PETER HESSLER

# COUNTRY DRIVING

## A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory

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# COUNTRY DRIVING

Also by Peter Hessler

*River Town*

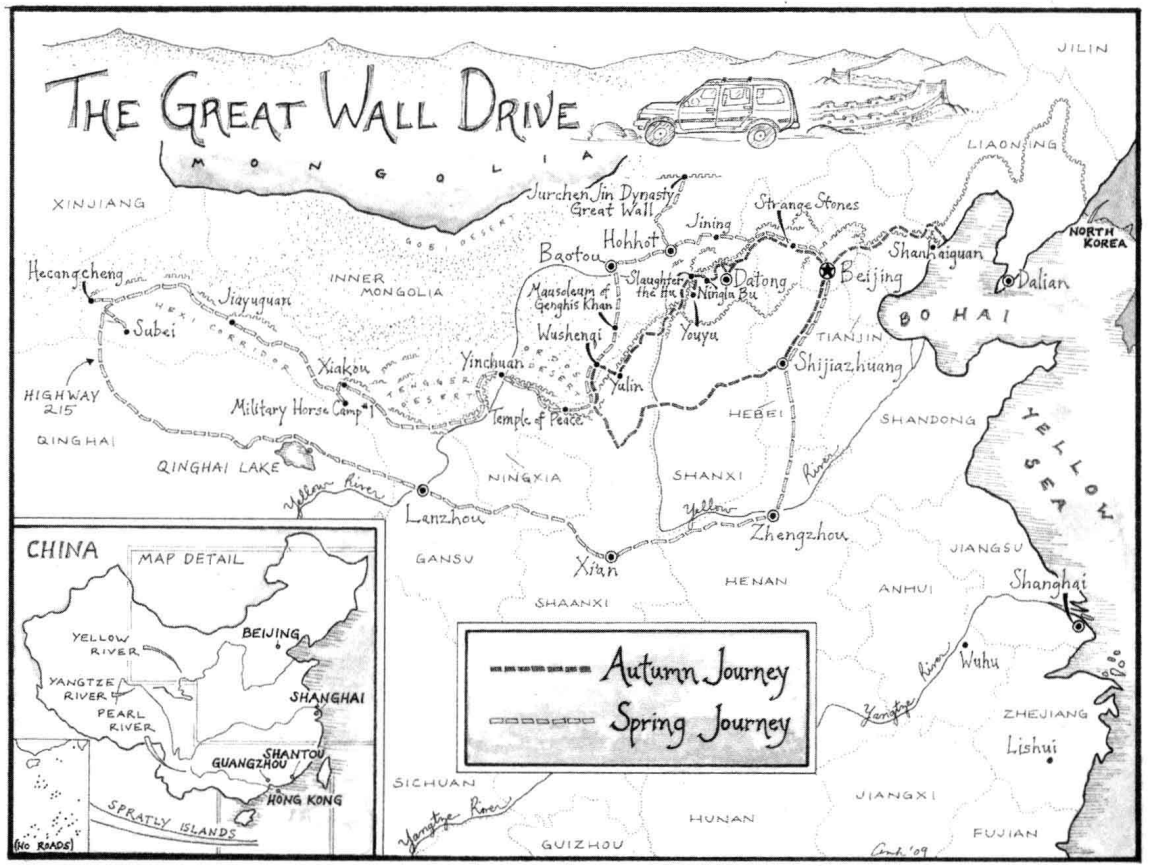
*Oracle Bones*

*for Leslie*

# CONTENTS

BOOK I

# THE WALL


THE GREAT WALL DRIVE
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Baotou
Shanhaiguan
Beijing
Dalian
Hecangcheng
Jiayuguan
INNER MONGOLIA
GOBI DESERT
HEXI CORRIDOR
Mausoleum of Genghis Khan
Slaughter the Ox
Datong
Ningia Bu
BO HAI
Subei
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Youyu
TIANJIN
Yinchuan
Xiakou
TENGGER DESERT
Yulin
Shijiazhuang
HIGHWAY 215
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HEBEI
SHANDONG
YELLOW SEA
QINGHAI
QINGHAI LAKE
NINGXIA
SHANXI
Yellow River
Lanzhou
Zhengzhou
GANSU
Xi'an
HENAN
ANHUI
JIANGSU
Shanghai
SHAANXI
Wuhu
Yangtze River
ZHEJIANG
Lishui
SICHUAN
HUNAN
JIANGXI
GUIZHOU
FUJIAN
Yangtze River
Autumn Journey
Spring Journey
CHINA
MAP DETAIL
YELLOW RIVER
BEIJING
YANGTZE RIVER
SHANGHAI
PEARL RIVER
SHANTOU
GUANGZHOU
HONG KONG
SPRATLY ISLANDS
(NO ROADS)

# I

THERE ARE STILL EMPTY ROADS IN CHINA, ESPECIALLY on the western steppes, where the highways to the Himalayas carry little traffic other than dust and wind. Even the boomtowns of the coast have their share of vacant streets. They lead to half-built factory districts and planned apartment complexes; they wind through terraced fields that are destined to become the suburbs of tomorrow. They connect villages whose residents traveled by foot less than a generation ago. It was the thought of all that fleeting open space—the new roads to old places, the landscapes on the verge of change—that finally inspired me to get a Chinese driver's license.

By the summer of 2001, when I applied to the Beijing Public Safety Traffic Bureau, I had lived in China for five years. During that time I had traveled passively by bus and plane, boat and train; I dozed across provinces and slept through towns. But sitting behind the wheel woke me up. That was happening everywhere: in Beijing alone, almost a thousand new drivers registered on average each day, the pioneers of a nationwide auto boom. Most of them came from the growing middle class, for whom a car represented mobility, prosperity, modernity. For me, it meant adventure. The questions of the written driver's exam suggested a world where nothing could be taken for granted:

*223. If you come to a road that has been flooded, you should*

*a) accelerate, so the motor doesn't flood.*
*b) stop, examine the water to make sure it's shallow, and drive across slowly.*
*c) find a pedestrian and make him cross ahead of you.*

*282. When approaching a railroad crossing, you should*

*a) accelerate and cross.*
*b) accelerate only if you see a train approaching.*
*c) slow down and make sure it's safe before crossing.*

Chinese applicants for a license were required to have a medical checkup, take the written exam, enroll in a technical course, and then complete a two-day driving test; but the process had been pared down for people who already held overseas certification. I took the foreigner's test on a gray, muggy morning, the sky draped low over the city like a shroud of wet silk. The examiner was in his forties, and he wore white cotton driving gloves, the fingers stained by Red Pagoda Mountain cigarettes. He lit one up as soon as I entered the automobile. It was a Volkswagen Santana, the nation's most popular passenger vehicle. When I touched the steering wheel my hands felt slick with sweat.

"Start the car," the examiner said, and I turned the key. "Drive forward."

A block of streets had been cordoned off expressly for the purpose of testing new drivers. It felt like a neighborhood waiting for life to begin: there weren't any other cars, or bicycles, or people; not a single shop or makeshift stand lined the sidewalk. No tricycles loaded down with goods, no flatbed carts puttering behind two-stroke engines, no cabs darting like fish for a fare. Nobody was turning without signaling; nobody was stepping off a curb without looking. I had never seen such a peaceful street in Beijing, and in the years that followed I sometimes wished I had had time to savor it. But after I had gone about fifty yards the examiner spoke again.

"Pull over," he said. "You can turn off the car."

The examiner filled out forms, his pen moving efficiently. He had barely burned through a quarter of a Red Pagoda Mountain. One of the last things he said to me was, "You're a very good driver."

The license was registered under my Chinese name, Ho Wei. It was valid for six years, and to protect against counterfeiters, the document featured a hologram of a man standing atop an ancient horse-drawn carriage. The figure was dressed in flowing robes, like portraits of the

Daoist philosopher Lao Tzu, with an upraised arm pointing into the distance. Later that year I set out to drive across China.

WHEN I BEGAN PLANNING my trip, a Beijing driver recommended *The Chinese Automobile Driver's Book of Maps*. A company called Sinomaps published the book, which divided the nation into 158 separate diagrams. There was even a road map of Taiwan, which has to be included in any mainland atlas for political reasons, despite the fact that nobody using Sinomaps will be driving to Taipei. It's even less likely that a Chinese motorist will find himself on the Spratly Islands, in the middle of the South China Sea, territory currently disputed by five different nations. The Spratlys have no civilian inhabitants but the Chinese swear by their claim, so the *Automobile Driver's Book of Maps* included a page for the island chain. That was the only map without any roads.

Studying the book made me want to go west. The charts of the east and south looked busy—countless cities, endless tangled roads. Since the beginning of "Reform and Opening," the period of free-market economic changes initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, development has been most intense in the coastal regions. The whole country is moving in that direction: at the time of my journey, approximately ninety million people had already left the farms, mostly bound for the southeast, and the routines of rural life were steadily giving way to the rush of factory towns. But the north and the west were still home to vast stretches of agricultural land, and the maps of those regions had a sense of space that appealed to me. Roads were fewer, and so were towns. Sometimes half a page was filled by nothing but sprinkled dots, which represented desert. And the western maps covered more space—in northern Tibet, a single page represented about one-fifteenth of China's landmass. In the book it looked the same size as Taiwan. None of the Sinomaps had a marked scale. Occasionally, tiny numbers identified the distance in kilometers between towns, but otherwise it was anybody's guess.

Most roads were also unlabeled. Expressways appeared as thick purple arteries, while national highways were red veins coursing between the bigger cities. Provincial roads were a thinner red, and county and local

roads were smaller yet—tiny capillaries squiggling through remote areas. I liked the idea of following these little red roads, but not a single one had a name. The page for the Beijing region included seven expressways, ten highways, and over one hundred minor roads—but only the highways were numbered. I asked the Beijing driver about the capillaries.

"They don't name roads like that," he said.

"So how do you know where you are?"

"Sometimes there are signs that give the name of the next town," he said. "If there isn't a sign, then you can stop and ask somebody how to get to wherever you want to go."

The driver's exam touched on this too:

*352. If another motorist stops you to ask directions, you should*

*a) not tell him.*
*b) reply patiently and accurately.*
*c) tell him the wrong way.*

Thousands of nameless roads webbed the Sinomaps, and it was impossible to find one clear route across the west. But another symbol was less confusing:  . This marking appeared on the northeastern coast, at the city of Shanhaiguan, and from there it ran westward through Hebei Province. It continued into Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia. In the deserts of Ningxia and Gansu, where dotted sands lay thick as stars, neat lines of  pierced the galaxy. That was one part of a Sinomap that was easy to understand: even as a boy I would have recognized it as the Great Wall. Throughout my childhood, whenever I looked at a map of China I thought: Imagine following a wall across a whole country!

At one point the Chinese had even considered converting the Great Wall into a highway. During the 1920s, intellectuals in China began to look to the example of the United States, where the automobile was already transforming the landscape. Chinese urban planners, some of whom had been educated in the States, encouraged cities to demolish their ancient defensive walls and use the material to build loop roads suitable for cars. By 1931 more than two dozen places had adopted this

strategy, including the southern city of Guangzhou, which tore down structures that were over eight hundred years old. Inevitably, modernizers turned their attention to the Great Wall itself. In 1923, the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao* published an article titled "Using Waste Material to Build a Road on the Great Wall." The author, Lei Sheng, supported a recent government proposal to modernize the structure; in Lei's opinion it represented "a very good opportunity." He wrote: "The Great Wall runs from Shanhaiguan to Yumenguan; it's continuous for thousands of *li*, and it's a straight line. To convert it into a road would link Beijing, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu; it would make it easier to do business. . . ." The proposal bounced around for a while—in 1931, the influential *Students' Magazine* supported it. Their article explained that with all the stones in the wall, "not so much capital will be required, with the result being that we'll fill a big gap in transportation infrastructure, going from the east to the west, from the ocean to the interior. . . ."

Nobody ever acted on this plan, undoubtedly because Great Wall regions are so rugged and remote. But seventy years later the general route appealed to me as a driver. East to west, from the ocean to the interior—I had always wanted to take such a road trip in China. In my *Book of Maps*, the ⊓⊓⊓⊓⊓⊓⊓⊓ were often paralleled and intersected by roads, usually of the capillary type; sometimes these small routes ran for miles alongside the ruins. And the crenallated symbol still inspired the same reaction I'd had as a child: Imagine following a wall across a whole country! It could guide me through small-town China; I could chase the Great Wall all the way to the edge of the Tibetan plateau. Once I had the idea, I couldn't shake it, although friends cautioned me about taking a long car journey alone. But that was also covered on the written driver's exam:

> *347. If another driver, with good intentions, warns you about something, you should*
>
> *a) be open-minded and listen carefully.*
> *b) not listen.*
> *c) listen and then don't pay attention to the advice.*

• • •

IN BEIJING, I RENTED a car and headed to Shanhaiguan, a city on the coast where the Great Wall meets the Bohai Sea. From there I drove west through the harvest of Hebei Province. It was mid-autumn and most crops had already been cut down; only the corn still stood tall in the fields. Everything else lay out in the road—mottled lines of peanuts, scattered piles of sunflower seeds, bright swaths of red pepper. The farmers carefully arranged the vegetables on the side of the asphalt, because that was the best surface for drying and sorting. They tossed the chaff crops into the middle of the road itself, where vehicles would be sure to hit them. This was illegal—there's no other act that so publicly violates both traffic safety and food hygiene. In rural China, though, it's still widely tolerated, because threshing is easiest when somebody else's tires do the work.

Initially I found it hard to drive over food. On the first day of my journey, I screeched to a halt before every pile, rolling down the window: "Is it OK for me to go through?" The farmers shouted back impatiently: "Go, go, go!" And so I went—millet, sorghum, and wheat cracking beneath me. By the second day I no longer asked; by the third day I learned to accelerate at the sight of grain. Approaching a pile, I'd hit the gas—*crash! crunch!*—and then in the rearview mirror I'd see people dart into the road, carrying rakes and brooms. That was my share of the autumn work—a drive-through harvest.

The Hebei hills are steep, marked by faces of open rock, and I drove through villages with rugged names: Ox Heart Mountain, Double Peak Village, Mountain Spirit Temple. The Great Wall shadowed these red-tiled towns. Usually the fortifications followed the ridgeline, high above the fields, and I'd catch glimpses as I wound through the hills. The Ming dynasty built these structures, mostly during the sixteenth century, and they had done their work well—the stone foundation and gray brick walls still clung firmly to the ridge. Sometimes a wall dipped into a valley, and in these low places the structure had been harvested as clean as the fields. The brick facing was completely gone: all that remained was the foundation and the hard-tamped earth interior, pockmarked