

## THE CULTURAL UNCONSCIOUS OF PETER HESSLER AS A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER TEACHER IN *RIVER TOWN*

*Hao Ming\**

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

School of Foreign Studies, Changsha University of Science and Technology,  
410004 Changsha, Hunan Province, China

E-mail: minghaocsu@gmail.com

*Shanthini Pillai\*\**

Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia  
and Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: spillai@ukm.edu.my

*Ravichandran Vengadasamy\*\*\**

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: ravicv@ukm.edu.my

Published online: 31 January 2024

To cite this article: Ming, H., Pillai, S. and Vengadasamy, R. 2024. The cultural unconscious of Peter Hessler as a Peace Corps volunteer teacher in *River Town*. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 20 (1): 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2024.20.1.7>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2024.20.1.7>

### ABSTRACT

*This article investigates the influence of the Peace Corps' salient ideology in Peter Hessler's works focusing on modern China. As a volunteer of the third cohort of the Peace Corps in China, Hessler served in Sichuan province from 1996 to 1998. We argue that the ideological overtones of the Peace Corps programme significantly influence his representation of China and use his memoir *River Town* as an example. Applying the concepts of the cultural unconscious by Ming Dong Gu, as well as decoloniality, colonial matrix of power and border thinking by Walter Mignolo*

*and Catherine Walsh, we show how Hessler's various actions in the memoir match the mission of the Peace Corps consciously and unconsciously. However, we also show that the narrative emits decoloniality through border thinking as Hessler eventually understands China and its different political culture and proceeds to recognise the shortcomings of American politics. While many enthusiasts of Hessler perceive his writings as challenging the dominant negative view of China in the Western mainstream media, we conclude that, from the perspective of the cultural unconscious, the Peace Corps volunteer's objective to spread American values far outweighed the Peace Corps' other mission of achieving a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the Americans.*

**Keywords:** Peter Hessler, Peace Corps, cultural unconscious, border thinking, decoloniality

## INTRODUCTION

On 16 January 2020, the United States (US) government abruptly announced the termination of its Peace Corps activities in China, which put the programme under the spotlight and aroused much controversy. The cessation of the programme in China was mainly due to changing American foreign policies towards the country. While the general reason was, according to the US senator Rubio (2020), that “China is no longer a developing country”, the following statement by Senator Scott (2020) reveals the underlying ideological reason for the withdrawal: “I am glad the Peace Corps has finally come to its senses and sees Communist China for what it is: the second largest economy in the world and an adversary of the United States”. Hessler (2020) discloses Scott Ricks' disappointment that the Peace Corps did not meet its objective: “What I have been told is that the volunteers who are there (China), they do not coordinate anything with the Senate department, they do not promote American values, they do not promote capitalism” (40).

We use this event as a point of departure in this article to investigate the salient ideology of the American Peace Corps as seen from the volunteer perspective. Our research sample is a memoir by an American Peace Corps volunteer, Peter Hessler. Around 1,400 Peace Corps volunteers served in China from 1993 to 2020, when the programme was operational. Three nonfictions have recorded the Peace Corps experience in China. They are *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* by Hessler (2001), *Kosher Chinese: Living, Teaching, and Eating with China's Other Billion* by Michael Levy (2011), and *Socrates in Sichuan: Chinese Students Search for Truth, Justice,*

and the (Chinese) Way by Peter J. Vernezze (2011). Of the three authors, Hessler is the only professional writer and has produced four bestsellers on modern China. Fostered by his Peace Corps experience, Hessler has come to be seen as a renowned storyteller on China. “By the time his books began to be published in China in 2010, he was a full-blown celebrity, eclipsing any other foreign writer on China” (Johnson 2015: 8). The American sinologist Jonathan Spence (2006) asserts, “Today’s China could have been made for him”, and Johnson (2015) regards Hessler as “the most influential popular writer in China in decades” (7). *River Town* is Hessler’s first book as a writer and his only book dedicated to the Peace Corps experience. The book is a winner of the Kiriya Prize and a *New York Times* notable book. It was translated into Chinese and published in mainland China in 2012.

Previous studies on Hessler focused mainly on his representation of China. It is widely acknowledged that Hessler challenges the traditional negative coverage of China in the mainstream Western media and presents a positive, progressive, and authentic China. The American sinologist and historian Paul Cohen (2013) views Hessler as an explainer of China to Americans: “He observes, he describes, he explains, but, although occasionally dismayed at individual Chinese, he almost never is judgmental about the Chinese collectively” (271). Johnson (2015) regards Hessler as a hero because Hessler’s portrayal helps explain a rising China and does so through gentle and often optimistic stories, which are similar to the Horatio Alger-type tales (from rags to riches stories) in American narratives. Wu (2018) claims *River Town* is one of the concrete rebuttals to holistic contentions of Western travel texts about non-Western countries. Is Hessler’s role as a Peace Corps volunteer truly altruistic as many believe it to be, and most significantly, is the ideology of the mission of the Peace Corps a salient feature? We now proceed with our investigation of Hessler’s *River Town* and how the ideological overtones of the Peace Corps are intertwined in his narrative imagination.

Our discussion will demonstrate how the narration of various episodes reveals the conscious and unconscious integration of the fundamental ideals of the Peace Corps. To explicate these elements, we draw on two frameworks. The first is the framework of the colonial matrix of power, decoloniality and border thinking as espoused by Mignolo and Walsh (2018). They describe that the colonial matrix of power is the invisible management and control of Western imperialism, in which coloniality is the underlying logic of the Western understanding of non-Western worlds. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) go on to contend that “coloniality is already a decolonial concept”, as the experience of seeing coloniality materialises decolonial thinking (112).

Decoloniality in turn requires border thinking, which is a form of delinking from the obedience to the colonial matrix of power and thus also from hegemonic epistemology (“absolute knowledge”) and the monoculture of the Western mind (Mignolo 2012: xvii).

The second framework is the cultural unconscious, advanced by Ming Dong Gu (2013). He uses the term to refer to the historico-psychological mechanism and a reservoir of desires, fear, predilections and preferences, and bias and prejudices that form the basis of the inner logic of the Westerners’ perception of China (Gu 2013). The cultural unconscious is the invisible background knowledge which influences the Western perception of China. These concepts by Mignolo and Walsh as well as Gu speak overtly to and build on the foundational aspects of the psychology of colonialism and orientalism as laid out by Frantz Fanon (2005) and Edward Said (1978), revealing the far reaches of their early formulations. These, we argue, are central to the mission of the Peace Corps.

In addition, the borders between binary worlds are inevitably porous, which is true of the Peace Corps. Thus, we integrate the aspects of decoloniality and border thinking by Mignolo and Walsh and the cultural unconscious by Gu. These concepts speak of disengagement from Western-centric knowledge systems and the effort to engage with “the other”. This study will show as well that Hessler’s narrative emits decoloniality through border thinking as he eventually understands China and its different political culture and proceeds to recognise the shortcomings of American politics.

## **THE BACKGROUND OF THE PEACE CORPS**

The Peace Corps was established in March 1961 by President Kennedy “for the training and service abroad of men and women of the US in new programs of assistance to nations and areas of the world, and in conjunction with or in support of existing economic assistance programs of the United States and of the United Nations and other international organizations” (Executive Order 10924 1961). From 1961 to 2021, over 240,000 volunteers served in more than 140 countries (Congressional Research Service 2021). The American policy on the Peace Corps waxes and wanes during different administrations, but the Peace Corps mission remains the same. A glance at the current official website shows that the goals of the Peace Corps are: (1) to help the people of interested countries meet their need for trained men and women; (2) to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served;

and (3) to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans (Peace Corps n.d.).

The idea of introducing Peace Corps into China started in 1979 after the normalisation of US-China relations. Nevertheless, the negotiation took more than a decade. It was not until June 1993 that the first group of Peace Corps volunteers arrived in China under the name of “US-China Friendship Volunteers”. Most Peace Corps volunteers in China were assigned to remote West China as English teachers. According to the US-China Friendship Volunteers Annual Report (Peace Corps 2018), from 1993 to 2018, as many as 1,391 Peace Corps volunteers completed their two-year assignments in more than 140 universities, colleges, and technical schools in China. Tens of thousands of Chinese teachers and students participated in the programme.

Initially, the Peace Corps was a tool of the Cold War to counter the influence of the Soviet Union in the Third World. Considering the Soviet Union had many more people who worked abroad in the service of world communism and had a closer tie with the Third World in the 1960s, the establishment of the Peace Corps was one of the US foreign policy decisions to contain the communist influence on the battlefield of the developing countries. The aims were as follows:

The official purposes for Peace Corps’ establishment were related more to foreign policy and international relations goals. This is the height of the US-Soviet Cold War relations, as such, the US government desired political influence, projecting power, maintaining spheres of influence over allies, and expanding it over newly independent states, constraining the other powers’ influence, and maintaining military, economic, and ideological superiority over others, particularly the Soviet Union. (Magu 2018: x)

Historically, the Peace Corps gained credit but also aroused controversies and critiques. In 1961, a Peace Corps volunteer teacher in Nigeria, Margery Michelmore, wrote a postcard back to the US, depicting the city of Ibadan where she served as a place with “squalor and absolutely primitive living conditions” (Kaliff 2021). She also described her personal feelings as “horrified shock” (Kaliff 2021). The postcard was intercepted by a Nigerian student, and its copies were distributed in the school. There were however repercussions as “Margery’s discussion of ‘primitive’ conditions and her blatant use of the word ‘underdeveloped’ not only broke the trust of host country nationals but also echoed the colonial rule that the country had just broken free from” (Kaliff 2021). During the 1970s, the Peace Corps’ reputation became soiled when the

public discovered that the organisation had been used as a front for gathering information for US government operations in Latin America (*The Michigan Daily* 2002). In 2008, US embassy officials in western Bolivia instructed Peace Corps volunteers to provide intelligence information about Cubans and Venezuelans living in Bolivia. It was in this controversial context that Hessler started his Peace Corps service in China in 1996. What is Hessler's Peace Corps experience like in China, and how does he perceive the reform era of China as an insider and an outsider?

### **HESSLER'S PEACE CORPS EXPERIENCE AS SEEN IN *RIVER TOWN***

Hessler served in the third cohort of the Peace Corps in Sichuan province, China, from 1996 to 1998. Before that, he had travelled to China in 1994 after graduating from the University of Oxford and found he liked the country. Hessler thus joined the Peace Corps in the US and specifically requested for China. He notes that his motivations for joining the Peace Corps in China were “to teach, learn Chinese, and become a better writer” (Hessler 2001: 53). After his Peace Corps service, Hessler chose to return to China and stayed as a staff journalist at *The New Yorker* and freelance writer in China for more than a decade. Hessler produced four books on China: *River Town* (2001); *Oracle Bones* (2006); *Country Driving* (2010); and *Strange Stones* (2013). *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001) is a unique collection of Hessler's Peace Corps memoir. In 2011, Hessler was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship for his “keenly observed accounts of ordinary people responding to the complexity of life in such rapidly changing societies as reform era China” (MacArthur Foundation 2011). In 2019, Hessler moved back again to China to teach nonfiction writing at the Sichuan University-Pittsburgh Institute and simultaneously reported on the outbreak of the pandemic. However, Hessler's contract was not renewed, and he had to return to the US in 2021.

*River Town* recounts Hessler's Peace Corps experience in the southwestern city of Fuling in the 1990s when the Chinese economy had just entered the phase of rapid growth. Hessler was then a 27-year-old American volunteer teacher at Fuling Teachers' College. Hessler arrived at Fuling in 1996, at a time when “no American had lived there for almost 50 years since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949” (Hessler 2001: 10). As China developed at a rapid pace after the reform and opening-up

policy and rose in the world, it has been deemed a threat to the West since the 1990s:

The image that China is on the way to becoming a threat to the West is a major one in the 21st century. It is visible in scholarly work, at the level of state policy and in popular opinion. Although most prevalent in the US, it is to a lesser extent also found elsewhere. (Mackerras 2013: 71)

Around the same time, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, in their book *The Coming Conflict with China*, viewed China as a new American enemy who was preparing to enter the world stage as a formidable power, since the Soviet Union was no more an open threat (Richard and Munro 1997). It was also predicted that China and the US were on a collision course, which would dominate the early decades of the twenty-first century. Against this background, Hessler started his career to report on modern China.

## **THE CULTURAL UNCONSCIOUS AND HESSLER’S PEACE CORPS EXPERIENCE**

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) assert that “coloniality is not over, it is all over”, which means the colonial influence, as a living legacy of colonialism, is pervasive today (119). As we march through modernity, the colonial matrix of power, “a complex structure of management and control of the West” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 10), impinges on all aspects of our life. Coloniality is implicit in the narrative of modernity. Meanwhile, in line with the colonial matrix of power, Gu speaks of the cultural unconscious with a specific focus on China studies in the West. Gu (2013) defines the cultural unconscious as follows:

... a cultural mental structure with invisible power that operates out of sight, but unconsciously influences, shapes, and controls the cultural activity of human life. In simple terms, the cultural unconscious forms the unobservable backdrop against which the observable human drama is enacted. (29)

Furthermore, Gu (2020) adds that the cultural unconscious is essentially a “colonial unconscious”, which is responsible for the alienated knowledge of China in the West. It is deeply hidden; even the most self-conscious critics and scholars are not immune to it.

The cultural unconscious acts as a reservoir of collective memory, which is invisible but serves as a yardstick for people to pass value judgement and map the outer world as common sense or universal truth. Observing numerous cases of inaccurate and distorted Western scholarship on China, Gu (2013) argues as follows:

The misperception of China by the West and misinterpretation of Chinese culture by the Chinese themselves do not simply come from the obvious factors of misinformation, biases and prejudices, or political interference, there is a fundamental logic sustained by epistemological and methodological underpinnings that has become a cultural unconscious. (1)

In other words, the “cultural unconscious” or “colonial unconscious” is a form of Western way of thinking, which deviates from the reality of China but is often taken for granted as the inner logic of Western knowledge production in China. Moreover, Gu (2013) claims that “the cultural unconscious is partly conscious and partly unconscious” (30). The cultural unconscious is invisible, but it influences people’s action even though they do not realise it.

Accordingly, when Hessler joined the Peace Corps in 1996, few volunteers were aware of its Cold War roots. Hessler (2020) recalls “Nobody from Peace Corps headquarters ever told me what I should or should not teach, and staff visited Fuling only twice in two years” (36). As Hessler (2001) retrospectively reviews his role as a volunteer teacher, he notes thus:

I had never had any idealistic illusions about my Peace Corps ‘service’ in China; I wasn’t there to save anybody or leave an indelible mark on the town. If anything, I was glad that during my two years in Fuling I hadn’t built anything, or organised anything, or made any great changes to the place. (304)

Hessler’s stand is not an isolated case. Few Peace Corps volunteers considered that their decisions and future work in far-off countries had potential foreign policy implications or that they were helping the US somehow fight the Cold War or defeat the Soviet Union. In fact, the Peace Corps has often been ridiculed as a “government-subsidised vacation for well-to-do white kids” (Magu 2018: 5). In addition, Hessler noticed the prevalent negative image of China in the West. As Hessler (2012) points out, he was not a big fan of the stories and reports about China in the foreign media in the late 1990s:



I felt that their understanding of China was rather shallow, and that their descriptions of Chinese people were very dry. Everything seemed grey and miserable in those stories, with none of the humour, energy and vitality that was my main impression from my time in Fuling. I hope that my writing is different from theirs, but I don't know if Chinese people will come to that conclusion. (6)

Hessler also believes that he differed from his peers in the portrayals of modern China, convincing himself that he was following his intuition to write the truth about China.

Nonetheless, Hessler compares his travel along the Yangtze River to “following Kurtz up the Congo” (Hessler 2001: 273), alluding to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) under the colonial matrix of power. Based on the following analysis of *River Town* from the perspective of the cultural unconscious, this paper argues that Hessler fulfils his mission to spread American ideology and values as a Peace Corps volunteer consciously and unconsciously. Hessler still views China from the Western lens and reinforces American cultural hegemony as the cultural unconscious is ingrained in his mind and acts as a yardstick for him to judge his outer world in China.

## ANALYSIS

### Cultural Unconscious in Hessler's “Helping” of China

The first goal of the Peace Corps is to help the people of interested countries meet their need for trained men and women. The goal of Peace Corps volunteers in China, under the name of US-China Friendship volunteers, to train English teachers and build friendship between the US and China, is an altruistic expression of America. However, at the same time, the Peace Corps has served as a powerful symbol of American values since its inception. Hessler (2020) claims China was the only communist country that accepted volunteers in 1996 when the Peace Corps sent volunteers to Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and other former Soviet bloc states. The first Peace Corps Director for China, William Speidel, recalled that the Americans were overjoyed, as “the idea that Peace Corps had a foothold in Communist China was really something” (Hessler 2020: 36).

Hessler's job in China was to teach the English language and literature at Fuling Teachers' College. Most students were from the countryside and expected to return to work as English teachers in rural middle schools in

China after graduation. It should be noted that the volunteer teachers enjoyed a great deal of freedom in their teaching:

Our teaching freedom was arguably greater than it would have been in America. Nobody checked our syllabi or hassled us about course content, and we structured our classes exactly as we wished. I was especially impressed that they even let us teach classes like literature and culture, which often had strong political overtones. (Hessler 2001: 262)

In this way, Hessler exported the American system to young Chinese students. He introduced the US political system into his class by presenting his absentee ballot for the American presidential election of 1996. Hessler was impressed by the students' response to the vote as they carefully examined the ballot. When Hessler retrieved the ballot, he recorded: "The room was so silent, and they were watching with such intensity, that my heart was racing" (Hessler 2020: 36). He might not have realised it was of any significance. However, in 2018, during his revisit to Fuling, his former students brought up his lecture and said, "That made a deep impression. I've always thought about that" (Hessler 2020: 38). Obviously, Hessler's teaching complies with the American advocacy that democracy is the best political system in the world and that all countries should embrace it.

Unconsciously and consciously, the Peace Corps volunteer teachers had an invisible impact on Chinese students. Hessler had no trust in the Chinese government and officials since he arrived at Fuling. He hardly believed anything coming from the Chinese government. Similarly, Hessler (2001) always encouraged the students to be "questioning and to be irreverent" (290). This was not a problem if it was in the field of study. However, regarding the relationship between students and teachers, the traditional values of obedience to the teacher and respect for the school authority in Chinese education fell apart. Hence, when the students confronted the college authority, Hessler and his colleague, Adam, who was the other Peace Corps volunteer teacher in Fuling, felt guilty, as their English play was blacklisted as the result of political sensitivity:

Adam felt guilty, and even though it was not my class I felt the same way, because there was no question that our influence had led the students into trouble... We had a direct effect on those students, and we had always encouraged them to be open-minded, questioning, and irreverent. Some of this had been intentional—the debates about

Robin Hood, the conversations in Chinese—but mostly it was a matter of our fundamental identity. (Hessler 2001: 290)

The Peace Corps has been a highly effective diplomatic tool for the US government as volunteers spread American ideology and values consciously and unconsciously, which serves American interests. The Peace Corps in China was a platform for the US to gain local knowledge. After the Peace Corps service in China, many volunteers continued to pursue a career that was relevant to their experiences, such as writers, diplomats, and academics who contributed an abundance of expertise to the US understanding of China (Schmitz 2020). Michael Meyer, a former volunteer in China from 1995 to 1997, expresses in an interview, “it’s very one-sided to say that Peace Corps in China was only benefiting the Chinese. That is not true at all. If anything, it benefited the American side much more” (Becker 2021).

The closure of the Peace Corps in China highlighted the unrealistic American expectation of the Peace Corps to influence China. Senator Scott Rick complained that the Peace Corps had not coordinated with the US government to promote American values, to which a former Peace Corps volunteer, Schmitz (2020) gave a befitting response:

What I think critics of the program do not understand is that Peace Corps volunteers in China are not propping up an authoritarian government. They are building relationships and teaching young Chinese about American values. You know, when I was a volunteer, I taught Western civilization, US history. And that included concepts like democracy and how it works in the US...This is likely one of the most important, unintentional soft power programs the US has in China.

The Peace Corps was “one of the least expensive instruments being used to advance US foreign policy objectives” (Nisley 2013: 539). After the Cold War, the Peace Corps was sent to East Europe to impart lessons in capitalism. The attacks of 11 September 2001 compelled the Bush administration to propose increasing the number of Peace Corps volunteers to spread American values. While it has been alleged that the Peace Corps’ responsibility is to help the Third World achieve a better life in the name of altruism, the volunteers have in fact served American interests as pawns of the US government by spreading American ideology and values. Born and raised in America, Hessler became a spokesperson for American values, either consciously or unconsciously,

as the Western-centric knowledge had been incorporated into his mind as common sense.

### **The Cultural Unconscious in Hessler's Promoting a Better Understanding of the Americans**

The second goal of the Peace Corps was to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served. As such, Peace Corps volunteers were to demonstrate America's best attributes in their contacts with locals at the grassroots level. Hessler presented an admirable American life and working style which were attractive to the young students. The American teacher's casualness and his American way of life were idealised by the Chinese students. For example, a typical game of Frisbee between Hessler and Adam was deemed "Olympian", and the students concluded, "foreigners are so versatile" (Hessler 2001: 20). Unlike Chinese teachers, Hessler and Adam encouraged casualness and informality in class. Hence, they cultivated an excellent relationship with their students, which was serious yet light-hearted. "Our relationship had a combination of humor and seriousness that seemed perfect for China" (Hessler 2001: 265).

In addition to maintaining a positive image of America, Hessler countered the unfavourable image of the US in the textbook edited by Chinese teachers. He was not satisfied with the ideas about American culture in the textbook, so he "kept the students as far as possible from the *Survey of Britain and America*" and chose some alternative materials to promote a better understanding of the US among Chinese students (Hessler 2020: 36). In addition, America was depicted as a superpower of advanced technology, affluence, freedom, and democracy. In a debate on the Chinese one-child policy, arranged deliberately by the Peace Corps volunteer teacher, the Chinese student, Rebecca, claimed there was not as much freedom in China as in America, regardless of the problems of overpopulation in China. Hessler responded slowly and cautiously, "I guess I would agree with you" (Hessler 2001: 141). In short, Peace Corps volunteers constructed an idealised and admirable American lifestyle among young Chinese students.

A better understanding of the Americans is seen in Hessler's Chinese language teacher, Ms. Liao. According to Hessler, Ms. Liao had a strong sense of Chinese tradition and was a fiercely proud woman. She had no tolerance for foreigners' condescending attitudes towards the Chinese. In their Chinese class, tension arose as Ms. Liao and Hessler had divergent views on some issues, such as whether China was a democratic country and whether China

was self-sufficient in oil. Although Hessler (2001) said he had never been a patriot, he challenged Ms. Liao with American narratives about China, such as how rich Hong Kong had become under the British rule. Through the arguments and exchange of opinions, Ms. Liao and Hessler saw each other clearly and learnt how to deal with each other. During the two years, Ms. Liao became more tolerant of her American students and even saved Hessler from an insult by a patronising Chinese cadre at their farewell party.

From the analyses above, it is evident that as a Peace Corps volunteer, Hessler represents American culture and values, and he made a great deal of impact, both consciously and unconsciously, on the Chinese who had little real-life experience with foreigners. Hessler has moreover contributed to a better understanding of the Americans by promoting a positive image of the US. As a former volunteer in China from 2006 to 2008, Steve Hess comments: “The volunteers were in China to serve and represent America and its ideals. It is a unique combination of nationalism and globalism” (Friedlein 2020).

### **The Cultural Unconscious in Hessler’s Understanding of China**

The third goal of the Peace Corps is to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. The Peace Corps allows the US to gain local knowledge and understand the countries that they had served in. In contrast, the US government often neglects local knowledge and deems it least crucial. The one-sided termination of the programme in China by the US government explains the ideology of “America first” by itself. Besides, there are also problems in Hessler’s understanding of China.

First, from the perspective of the cultural unconscious, Hessler’s perception of China is not without its biases and stereotypes. Hessler disliked the representation of China in the Western media as he believed their narratives about China had been Beijing-centred and predominantly negative; however, Hessler’s source of information was primarily derived from the West. He confesses as follows:

I had access to a great deal of information that was unavailable to the Chinese, and as a result I often felt as if I understood the political situation better than the locals. It was impossible to avoid this type of arrogance, even though I realised that it was misleading and condescending, and I was careful not to voice my opinions openly. (Hessler 2001: 119)

Despite living and working in China, Hessler still followed the American discourse, which tends to describe China as a backward, authoritarian, and inferior “other”. Hence, viewing China through the American lens and repeating the Western narrative of modern China, Hessler developed the stereotype that all small Chinese cities are “dirty”, “messy”, and “frightening”. He wrote the following in his memoir:

There are no bicycles in Fuling. Otherwise, it is similar to any other small Chinese city—loud, busy, dirty, crowded; the traffic twisted, the pedestrians jostling each other; shops overstaffed and full of goods, streets covered with propaganda signs; no traffic lights, drivers honking constantly; televisions blaring, people bickering over prices; and along the main streets rows of frightened-looking trees, their leaves gray with coal dust, the same gray dust that covers everything in the city. (Hessler 2001: 28)

As a developing country, China did have problems such as pollution, overpopulation, and inadequate infrastructure in the 1990s. Nevertheless, while Fuling was underdeveloped in remote southwestern China at that time, the act of homogenising all small Chinese cities as similar in nature reflected a negative colonialist stereotype. As Hessler’s Chinese proficiency improved though, he found the city of Fuling was better than before and the people were friendlier. He spent most of his spare time in the city, wandering around and talking to people.

Similarly, Hessler depicted China as an exotic and underdeveloped “other” to America. In *River Town*, Fuling, along the mountainous city’s narrow, long stone staircase, was full of shoppers, porters, cobblers, barbers, and fortune-tellers:

. . . a traditional Chinese physician who has a regular stand near the top of one of the stairways. His stand consists of a stool, a box of bottles, and a white sheet with big characters that say: ‘To help you Relieve Worries and Solve Problems! Treatments: Corns, Sluggishness, Black Moles. Ear Checks. Surgery - No pains. No Itching. No Bloodletting. No Effects on Your Job!’. (Hessler 2001: 28)

The “traditional Chinese physician” described by Hessler seems to be at best a charlatan and hardly connected in any way with traditional Chinese physicians. Traditional Chinese medicine is based on long-term observation and has been successfully practised in China for thousands of years. Many Chinese still prefer to consult a traditional Chinese physician, as traditional Chinese

medicine is hospital-based and delivers almost 40% of health care services in contemporary China (Scheid 1999). However, traditional Chinese medicine and its practitioners have not been recognised or meet with scepticism in the West, and Hessler's attitude above epitomises this. As Wong et al. (2012: 2) note, "Chinese medical diagnostics and therapeutics remain obscure to most Western medicine practitioners, partly because of different terminology and concepts. Although important interpretative and translational work has been in progress, a great deal remains to be done" (2).

Hessler's cultural unconscious thus repeated the Western narrative of China, as he regarded China as an authoritarian country and all Chinese leaders as dictators. He resented Chinese leaders even without any valid reasons. For example, Hessler (2001) states, "I disliked Mao intensely. This was not unusual for a 'waiguoren' (foreigner). There weren't many reasons to like him when you come from outside" (11). He also expressed:

In Fuling I came to dislike the sight of his fat smug face, and I disliked his pithy sayings and neat theories that were so easily memorised. Especially I disliked Mao's story 'The Foolish Man Who Moved the Mountain'. (Hessler 2001: 110)

Hessler's blind resentment towards the Chinese leader made him paranoid. Consequently, he took the ancient Chinese fable as Mao's fabricated story by mistake and attacked Mao personally. At the same time, Hessler was dismissive of the Chinese political system and avoided all Chinese officials, which is irrational:

Generally, I avoided the cadres, which fortunately wasn't hard to do. I never went to the 'waiban' (Foreign Affairs Office) unless it was absolutely necessary, and I tried not to talk with any of the administrators. In my apartment I had two telephones: one for outside calls and a campus line. It worked nicely because only the cadres used the campus line, which I never answered. (Hessler 2001: 260)

Thus, the cultural unconscious of Hessler, like with many Western reporters, was that all Chinese officials were corrupt and evil, a common rhetoric of Western discourse on China. His dismissive attitude towards Chinese leaders and intense distrust of Chinese officials were inseparable from the pervasive adverse reports on China in the West, which were ingrained in his cultural unconscious. In this sense, "Hessler was actually not much different from his students who saw 'what they wanted to see'" (Wu 2018: 6).

Hessler's stereotypes of and biases towards China in the memoir have in turn been endorsed by the American reader, Richardson, L. M. (2001), who also served in China as a diplomat. In his review of *River Town*, Richardson saw a repressive, rigid, brutal, xenophobic, and Communist China, and concluded that China had hardly changed in the past fifty years: it was still a hostile cultural and linguistic environment, in which the people were shaped by the harsh reality of primitive agriculture and its economic hardships and deprivation; the people were bowed down under the weight of social traditions that still imposed rigid rules on personal behaviour, and finally, and most notably, they were oppressed by the brutality of communism's excesses.

Second, Hessler boasted an inalienable sense of superiority and overconfidence in his dealings with the Chinese locals. By taking on a Chinese name, Ho Wei, Hessler created a new identity in China. Nonetheless, Hessler regarded Ho Wei as insane, stupid, and inferior, which revealed a sense of superiority in his real identity. The imperial gaze still exists in Hessler's writing as seen in the following excerpt:

Ho Wei was completely different from my American self: he was friendlier, he was eager to talk with anybody, and he took great pleasure in even the most insane conversations. In a simple way, he was funny; by saying a few words in the local dialect, he could be endlessly entertaining to the people in Fuling. Also, Ho Wei was stupid, which was what I liked the most about him...and when Ho Wei returned home, he left the notebook on the desk of Peter Hessler, who typed everything into his computer. (Hessler 2001: 186)

In another example, Hessler and his colleague Adam went out to shoot their farewell video before departing for the US at the end of their Peace Corps service. They attracted a crowd of people. Hessler was shooting a video while Adam created a diversion by juggling a steamed bun (a local Chinese food):

Adam dropped a bun. He picked it up and tossed it across the street toward me. He pointed me out, and the people laughed, turning back to Adam as he told another joke. Slowly I panned across the faces once more, and then suddenly the viewfinder went black. (Hessler 2001: 294)

A Chinese man blocked Hessler's camera, saying, "You cannot do this. You cannot film here" (Hessler 2001: 294). Hessler was irritated and challenged, "Leave me alone. I am not doing anything wrong; get out of here. Blow away"



(Hessler 2001: 294). As the crowd gathered and the man got angry, Hessler and Adam ran away. After the incident, Hessler recalled as follows:

Most painfully, it showed the mistakes that we had made, starting with drawing a crowd in a part of town that we didn't know well. It also showed that Adam had been too nonchalant, milking the attention, and it showed that he had been disrespectful in tossing the bun across the street. It showed that I was far too quick to anger and use strong language; from the tape it seemed that the man might have left me alone if I hadn't insulted him. (Hessler 2001: 295)

Although Hessler and Adam escaped the “mob” successfully, the memory of their confrontation with the crowd was traumatic. Indeed, Hessler and Adam did not mean to offend the locals, but their nonchalant joking, tossing of Chinese food, and insulting words finally led to the catastrophe. The incident reveals their unconscious disrespect for and offence towards the locals.

Despite Hessler's claim that he aimed to write the truth about China, Hessler did not escape the colonial matrix of power of the American culture, as almost all of his knowledge about China was from America. Hence, Hessler's views of China were still from the American lens and thus also reflected the coloniality of the American culture and his innate sense of superiority and overconfidence in dealing with the Chinese locals due to the legacy of colonialism and his inherent cultural unconscious.

### **Border Thinking in Hessler's Peace Corps Experience**

It must be noted however that Hessler's writing was not an absolute reflection of the colonial matrix of power, as he did show some aspects of border thinking, of delinking from the hegemonic epistemology of the colonial matrix of power or what Mignolo and Walsh have termed as “epistemic disobedience” to this power. As a Peace Corps volunteer in China, Hessler gained a new insight into China and America through the perspective of both an insider and an outsider and thus inevitably showed some ambivalence in his writing.

In Hessler's point of view, China is an authoritarian country. Living in Fuling, Hessler found most Chinese were disengaged from political affairs. In fact, Chinese meritocracy supports democratic values but not elections. Meritocracy can be acknowledged as a democracy even when it does not fully agree with Western standards (Arcila 2021). From a Chinese perspective, democracy is achieved not necessarily through suffrage but by a prestigious and experienced elite capable of running the country according to the people's

will. Hessler (2001) concludes thus: “In the end, Fuling struck me as a sort of democracy—perhaps a Democracy with Chinese Characteristics—because the vast majority of the citizens quietly tolerated the government” (117). Reflecting on his role in the Peace Corps, Hessler (2001) also realised his involvement in American democracy was “casting meaningless votes and accepting the results” (116). It finally became clear to him that his participation in the American system was shallow. “I had never cast a vote that truly made a difference, and I never would; elections are not decided by a single tally” (Hessler 2001: 116). Hence, he concludes, “regardless of whether it was Chinese or American government claiming to be empowered by the common person, part of it was ‘dishonest wordplay’” (Hessler 2001: 116).

Hessler was annoyed by the Chinese propaganda but found that America was no different. *The Voice of America* (the international radio broadcaster of the US), which targets audiences in China, was a “propaganda organ” (Hessler 2001: 117) as well. Hessler noted that his Chinese teacher, Ms. Liao, had no patience for foreigners’ views towards China. However, he wrote, “In some ways, I couldn’t blame her; the American press tended to portray a China that was overwhelmingly negative and Beijing-centred”. Hessler was very sceptical of the Chinese teaching materials. He challenged Ms. Liao with different ideas so that she doubted what Hessler had learnt in America. After their arguments, such as whether China was self-sufficient in oil, Hessler claimed Ms. Liao had been brainwashed by Chinese propaganda. However, he realised America was no better than China:

More sensible voices sounded in my head—what about Pat Buchanan? America First? The anti-Chinese laws in the nineteenth century?—but the balance was not my goal. I was fighting fire with fire, and I responded to propaganda with more of the same. (Hessler 2001: 119)

In short, through border thinking, Hessler broke through the binary dichotomy in the Western narrative of China. However, he realised that it was not all that simple. “I was a Peace Corps volunteer, but I wasn’t. China was Communist, but it wasn’t” (Hessler 2001: 14). Hessler developed an ambivalent feeling about his Peace Corps work: “Nothing was quite what it seemed, and that was how life went in those early days, everything uncertain and half a step off” (Hessler 2001: 13). Thus, as much as *River Town* revealed the ideological overtones of the Peace Corps programme, it did mitigate the stereotype of a threatening China as perennially depicted in mainstream Western media. In many ways, Hessler presented a hybrid and contradictory China. It is in accord with what was maintained in *Modern China*:

China is a continent, not just a country. It is a series of identities, some shared, some differentiated, and some contradictory: modern, Confucian, authoritarian, democratic, free, and restrained. Above all, China is a plural noun. (Mitter 2008: 11)

Through border thinking, instead of describing China in a black-and-white way, Hessler developed an ambivalent attitude towards modern China and concludes as follows:

The town wasn't simple, and neither was my role there, it would be wrong to say that I had failed in my efforts to make Fuling a comfortable home, and it would be just as inaccurate to claim that I had been entirely successful. There were good days and there were bad days. To some degree, this was what I like most about Fuling: it was a human place, brightened by decency and scarred by flaws, and a town like that was always engaging. For two years, I had never been bored". (Hessler 2001: 298)

Lastly, the Peace Corps experience offered Hessler an alternative perspective to the American culture. Hessler bemoaned the shutdown of the programme and deemed it a loss of American confidence and turndown of grassroots knowledge. Upon the unexpected shutdown of the Peace Corps in China, Hessler gave a speech for an in-service training of the Peace Corps in China. He noted that the American volunteers were stunned, and the Chinese staff had stoic expressions. Hence, Hessler suspected that the decision to break ties with China was more of a diplomatic conflict, which had never happened in the Peace Corps' history. Hessler (2020) discloses that Senator Rick Scott, who advocated withdrawing the Peace Corps from China, acknowledged that he and his staff had not spoken with any volunteers in China, which is quite ironic given the claims of democratic America. Furthermore, Hessler (2020) writes that the "pressure on the Peace Corps was connected to a growing anti-China sentiment", and admits to "the frustration that China has not followed a path that Americans would prefer in history" (39).

Thus, one could argue that, in a sense, the termination of the programme was a result of the colonial matrix of power, ironically at a time when the third objective of the Peace Corps was about to be realised. As Hessler began to understand China and America more, American authority intervened and shut down the Peace Corps operations in China, that in turn closed the borders for his further understanding. Hessler's (2020) response to this act of the US government however revealed the impact of border thinking and decoloniality

as he lamented the shutdown of the Peace Corps in China, and likened the one-sided withdrawal of the programme to America's regression into a closed system: "every contact was a threat, and every exchange was zero-sum" (40). This statement certainly reveals a delinking from an absolute obedience to the American colonial matrix of power.

## CONCLUSION

In his nonfictional work titled *River Town*, Hessler offered an exclusive perspective into modern China as an insider as well as an outsider. Unlike his peers, Hessler did not portray China in a black-and-white way. Instead, Hessler followed his intuition to write about modern China. However, this paper has uncovered that Americentric knowledge is the basis of the inner logic of Hessler's perception of modern China, based on the concepts of colonial matrix of power and the cultural unconscious, more so than decoloniality and border thinking, though the latter is apparent at later junctures. Despite living for more than a decade in China, Hessler's understanding of China was still based on the American discourse and his American cultural background. Hence, a deep Western bias and stereotypes from the colonial matrix of power still prevailed in his representation of China regardless of whether he was aware of them or not, thus pointing to a cultural unconscious, especially when China has historically been deemed an enemy and a threat to America. Many enthusiasts of Hessler regarded his writings as challenging the dominant negative view of China in the Western mainstream media; but, from the perspective of the cultural unconscious, the Peace Corps' objective to spread American values far outweighed its other mission of achieving a better understanding of other people. However, this is not to say that Hessler remained unchanged by the Peace Corps experience and completely under the sway of the colonial matrix of power. He did cross some borders of understanding and thus revealed some level of decoloniality in that he expressed an ambivalent attitude towards China, as well as American policies and culture.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the Editor-in-Chief, Dr Grace V. S. Chin and the reviewers for their invaluable contributions to the preparation and enhancement of this manuscript throughout the

publication process. Their commitment to the peer-review process, patience, and dedication were instrumental in shaping the paper into its current form.

## NOTES

- \* Hao Ming is a PhD candidate, researching on China in English literature at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). He is also a lecturer in Changsha University of Science and Technology, China. His areas of interest include postcolonial literature and travel writing in English.
- \*\* Shanthini Pillai (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Research in Language and Linguistics of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM and an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM. Her research interests are anchored primarily in ethnic diversity, diaspora, transnationalism and religious mobilities in literary and cultural texts with particular reference to the global South Asian diaspora. She has held Research Fellowships at the University of Queensland, Australia, the Asia Research Institute, Singapore as well as Université Catholique de l'Ouest, France. She has published widely in her field, with articles in various high-indexed academic journals as well as book volumes.
- \*\*\* Ravichandran Vengadasamy (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Research in Language and Linguistics, UKM. He is currently the Head of the Postgraduate Programme at the Centre. His research and teaching interests include postcolonial literature, Malaysian literature in English, cognitive and literary stylistics and academic writing.

## REFERENCES

- Arcila, J. J. 2021. Meritocracy: China's form of democracy. *Online Journal Mundo Asia Pacifico* 10 (19): 121–129.
- Becker, J. 2021. Michael Meyer on the end of the Peace Corps Program in China. *Asia Experts Forum*, 8 November 2021. <https://asiaexpertsforum.org/michael-meyer-end-peace-corps-program-china/> (accessed 5 February 2023).
- Cohen, P. A. 2013. Peter Hessler: Teacher, archaeologist, anthropologist, travel writer, master storyteller. *Journal of Asian Studies* 72 (2): 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911812002197>
- Congressional Research Service. 2021. The Peace Corps: Overview and issues. 17 December 2021. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21168> (accessed 16 January 2024).
- Executive Order 10924. 1961. Establishment of the Peace Corps 1961. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-10924> (accessed 5 February 2023).
- Fanon, F. 2005. *The wretched of the earth*. Trans. Philcox, R. New York: Grove Press.

- Friedlein, J. 2020. Transylvania professor spearheads effort to keep Peace Corps in China. *The Official Blog of Transylvania University*, 21 February 2020. <https://www.transy.edu/1780/2020/02/transylvania-professor-spearheads-effort-to-keep-peace-corps-in-china/> (accessed 5 February 2023).
- Gu, M. D. 2020. What is ‘decoloniality’? A postcolonial critique. *Postcolonial Studies* 23 (4): 596–600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1751432>
- . 2013. *Sinologism: An alternative to orientalism and postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Hessler, P. 2020. The Peace Corps breaks ties with China. *The New Yorker*, 9 March 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/16/the-peace-corps-breaks-ties-with-china> (accessed 6 February 2023).
- . 2012. *Jiang Cheng*. Trans. Li, X. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- . 2001. *River town: Two years on the Yangtze*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Johnson, I. 2015. An American hero in China. *The New York Review*, 7 May 2015. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/05/07/peter-hessler-american-hero-china/?pagination=false> (accessed 6 February 2023).
- Kaliff, R. 2021. The “Peace Corps postcard”: A brief history of Peace Corps critiques. *Peace Corps Community Archives*, 5 November 2021. <https://blogs.library.american.edu/pcca/the-peace-corps-postcard-a-brief-history-of-peace-corps-critiques/> (accessed 5 February 2023).
- Mackerras, C. 2013. *China in my eyes: Western images of China since 1949*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press.
- Magu, S. M. 2018. *Peace Corps and citizen diplomacy: Soft power strategies in U.S. foreign policy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.
- MacArthur Foundation. 2011. Peter Hessler. <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2011/peter-hessler> (accessed 16 January 2024).
- Mignolo, W. D. 2012. *Local histories/global designs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400845064>
- Mignolo, W. D. and Tlostanova, M. V. 2006. Theorizing from the borders: Shifting to geo- and body-politics of knowledge. *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2): 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063333>
- Mignolo, W. D. and Walsh, C.E. 2018. *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779>
- Mitter, R. 2008. *Modern China: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nisley, T. 2013. Send in the Corps! The Peace Corps and the popular perception of the United States in Latin America. *Politics & Policy* 41 (4): 536–562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12027>
- Peace Corps. n.d. About. <https://www.peacecorps.gov/about/> (accessed 16 January 2024).
- . 2018. US-China Friendship Volunteers annual report 2018. [https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/ANNUAL\\_REPORT\\_2018\\_PDF.pdf](https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/ANNUAL_REPORT_2018_PDF.pdf) (accessed 16 January 2024).
- Richard, B. and Munro, R. 1997. *The coming conflict with China*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Richardson, L. M. 2001. China, taken personally. *Policy Review* 107: 83–93.

- Rubio, M. 2020. Rubio statement on Peace Corps' withdrawal from China. 16 January 2020. <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2020/1/rubio-statement-on-peace-corps-withdrawal-from-china> (accessed 6 February 2023).
- Said, E. W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Scheid, V. 1999. The globalization of Chinese Medicine. *The Lancet* 354: SIV10. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(99\)90353-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(99)90353-7)
- Schmitz, R. 2020. Peace Corps to end China program. *NPR*, 24 January 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/799358578/peace-corps-to-end-china-program> (accessed 6 February 2023).
- Scott, R. 2020. Sen. Rick Scott on the Peace Corps ending programs in Communist China: I'm glad they finally came to their senses. 16 January 2020. <https://www.rickscott.senate.gov/2020/1/sen-rick-scott-peace-corps-ending-programs-communist-china-im-glad-they-finally-came-their-senses> (accessed 6 February 2023).
- Spence, J. 2006. Letter from China. *The New York Times*, 30 April 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/books/review/30spence.html> (accessed 16 January 2024).
- The Michigan Daily*. 2002. In pursuit of peace: Bush should fund Peace Corps keep it clean. *The Michigan Daily*, 4 February 2002. <https://www.michigandaily.com/uncategorized/pursuit-peace-bush-should-fund-peace-corps-keep-it-clean/> (accessed 7 February 2023).
- Wong, E. Y., Gaster, B. and Lee, S. P. 2012. East meets West: Current issues relevant to integrating Chinese medicine. *Chinese Medicine* 7: 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1749-8546-7-20>
- Wu, S. 2018. Hardship and healing through the lens of cultural translation in Peter Hessler's travel memoir *River Town*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20 (5). <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3397>