

Hardship and Healing through the Lens of Cultural Translation in Peter Hessler's Travel Memoir River Town

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**Shang Wu,**

**"Hardship and Healing through the Lens of Cultural Translation in Peter Hessler's Travel Memoir *River Town*"**

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.5 (2018)**

Thematic Issue ***Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives.***

**Ed. I-Chun Wang, Jonathan Locke Hart, Cindy Chopoidaló, and David Porter**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/6>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Hardship and Healing through the Lens of Cultural Translation in Peter Hessler's Travel Memoir *River Town*" Shang Wu looks into the autobiographical dimension of Hessler's account of his two-year stay as a Peace Corps teacher in Fuling, a remote town in southwestern China. Taking the two senses of cultural translation, one in anthropology and one in cultural studies, as two descriptive aspects, it illustrates the hardship Hessler confronted and his healing strategies. Faced with etiquette and language issues as well as the power relation between China and America and its consequent stereotypes in cross-cultural encounters, Hessler gazed back to his own world and sought for comforting skills as well as reached out to a liminal space and initiated local communication. The case study demonstrates that the term cultural translation could be used flexibly as a descriptive tool to read the life writing perspective of cross-cultural travel writing; and it could also provide important insights to people living in a cross-cultural setting.

## Shang WU

### Hardship and Healing through the Lens of Cultural Translation in Peter Hessler's Travel Memoir *River Town*

Within a Western context, since the 1980s the academic interest in the humanities has started to turn from the center to the periphery, from the canon to marginal texts and polyphonic voices. It is from the margins that travel writing was unearthed, initially by Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* and its invention of postcolonialism. In the wake of *Orientalism*, a wave of scholars, such as Mary Louise Pratt, have scrutinized the ways in which other cultures, especially cultures of the colonies, were represented in western travel texts, and have exposed how these texts facilitate and perpetuate the unequal power relationship.

For studies of travel writing, the major contribution of the postcolonial approach is to show that travel writing is never simply disinterested factual account of the travelled lands. Rather, as Tim Youngs concludes, "travellers have already been influenced, before they travel, by previous cultural representations that they have encountered" (9). Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan also point out that the traveler's experiences "generally takes its coloring from previous accounts" (68). But we have to be cautious about this contribution, as the pitfall of essentialism awaits if we read all travel texts as mere extensions of prior representations and ignore the introspective and autobiographical dimension rooted in the subjectivity of the travel writer, namely a dimension of life writing. And overly depending on the postcolonial approach may lead to generalizing all Western travel texts about nonwestern lands as colonial construction, and may also run into the geographic limitation of *Orientalism* and overlooking specific historical and sociocultural contexts. As Steve Clark notes in *Asian Crossings*, "Said's initial thesis of a monolithic Western will-to-power is almost entirely based on the Near East, with little consideration of the markedly different practices of British colonialism in India, let alone the complex and diverse European relations with Eastern Asia" (11). Debbie Lisle's assertion in *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* that "colonial relations are constitutive of both the historical development of the genre and its general politics" (58) is one example of such partial views, which overlooks the variety of the travel writing genre (Youngs 9) and denies the self-reflexive capability of the travel writer.

In this essay, I intend to look at American writer Peter Hessler's travel memoir *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* that I consider as one of the concrete rebuttals to holistic contentions of Western travel texts about nonwestern countries. The book recounts Hessler's two-year experience of working as a Peace Corps teacher from 1996 to 1998 in Fuling, a backwater town along the Yangtze River in Sichuan province in southwestern China. Self-reflexivity is one of the main characteristics of the book. Hessler's travel and immersion in the little Chinese town is also depicted as part of his life journey with the development of a Chinese identity. Besides observations of the traveled place and the local people, Hessler sheds light on his own position in the local society. His view of the traveled place changed as the place changed him along the way. Mary Besemeres considers Hessler's book as belonging to a new subgenre of travel writing, "immersion narratives" (224): different from Paul Theroux's "monarch-of-all-I-survey" (Pratt 217) view in *The Old Patagonian Express*, Hessler highlights his experience of learning Chinese, the language of the traveled place, in order to engage with the local people and culture in a dialogical way (Besemeres 225-26). Building on Besemeres' analysis, here I want to take a closer look at the autobiographical dimension of *River Town*; specifically, to illustrate the hardship Hessler confronted during his linguistic and cultural encounters in Fuling, and his healing from such hardship. In order to better inspect the encounter process, I propose the term "cultural translation" as a descriptive tool: though sharing the roots of postcolonialism, it could be used flexibly to describe the complexity and ambivalence of cross-cultural relationships.

Over the past decades, along with the progression of decolonization and globalization, the term "cultural translation" has stirred up on-going discussions and debates across multiple disciplines, particularly within anthropology and cultural studies. As a result, it has almost become a thick term fraught with ambiguities and preempts specific empirical practice.

The Western anthropologists in the 1950s first invented the term "cultural translation" to describe the ethnographic writing of the investigated foreign culture for readers at home. In this sense, anthropologists back then assumed the foreign culture as a framework of translatable signs that can be put "into the languages, the categories and the conceptual world of a Western audience" (Bachmann-Medick 35). In 1986, Talal Asad criticized such holistic views of culture and the asymmetrical power relationships between the languages involved: "the process of 'cultural translation' is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power -- professional, national, international" (163). Since then,

anthropologists started to repudiate their predecessors' approaches as part of the colonial discourse. Therefore, instead of domesticating the foreign culture into Western terms, many contemporary anthropologists have adopted more reflexive approaches with foreignizing strategies; and accordingly, the meaning of cultural translation in anthropology is now with a shifted focus to the anthropologists' self-reflexivity and their recognition of the specific social and political contexts of both the foreign and the domestic cultures (Conway, "Cultural Translation: Two Modes" 18).

In cultural studies, the term "cultural translation" is usually used, in situations such as migration, diaspora and travel, as a metaphor for the displacement across cultural and linguistic borders. Such meaning was initially developed in the 1990s by Homi Bhabha in his reading of Salman Rushdie in *The Location of Culture* in dealing with "basic cultural problems of migration" (Pym, *Exploring* 145), and has been popularized by scholars of postcolonial and cultural studies ever since. For them, cultural translation, as Bhabha notes, "desacralize[s] the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy" (228), destabilizes the hegemonic notions of both Self and Other, and opens up, between the binary, a "liminal space" (4) that "prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (4). Though providing a powerful and promising perspective in dealing with issues of displacement and cultural hybridity in the postcolonial and globalized world, cultural translation in this sense, especially when drawn out of the social and historical contexts it was originally generated, is at the borderline of becoming a catchphrase that is too abstract and utopian to hold any practical value.

Confronted with "a frequently messy collection of ideas" (Conway, "A Conceptual" 264) on cultural translation, Kyle Conway's in-depth study "trace[s] the contours" (264) of these ideas from diachronic and synchronic perspectives. Generally, Conway categorizes cultural translation into two modes: in anthropology it refers to the rewriting of the foreign culture, emphasizing the produced text; in cultural studies it refers to the transposition of people, emphasizing the movement ("Cultural Translation" 21-25; "A Conceptual" 266-271; "Cultural Translation: Two Modes" 16-21). For the empirical application of the two modes, Conway suggests that different modes "can be used as complementary tools" ("A Conceptual" 277) to describe various elements and situations of linguistic and cultural encounters; and he proposes that "one productive approach will be to examine socially and historically situated circumstances where the types of negotiation described by both anthropologists and cultural studies scholars have taken place" ("Cultural Translation" 24).

In relation to the subject of this essay, Hessler's *River Town*, the two modes of cultural translation are converging: Hessler rewrites his experiences and observations of the foreign culture in English, which is similar to working as an ethnographer in a reflexive and postmodern way; at the same time, Hessler himself is also the translated content being placed in a foreign context with his own cultural factors, and is confronted with the power relation between the home and foreign cultures. The two modes of cultural translation both use the word "translation" as a transference metaphor for the cross-cultural process. Etymologically, the transference meaning of "translation" could be traced back to the Greek word *metaphorá* and its Latin translation *translatio*, "carrying across." In translation as rewriting, it's the contextualized foreign culture that is carried across; and in translation as transposition, it's people with their cultural factors that are carried across (Conway, "Cultural Translation" 21). Another transference metaphor of translation developed earlier in the humanities is the conduit metaphor, which sees the translation process as a unidirectional transportation of meaning independent of the source and the target contexts as well as of the translator. Yet here, the transference metaphors in the two modes of cultural translation foreground the translation process as complex and fluid, highlighting the self-reflexivity of the translator and the power relations between the source and target cultural contexts. Coming back to travel writing with the two modes of cultural translation as two descriptive aspects: the travel writer could be seen as the translator of the contextualized foreign culture, trying to bridge the unfamiliar with the familiar; and could also be seen as the translated content in the foreign context, stirring up new possibilities with his own cultural factors. The work of the travel writer is similar to what the translation scholar Anthony Pym names "interculture" (*Method* 178), referring to "practices found in intersections or overlaps of cultures" (178). And in both descriptive aspects, we can never say with absolute certainty that the travel writer has unambiguous stable allegiance to any of the two cultural systems, or that the travel writer is isolated or free from the ideology of any systems. So, taking the two modes of cultural translation as two descriptive aspects may help enable a clearer inspection of the travel text's autobiographical dimension, and it may as well avoid the pitfalls of essentialism.

Hessler arrived in Fuling with his colleague Adam Meier in the fall of 1996. They were among the third batch of Peace Corps volunteers that had been sent to China since 1993, and were assigned to teach English language and literature at the Fuling Teachers College. Fuling, situated at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Wu River, was then a small town downstream from Chongqing in Sichuan

province; and in 1998 after Chongqing became a municipality directly under the central government of China, Fuling was incorporated as one of Chongqing's districts. When Hessler first arrived, Fuling had no railroad or highway, and the most common way to travel elsewhere was by boat. For many years, only very few foreigners had been in Fuling; and for most of Hessler's two-year stay, he and Meier were the only foreigners in town.

Hessler's account of his stay in Fuling is characterized by a strong intention to be immersed in local life. Instead of what life *looks* like in Fuling, Hessler wanted to find out what life *feels* like there. Only a few days after his arrival, he started to wonder "how the city worked and what the people thought" (Hessler 62). And with this intention, unlike the Western sightseers with no knowledge of the local language (described by Michael Cronin as seeing "with the sound switched off" [*Across* 82]), Hessler always listened to the sounds of the city. Even in the early weeks before he could understand Chinese through listening, he enjoyed all the sounds that marked the campus routines as they mitigated his initial incompatibility: the morning rooster crowing, the students jogging accompanied by exercise music, the bells for morning class, the students repeating their lessons, the teacher's voices, noises of the breaks between classes, and the rush of the lunch hour (Hessler 13-14). As postcolonial adventurers analyzed by Pratt "perched" (216) themselves on hotel balconies in big third-world cities "to paint the significance and value of what they see" (216), Hessler listened to the sounds of Fuling in his apartment on the top floor of the teacher's building wanting to "explore its corners and learn its secrets" (Hessler 64). Also with the intention to live like a local, Hessler had always consciously guarded himself against ethnocentrism and any claiming of cultural authority. In the "Author's Note" at the very beginning of the book, which is attuned to the spatial and temporal complexity of China, he emphasizes that the book is not a comprehensive portrait but depicts "a certain small part of China at a certain brief period in time." Besides, Hessler was constantly aware of the untranslatability of culture and the importance of social and historical contexts. For example, during his early month teaching in China, when faced with biased remarks on the West in his students' journals (for example, that Western girls "lead a loose life" [Hessler 21] or that China's opening up to foreign countries increased crime rate [22]), he didn't judge the students, but tried to understand their different backgrounds. And when gazing back on the history of America itself to draw an analogy to explain the situation of the students, Hessler as well foregrounds untranslatable particularity: "in some ways it was like the American generation of my parents, who grew up on stories of the Depression and World War II, and who built the America of today, for better or worse. There was the same sense of future glory in China, but the past was far more brutal than anything that had ever happened in America, which complicated things" (Hessler 23). The other distinctive feature that reflects Hessler's caution against ethnocentrism resides in his translation of the Chinese conversations that he had with the local people. Generally, the utterances of the interlocutors, whether of a cadre or a coworker in the college or of an uneducated restaurant owner or a rich businessman in town, are translated into simple everyday English. And for a cultural or local specific word, Hessler mostly uses pinyin (the official romanization for standard Chinese) in italics followed by a verbatim translation or an interpretation or sometimes both, which signals the foreignness of the interlocutor, the language in use, and the context. For example, in the encounter with a Fuling boatman, the Chinese word for common people is introduced as "laobaixing, Old Hundred Names, the common folks" (Hessler 128). There is a conventional strategy, often spotted in both fictional and nonfictional imperial writings, of using an invented pidgin English or a mock medieval English to signal a conversation originally took place in a foreign language, which implies a downgrading of both the speaker and the foreign language (Bassnett 37-38). Hessler's rejection of such convention bluntly entails his attitude against ethnocentrism and his intention of seeing and showing the cultural Other in an equal and dialogic relationship.

However, such sensitivity to the historical and sociocultural local contexts and the danger of ethnocentrism could never guarantee Hessler's immersion into the local life to be free from any obstacles. And with the two modes of cultural translation as descriptive tools, the hardship encountered during the immersion could be inspected from two aspects.

According to the anthropological sense of cultural translation, Hessler could be seen as a translator of the local culture, in other words, an ethnographer doing field investigation in Fuling. From this aspect, the hardship Hessler experienced in Fuling is similar to an ethnographer's culture shock in the adaptation stage, which is "what happens when the familiar psychological cues that help an individual to function in society are suddenly withdrawn and replaced by new ones that are strange or incomprehensible" (Toffler 19). This state brings on a whole host of emotions including bewilderment, frustration, anger, helplessness and loneliness. For example, in *The Vice Lords: Warriors of the Streets*, R. Lincoln Keiser records his helplessness, at the early stage of his research into the Chicago street gang, of feeling like

a twenty-nine years old infant with little understanding of most actions and words used by the gang members: "this feeling of helplessness was very difficult for me to handle. In the early part of my research it often made me feel so nervous and anxious that events occurring around me seemed to merge in a blur of meaningless action" (95). For Hessler, his experiences of cultural shock, especially in the early months of his stay, mostly reside in etiquette and language issues.

Cross-cultural etiquette problems are usually caused by unfamiliarity of different social norms. Hessler's appearance in the city of Fuling alone was already the opposite of the norm at that time; as Fuling, unlike the big cities in China such as Beijing and Shanghai, rarely had foreign visitors, and Hessler and the other Peace Corps volunteers were the first Americans lived there in half a century (Hessler 1). Throughout Hessler's stay, every time he went into the city, the locals would crowd around him to see the *waiguoren* (foreigner) as if there was a show for his exotic features. Though gradually Hessler found his way around it, but in the early days, especially when he only had a one-month orientation of basic Chinese, such encounters were simply "frightening" (65):

If I ate at a restaurant or bought something from a store, a crowd would quickly gather, often as many as thirty people spilling out into the street....When I walked down the street, people constantly turned and shouted at me. Often they screamed *waiguoren* or *laowai*, both of which simply meant "foreigner." Again, these phrases often weren't intentionally insulting, but intentions mattered less and less with every day that these words were screamed at me. Another favorite was "hello," a meaningless, mocking version of the word that was strung out into a long "hah-loooo!" This word was so closely associated with foreigners that sometimes the people used it instead of *waiguoren* -- they'd say, "Look, here come two hellos!"...The stresses piled up every time I went into town: the confusion and embarrassment of the language, the shouts and stares, the mocking calls....Finally, as the fall semester wore on, we did everything possible to avoid going to town. When I did go, I wore headphones. That was the only way I could handle it; I listened to the loudest and most offensive rap music I had -- Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, the Beastie Boys -- and it was just enough to drown out the shouts as I walked down the street. It made for surreal trips downtown, listening to Snoop rap obscenities while I dodged the crowds, but it kept me sane. (65)

The locals' reaction is a mixture of curiosity and xenophobia. Most of them never meant anything malicious, but when the English word "hello" which was supposed to be an innocent greeting started to sound like "a meaningless, mocking" (65) synecdoche for foreigners, Hessler felt he was being treated "like an animal" (318), and his confusion, embarrassment, and frustration piled up together. Perhaps the most ironic and conflicted is his oppositional responses to sounds of the city: in the early days, listening to the sounds of Fuling from his balcony alleviated Hessler's feeling of being out of place, while when he was actually walking in the city, he needed the loudest music to keep him from hearing the catcalls and to keep him sane. It suggests that, when confronted with culture shock, there is a certain limitation of the outsider's intention to live like a local. As for the breaking of the local etiquette, Hessler and his Peace Corps colleague were usually informed by the English journals of their students, which was the main source of their beginners' knowledge of Fuling. For example, scratching oneself during the class and leaving the belt dangling were considered too casual and not a good manner in China (Hessler 17); and saying to a student that "You have very nice freckles" (19) was not a compliment but was like saying "You have a nice birthmark" (19). Fortunately, the students tended to be forgiving and these mistakes were not difficult to fix.

The other "enormous problem" (Hessler 64) that led to Hessler's culture shock is the difficulty of learning Chinese. To learn Chinese, strongly related with his intention to experience the local life, was one of Hessler motivations of coming to Fuling. He believed that "studying Chinese was one of most important things I could do in Fuling. So much depended on knowing the language -- my friendships, my ability to function in the city, my understanding of the place" (60). This intention distinguishes him from the travel writers with no knowledge nor intention of learning the language of the traveled place as well as the migrants or diasporas with no choice but forced to learn the language of the destination country. And Hessler's relationship with the Chinese language is a thread running through his experiences of hardship and healing in Fuling, as Cronin argues: "How travel writers deal with the fact of languages other than their own...has clear implications for their capacity to engage with or interpret the realities they encounter" ("Knowing" 334). However, sheer will could not make learning the local language less daunting. Hessler came to Fuling with only a smattering knowledge of Chinese from a one-month intensive training given by the Peace Corps. But after the arrival, he quickly realized that Chinese is not just one single language: there were a mess of dialects in Sichuan that even a Chinese outsider couldn't understand, and the local language for communication also changed dramatically according to the education level of the speaker (Hessler 64-65). Though actually what Hessler needed

to do is to learn Mandarin, but at that time with no Chinese tutor and all the frustrating downtown experiences, he felt that his goal of learning Chinese in two years was completely hopeless. On the other hand, the mocking catcalls and the locals' convictions that "waiguoren couldn't learn Chinese" (60) also acted as impetus for Hessler to learn Chinese, and he kept reviewing the learning material from the Peace Corps training. However, when he started to take lessons with Chinese tutors, more hopelessness ensued: "My first tutorial with Teacher Liao was scheduled for two hours, but I lasted less than sixty minutes. I went home with my head reeling -- had a human being ever compressed more wrongness into a single hour? Everything was wrong -- tones, grammar, vocabulary, initial sounds" (67). Teacher Liao is one of two tutors the school found for Hessler and Meier; both tutors worked at the Chinese department and didn't speak any English. Apart from the humiliation out of infantilization when learning a new language as an adult, more frustration came from the significant difference between Chinese and American teaching styles. The Chinese way is to expect success and to criticize and correct failure, while the American way is to praise effort and to sugarcoat criticism. As Teacher Liao constantly said "budui" (not correct) to point out the mistakes without any encouragement, Hessler's satisfaction of making progress were constantly eclipsed by frustration.

And according to the cultural studies' sense of cultural translation, Hessler could be seen as being translated into Fuling, the foreign context where the locals live by their own cultural and ideological patterns, with his own cultural and ideological factors. Within this translation metaphor, the magnifying glass is put on the possible communications between the traveler and the locals. And from this aspect, the hardship Hessler encountered, especially in the first year, is basically rooted in prior exposure of cultural and political stereotypes. Though Hessler was always cautious against judging any situation without looking into the specific context, as an outsider, particularly in the early days of his stay in China, misunderstandings and misinterpretations were impossible to avoid. Similarly, Carl Thompson argues "we may set out as adventures, but subsequently have to acknowledge en route we are no more than tourists" (10). For example, when Hessler was having the intensive language training in Chengdu, one of the Chinese teachers, Teacher Shang, was from Manchuria. Not acquainted with the Chinese habit of drinking boiled hot water, Hessler saw her as "[e]ven in summer she clutched a bottle of tea in both hands as if for warmth" (6) since she came from the frozen north of China. What was more interesting was that Teacher Shang, though had never been to Fuling, told Hessler "with conviction" (6) that Fuling women were beautiful because of the river and mountains, but that they were also bad-tempered because of the hot weather. However, Hessler didn't recognize the somewhat similar mindset he shared with Teacher Shang. To him, she was Chinese and he was foreign; and the conclusion he drew from this was: "the Chinese saw their landscapes differently than outsiders did. I looked at the terraced hills and noticed how people had changed the earth, taming it into dizzying staircases of rice paddies; but the Chinese looked at the people and saw how they had been shaped by the land" (6). Such conclusion, to some extent, could be related with some major differences between Western and Chinese epistemologies in history. But at that time, Hessler's amazement at the Chinese terraced rice fields was mostly owing to his unfamiliarity with the agricultural situation along the Yangtze River: in John King Fairbank's words, "a vicious interdependence between dense population and intensive use of the soil" (13). Besides, in the first several weeks after Hessler arrived at Fuling, the Fuling Teachers College to him was "build on the ashes of the Cultural Revolution, where history was never far away and politics everywhere you looked" (Hessler 9). It seemed that during that period, to Hessler, the "history" was more political than factual and more recent than ancient. For example, Chinese students' difficulty of criticizing anything Chinese was attributed to that "they were constantly being indoctrinated by the Communist Party" (23); but Hessler didn't mention, or probably didn't know about at the time, the Confucian teaching of "being obedience" which had influenced Chinese education for centuries. A similar example pointed out by Paul A. Cohen is about the Taoist fable "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" that Hessler encountered a lot in students' journals, which he especially disliked (252). He saw it as "Mao's story" that build the foundations of economic policies during the years of Great Leap Forward that "affected hundreds of millions of people" (Hessler 134), but "showed little sense of the centuries-old presence of the story in Chinese culture" (Cohen 252) which was "nonsensical than the thousands of other stories that formed a vital part of China's cultural heritage" (Cohen 253). In this respect, during the early stage Hessler was actually not much different from his students who saw "what they wanted to see" (Hessler 16). To the students, Hessler and Meier were representatives of America and sometimes even the condensation of all foreign world. For example, in the journals, many students wrote about Hessler's long and straight nose and blue eyes, but actually his eyes were hazel (16). And one of the brightest students Annie once hated to see the two American teachers as she heard in the news that Bill Clinton was elected as the president partly because he would

be tough on China (Hessler 21). Besides, the "lazy game" (Hessler 17) frisbee that Hessler and Meier once played was described by one student as "Olympian" (17), concluding that "Foreigners are so versatile." (18) Basically, it was Orientalism in reverse: Hessler and Meier were observed by their students with an ambivalence of fascination and repulsion.

After the analysis of Hessler's hardships and before turning to the healing part, it has to be stated that there is no clear-cut borderline between the two descriptive aspects, which are two interwoven angles with different focal points. And accordingly, Hessler's healing could also be categorized into two aspects, gazing back into one's own world for comfort and stepping into a liminal space for communication.

Confronted with the culture shock in Fuling, especially the embarrassment and frustration out of the intense public attention and the difficulties of learning Chinese, Hessler became "clumsily self-conscious" (71) and felt like "Alice in Wonderland" (71) with the world "turned upside down" (71). During his early days in Fuling, Hessler's Chinese identity, He Wei (Hessler's Chinese name), was at an infant stage -- he couldn't use or understand the language, and the surroundings were all new to him. However, Hessler himself is a twenty-seven years old adult, graduated from Princeton and then Oxford. He came to Fuling to teach; and yes, in class he was doing what he was good at, but when he was out of campus he became clumsy and even illiterate. Such contradiction exasperated his sense of failure. He envied the locals' simple routines in the city and longed to find something repetitive in that way that he could do well to at least gain some satisfaction (71). So he turned to running, something he had done "for many years in many places" (91). Running was also an escape for Hessler: when he ran in the city, people couldn't crowd him, and the catcalls wouldn't last for long; and he usually ran in the hills behind campus, where there was no rules of etiquette, no crowd, and no "budui": "the fields were quiet and peaceful and the activity felt the same as it always had. That old well-known feeling -- the catch in my chest, the strain in my legs -- connected all the places where I had lived, Missouri and Princeton and Oxford and Fuling....As the months slipped past I realized that even these Sichuan hills, with their strange tombs and terraces, were starting to feel like home" (72). Later in the first semester, Hessler participated in the Fuling Annual Long Race. It was a sensation for the locals that a *waiguoren* was in the race, and their shouting of "waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren" (91) lasted all along the course; but it no longer bothered Hessler: when running, he felt "completely at home" (91). Hessler won the first place, and on the certificate he was designated by the name "Comrade He Wei." Unexpectedly, Hessler's way of seeking comfort also propelled his project of becoming local: he established that there was at least one thing He Wei could do well in Fuling. Several days after the race before a Chinese class, Teacher Liao praised him for the first time: "in all of Fuling City, you are the fastest person" (93); on that day, she rarely said "budui," and the phrase sounded much less harsh to Hessler.

The other skill that brought Hessler comfort was writing -- in his own language, English. Hessler came to Fuling with three motivations: teaching, learning Chinese, and becoming a better writer (60). For him writing, unlike running, was never intended to be a healing strategy, but a habit, a profession, a life goal. Hessler always had a notebook with him to jot down the people, conversations, events, and surroundings he encountered; then he would organize the notes in his apartment; and later he finished the book based on all the writing he had done in Fuling after went back to America. When Hessler was in Fuling, while running was an escape, writing was going back to the foreign reality and trying to make sense of it in his own language. In his apartment, there were two desks: "One was for studying Chinese, and the other was for writing; one desk was Ho Wei's (Hessler's Chinese name pronounced in local dialect) and the other belonged to Peter Hessler" (239). Hessler's Chinese identity grew as his Chinese competence and local immersion degree grew. In the second year of Hessler's stay, He Wei was becoming most of his identity. Outside campus, all the locals knew him in Chinese as He Wei -- friendly, funny and a little stupid (238). For the whole month of the second Spring Festival holiday, he was the only *waiguoren* in town and spoke nothing but Chinese, so English became "a language strictly for writing" (295). By then, Hessler had found his way to the local routines and felt that his Chinese life was settled at last; he no longer thought of himself as "being alone" (295). Before this turning point of Hessler's Chinese identity, especially during the early days, writing in English carried therapeutic side effects: it generated a space free from the embarrassment and frustration of not being able to get the basic Chinese expressions right; besides, it provided a chance to revisit the frightening experiences, the confusions and misunderstandings to alleviate the tension and painful feelings in hindsight.

In the other descriptive aspect, Hessler himself is the translated content being transposed to the foreign context of Fuling. As analyzed earlier, he was confronted with the cultural and historical power relations between China and America and the consequent stereotypes. Hessler was always seen by the locals as a *waiguoren*, a representative of an imagined, constructed collective. And Hessler himself, in



spite of his caution against such mindset, sometimes also saw the local people and events as representatives or sought only political explanations. Considerably, such obstacles were gradually resolved through communication in a liminal space, which was not immediately generated by Hessler's arrival in Fuling but was later signaled by one party of the communication starting to see the other as a real person.

The most distinct example is Hessler's changing relationship with his students. For the first semester, after a bumpy start fraught with etiquette problems and stereotypical assumptions, it was in the English literature class Hessler and his students started to put away the representative differences. Together they created something new and fresh through exchanging poetic clichés: Shakespeare's Dark Lady with slim fingers as scallion roots and eyebrows as leaves of willow (both are classical expressions in ancient Chinese literature for beautiful women) (44); and in Hessler's eyes, "both the students and *Hamlet* became something new" (48) through the students' performance of the play. *Hamlet* gained a tint of Fuling and the students became individuals with different characters. However, there were still occasions the students acted like a collective, opposing Hessler as an outsider, especially when the discussion topics involved criticizing anything Chinese. The turning point of such situation emerged in the second fall. As Hessler's Chinese advanced, he started to talk to the students in Chinese when outside class and found them to be "much more at ease" (339) and "completely different people" (339). Talking in Chinese, they did not avoid sensitive stuff, such as politics and the relationships with the school cadres, but handled it more comfortably (340). Besides, some of them started to help Hessler with the local dialect; then as the school officials warned the students to stop teaching the *waiguoren* dialect words, a "shared dissidence" (342) was gradually developed, and "the flow of language, which went both ways, was out of control," especially when interesting swear words were involved. When they learned Jonathan Swift in class, the students loved the word "yahoo" as its pronunciation was similar to the Chinese word of toothbrush, "yashua," which meant stupid in the local dialect; later in the Spanish class taught by Meier, they learned the Spanish counterpart "tonto"; and not long after, the three words became ubiquitous among the students and their conversations with Hessler (342). By then, they both "became much fuller figures" (342) to each other: the students no longer bowed their heads in awkward silence, and Hessler no longer felt as a *waiguoren* standing in front of them. In this case, Hessler's ability to use the Chinese language is a necessary -- though not sufficient -- condition for the communication in the liminal space to work; and the two parties in communication are brought closer by a mark of resistance against the authoritative power. However, the liminal space is not ideal but limited, fluid and unreliable as the variables could be beyond anticipation. At the end of Hessler's stay, he and Meier went downtown with a camera to film the city for remembrance. But in an unfamiliar area they were mistaken for foreign journalists deliberately filming the unappealing places of China and were caught in a row with the crowd (380-382). At that moment, Hessler was a *waiguoren* again: all the Chinese he learned and the experience he had were beaten by a stubborn stereotype.

In conclusion, cultural translation, with its two modes converging in cross-cultural travel memoir, could be a productive tool to avoid the pitfall of essentialism and trace the traveler's autobiographical path. Hessler's hardship and healing in Fuling presents the traveler's inner journey in his two-year stay through the changing relationships with the local language, people and surroundings. His will to learn Chinese and experience of learning it distinguish him from postcolonial adventurers and global tourists and promote the growth of a new, Chinese identity, which is the leading thread of the journey. And when confronted with linguistic, cultural, political as well as physical and psychological obstacles in a completely foreign context, Hessler's healing strategy -- gazing back to one's own world to seek comforting skills and reaching out to a liminal space to initiate local communication -- could provide insightful references to people, by choice or out of choice, on the move, living in foreign land, or facing cross-cultural contact in everyday reality.

Moreover, what would be interesting for future research is to look into the Chinese translation of *River Town*. There are two renditions published respectively in Mainland China and Taiwan. And the translator of the Mainland version, Li Xueshun, was Hessler's colleague in the Fuling Teachers College; so the translation, to some extent, could be read as a translation of cultural translation as well as an active dialogue between the local and the travel writer.

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