READING COMPREHENSION

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RETURN TO RIVER TOWN

A message from Life co-author, Helen Stephenson

Many people become English teachers because they want to see different places and experience different cultures. I was one of them. I consider myself very lucky in that my native language has been like a magic key that has opened doors to some fascinating worlds. I never made it to China, though I have to say it was on my 'list'. It seemed like a vast and unknowable country to me at one time. So I was interested to read this article about teaching in China and then returning there years later. What struck me most, however, was not what the author says about China, but what he says about learning from the people he met there. The article is taken from the March 2013 issue of National Geographic magazine.

In 1996, Peace Corps volunteer, Peter Hessler, arrived in Fuling, a quiet town on the Yangtze, to teach English. He went back recently to find the landscape and his former students transformed.

There is excellent mobile phone coverage at the bottom of the Yangtze River, although Huang Dejian is one of the few people who know this. He's the director of the new White Crane Ridge Underwater Museum and today his phone rings constantly at a depth of 40 metres. The museum is the strangest sight in the city of Fuling – visitors enter via a 100-metre-long escalator encased in a steel tube, like a massive straw dipped into the muddy Yangtze.

The last time I saw Huang, all this was dry land, the $34 million museum didn't exist and the Three Gorges Dam* was still under construction 450 kilometres downstream. Fuling sits at the junction of the Yangtze and the Wu Rivers, and in the mid-1990s it felt sleepy and isolated. There was no main road or railway line, and the Yangtze ferries took seven hours to reach Chongqing, the nearest large city. Foreigners were unheard of – if I ate lunch in the town centre,

I often attracted a crowd of 30 spectators. The city had one escalator, one nightclub, and no traffic lights. I didn't know anybody with a car.

In those days, I worked at Fuling Teachers College. Nearly all of my students came from rural homes with little tradition of education; many had illiterate parents. My students taught me many things, including what it meant to come from the countryside, where the vast majority of Chinese lived at the beginning of the reform era. They also taught me about the complexities of poverty in China. My students had little money, but they were optimistic, and they had opportunities; it was impossible to think of such people as poor.

During my visit, about 15 students return to Fuling for an impromptu reunion. They give updates on the classmates who, like so many Chinese of their generation, have migrated far from home. My old students are interested in analysing their society. One, who gave himself the English name of Mo Money says, 'Life is competitive. I think this is a special stage for China. In the past we criticised capitalist America. But now we are in a similar situation.'

My last meeting on this visit is with fishermen, Huang Zongming and his brother Zongguo. I was here when they moved out of their homes in June 2003, when the first stage of the dam was completed. The brothers tell me there's still good fishing upstream and Zongming has still never travelled on a train. I discover that they are the only people I know who remain virtually the same, despite the changes all around them.

**The Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River stretches for nearly 2.5 kilometres and is the largest concrete structure on Earth. It's five times as wide as the Hoover Dam in the United States and is the world's biggest power station.*

(https://www.ngllife.com/return-river-town-1)

Task 1. Answer the questions.

1. What is the strangest thing in the city of Fuling and why?

2. When Peter used to live in Fuling, how was he looked at by the locals?

3. What is unusual about Chinese students? Why couldn't they be seen as poor?

4. Did his students enjoy his teaching there? How do we know?

5. Why does Peter say that the two fishermen are the only two people that remain the same in the region?

Task 2. Mark the sentences true (T) or false (F).

1. Peter Hessler describes the changes he finds on his visit to Fuling.

2. In 1966, Peace Corps volunteer, Peter Hessler, arrived in Fuling.

3. Peter Hessler discovers that everyone he knew has moved away from the area.

4. There is excellent mobile phone coverage at the bottom of the Yangtze River.

5. After Peter's students left college they returned home to teach.