious and secular – described by Hessler?**
- **What traditions are important to you? Your family? Your community?**

Under Mao Zedong (Tse-Tung), atheism was vigorously promoted in China while religions were regulated or persecuted by the state. Things have changed somewhat since then.

- **Assuming that only a few of the students and teachers at Fuling Teachers College (and none of the Communist Party members) identify with or practice any religion at all, what does this say about the role of religion in China today?**
- **Do you regard communism, or the worship of Chairman Mao, as expressions of the human religious impulse? If so, how does this understanding serve to challenge or expand the traditional definition of the word “religion?” If not, how do communism and devotion to Mao differ from religion as you understand it?**

#### **ECOLOGY/GEOGRAPHY/HISTORY/POLITICS**

Our world is profoundly shaped by the biological and physical features of our environment, the immediate and distant past, and the decisions of those who govern. The Fuling in which Hessler taught is a product of various environmental, historical, and political influences.

- **How does geography – Fuling's location within greater China, the structure of its land, the town's relationship to the Yangtze River – influence the local Chinese culture as it is described by Hessler?**
- **How has geography shaped your own culture?**
- **As described by Hessler, how has China's policy of economic and political reform and increased openness affected Chinese college students? Teachers? Farmers? Workers? Foreign visitors such as Hessler?**

Hessler alludes to such historical events as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the Tiananmen Square protest (1989). Though these occurred in China's past, their influence is still felt by Hessler and those he encounters in Fuling.

- **As described by Hessler, what are some of the concrete ways that China's past continues to shape Fuling's present?**

- **How have such historical events as the Civil War, World War II, and 9/11 shaped the way life is lived in the United States during the first decade of the 21st century?**
- **How have these same events impacted life in Charleston? Your life?**

From the early 1900s through the 1960s, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation constructed thousands of dams in the West as well as along the Tennessee River and its tributaries. These dams control floods and provide the electric energy needed to maintain our lifestyle and ensure economic prosperity.

- **As reflected in Hessler's book, how do the contemporary Chinese envision their land and natural resources?**
- **How does this attitude compare to that of Americans up to mid-20th century?**
- **How has the American view changed over the past few decades?**
- **What events caused this shift in thinking about natural resources?**
- **Would you be willing to make ecological sacrifices in order to promote economic growth?**
- **Why or why not?**

## **FURTHER READING**

China is a large country with a long history and a rich, complex culture. Below, you will find listed a few books that will help you become acquainted with features of China's culture, geography, and history relevant to Hessler's *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. This list is far from complete. We thus encourage you to seek out additional reading, as no list of books, no matter how extensive, can begin to do justice to China and its people.

***Before the Deluge: The Vanishing World of the Yangtze's Three Gorges.*** (2002). Deirdre Chetha. Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan. Examines the ecological, economic, and political controversies surrounding the building of the world's largest hydroelectric dam.

***China Obscura.*** (2004). Mark Leong, Yang Lian, & Peter Hessler. Publisher: Chronicle Books. A photo essay detailing the rapidly changing cultural landscape of China following the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989.

***Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic (3rd ed.).*** (1999). Maurice Meisner. Publisher: Free Press. A brief account of the policies, politics, and personalities that have ruled China since Mao's 1949 revolution.

***The River at the Center of the World: A Journey up the Yangtze, and Back in Chinese Time.*** (1997). Simon Winchester. Publisher: Owl Publishing Company. A travel essay that includes vivid descriptions of the people, climate, and culture of China.

***So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps: What to Know before You Go.*** (2000). Dillon Banerjee. Publisher: Ten Speed Press. An insider's perspective of the Peace Corps, the organization's application process, and the potential effect of culture shock on volunteers.

***Swallowing Clouds: A Playful Journey through Chinese Culture, Language, and Cuisine.*** (2002). A. Zee. Publisher: University of Washington Press. A short, entertaining introduction to Chinese culture, language, and food.

***Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China.*** (2004). Ann Johnson. Publisher: Yeong & Yeong Book Company. Insight into the gender mores associated with Chinese culture.

For additional information about the Peace Corps:

**<http://www.peacecorps.gov/>** (general info on Peace Corps)

**<http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/467/1011899.html>**

(article written by Peter Hessler)

## **CONVOCATION SPEAKER**

Jennet Robinson Alterman

The 2005 Convocation Speaker is a Charleston native who can relate well to the experiences of author Peter Hessler. Jennet Robinson Alterman served in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan from 1977 to 1978 and subsequently served as the country director for the Peace Corps program in Swaziland. A B.A. graduate of Mary Baldwin College (Staunton, Virginia), she has more than 20 years of state, national, and international experience in management, organizational development, volunteer services, and financial operations. She has experience as a TV news reporter and anchor, as a press secretary for a South Carolina lieutenant governor, and as producer/director of the Health Communications Network at the Medical University of South Carolina. She is currently the executive director of the Center for Women in Charleston and has been widely honored in the S.C. Lowcountry for her accomplishments. She has long-standing ties to the College of Charleston through her father, the late Emmett Robinson, a highly regarded faculty member in the Department of Theatre.

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