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## *Book Notes*

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Simon Winchester, *The River at the Centre of the World: A Journey up the Yangtze, and Back in Chinese Time*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. 432p. ISBN 0-805-05508-8. US\$16.00; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1998. 448p. ISBN 0-140-24912-5. £ 8.99 (pbk)

Simon Winchester's Yangtze begins at Shanghai and ends after almost 4,000 miles at its source some 15,000 feet high in the Tibetan mountains. With his Chinese companion and guide Lily he confronts the difficulties of travelling one of the longest rivers in the world, which is navigable for only a quarter of its length. Using different means of transport, on water, land and in the air, his path takes him through the diversity of China's geographical regions and ethnic groups towards the remoteness of its interior. From the polluted urban world to some sites of historical significance and contemporary controversy, and from there to the wildness of its source, Winchester leaves his readers with a deeply felt sense of people and place. Dr. Sun Yat Sen, Chiang Kai Shek and Mao Zedong all made parts of the Yangtze their own, but this is the people's river, whose daily life and history are recorded in Winchester's quest to enter the nation's psyche. His criticisms of China, which centre on the problems of pollution, the ugliness of its modern architecture and the neglect of its past, reach a climax in his discussion of the proposal to construct a dam which will flood the environmentally significant Three Gorges, between Chongqing and Wuhan. There is a sense, then, in which the Yangtze of this narrative-cum-interpretive account of the past and the present is a paean to a river which, like others around the world, is on the point of permanent change. A geographer and Briton by birth who has lived in Hong Kong, Winchester is the spiritual descendant of the explorers of another age who tracked rivers to their mystical sources and who embarked on seemingly impossible quests. He has written extensively on Asian affairs and has achieved prominence in recent years for his account of the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in *The Professor and the Madman* (*The Surgeon of Crowthorne*) and *The Map that Changed the World: William Smith and the Birth of Modern Geology*.

Peter Hessler, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. 416p. ISBN 0-060-19544-4. US\$26.00 (hdb); London: John Murray, 2001. 412p. ISBN 0-719-56156-6. £ 18.99 (hdb); New York: HarperCollins Publishers (Perennial), 2002. 416p. ISBN 0-060-95374-8. US\$13.95 (pbk); London: John Murray, 2002. 412p. ISBN 0-719-56480-8. £ 9.99 (pbk)

Peter Hessler's Yangtze flows past Fuling, the small industrial city of 250,000 people in Sichuan Province where he arrived to teach English at the teachers' college as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years in 1996. He and his colleague Adam Meier become the first foreigners for fifty years in a city which is not a destination to the Chinese themselves. Hessler and his *alter ego* Ho Wei observe its life at a time of enormous change in China: Hessler stands back and Ho Wei gives him the material

he enters into his computer. In 1997 Deng Xiaoping dies, Hong Kong returns to China, and the future of Fuling is threatened by the Three Gorges project, which will flood parts of the city and displace more than a million people. No longer remote from Beijing and Shanghai, its population faces an uncertain future. Hessler's students, most of whom come from poor villages, are preparing to become middle-school teachers, a position which will pay them less than a manual worker in a new economic zone. This is the context in which he teaches them English and American literature, debates politics with his Chinese language teacher in their "Opium Wars", runs in the local marathon, observes the lives of the people, and travels throughout the province and beyond. His students perform Shakespeare, have refreshing and challenging views on canonical texts, and contribute social, political and cultural perspectives to his story. An acute observer who speaks Chinese and is sensitive to the complexities of cultural conflict, Hessler overcomes some of the barriers he encounters and establishes friendships with several local people. He contrasts Western and Chinese attitudes and re-examines his own assumptions in a memoir which creates a new sense of himself and his subject. A native of Columbia, Missouri, Hessler was educated at Princeton and Oxford. He has published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Atlantic Monthly* and other works. A recent article, "Boomtown Girl", which describes the life of Ma Li, one of his students in Fuling who went to work in Shenzhen, appeared in the August/September 2001 issue of the Australian magazine *HQ*. Hessler lives in Beijing.

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