

Book Review

Country Driving: A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory

Peter Hessler

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By 2030, China will complete a system of expressways connecting all its cities with populations of more than 200 000—an achievement that is all the more impressive considering that the first Chinese expressways were built in 1988. The completed expressway network will be longer than the United States' interstate highway system. Furthermore, road building in China is not limited to freeways, as nearly 119 000 miles of rural roads were paved during the past decade. While most of the new roads connect the busy and populous coastal areas, the government is investing heavily in the rural interior as well. All of these roads are not sitting empty, as the Chinese auto market overtook the United States in 2010 to become the largest in the world. Peter Hessler describes this automotive transformation in *Country Driving*. As a journalist, Hessler relies primarily on anecdotes and observation rather than on academic research, but his book illuminates the economics, incentives and trends that will shape China for decades to come.

While many advocates and planners argue that China is leading the way on sustainable transportation, transit investment, and high speed rail, it is also rapidly becoming a nation of drivers. Owning a car is a mark of status, and members of the rapidly expanding middle class are buying cars as fast as they can. In Beijing—a city of 22 million people and one of the most densely populated areas in China—1000 new drivers register daily, and more than that many cars are sold. Since private ownership of automobiles was permitted in the mid-1990s (all private cars had been confiscated by the Chinese Communist Party after it came to power in 1949) the country has been planning for and adapting to the automobile as quickly as possible.

Country Driving is organized into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the transportation revolution occurring in China and offering fresh insights into the ways automobiles are altering Chinese cities. In the first section, Hessler details his journey across the Great Wall by car, which is still a novel way to travel the country. Perhaps the most entertaining revelation in this section describes driver education. To get a license one must take courses, receive behind-the-wheel training and pass tests—but the contents of the courses and tests reflect how unfamiliar most Chinese are with driving.

Hessler observed driver education in Lishui, a city in southern Zhejiang Province which is featured throughout the book. The drivers in training spent the first day of class practicing gear

shifting with the motor off. On the second day, the students were able to move the training car, but proceeded to spend the next 10 days practicing parking. Ultimately the students actually learned how to drive, highlighted by mastering the “single-plank bridge.” This particular skill required the students to perch two wheels atop a long riser, then repeat the maneuver with the other two wheels. According to the instructor, the practical value of this skill was that it was difficult. Though the students were adults, most did not have an automobile, so they had no reason to question the skills they were learning. For them driving school was an aspirational endeavor and something to put on their resumes.

The relative inexperience of the drivers is exacerbated by occasional planning blunders in a nation where road building is as unfamiliar as driving. In one Beijing neighborhood, the roads feature left-turn lanes located on the far right sides of the roads and traffic signals that display green lights in all directions for part of each cycle. The combination of these types of problems with a large population of inexperienced drivers produces high crash fatality rates; in 2001, China had one-fifth as many cars as the United States but twice the number of traffic deaths.

The second part of the book traces the changes experienced by one family as the village of Sancha becomes an exurban center and the Beijing middle class discovers the area as a desirable destination for weekend travel. The interesting aspects of this section are how the choices that households make regarding education, employment, and housing changed for one family. This is an interesting section that provides anecdotal details of how individuals are adapting to an auto-centric China, but is the least informative part of the book for understanding the large-scale changes produced by China's changing transportation system.

The third section of the book, dealing with land development, will be the most interesting to planners and policymakers. Hessler explains how new expressways through southern Zhejiang have contributed to the province's transformation from underdeveloped countryside to a series of factory towns. He documents how new roads have affected manufacturing specialization and urban development in the region, and describes his travels from town to town asking bystanders what was made there. Often, people would answer with a sentence, but sometimes they would respond by simply holding up a product—such as playing cards, for which Wuyi accounts for half of the annual domestic market. Such specialization can be partially explained by the transportation and land development process.

The process of land development in China is characterized by what urban scholar John Friedmann (2005) calls “amphibiousness.” Amphibiousness describes the unique way that local governments in China raise money to provide basic services by undertaking profitable enterprises. Chinese cities cannot directly raise money through bonds or taxes, so infrastructure is funded through growth. As cities expand outward, rural land collectively owned by villages is converted to urban land and granted to cities. Local jurisdictions then sell development rights and use the income to pay for roads and other facilities. Then, once the buildings and infrastructure—mostly in the form of roads to allow for the movement of goods—are built, the cities lease the properties and split the profits with the developers. Scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimate that coastal cities rely on real estate development for half of their total revenues.

This system offers strong incentives for cities to constantly expand. Lishui, for instance, spent \$8.8 billion in infrastructure between 2000 and 2005 to attract factories, more than it spent on infrastructure during the previous 50 years combined. The national government is aware of the risks of this approach to urban development, and starting in 2006 it began to imple-

ment policies designed to slow growth, including a more arduous application process for large expansion projects. However, because the development system has become so decentralized, the central government has had mixed success at best enforcing the new policies. Many scholars expect that the Chinese government will eventually privatize land and implement property taxes in order to break cities' dependence on constant growth.

Although *Country Driving* is written for a popular audience rather than for researchers, Hessler provides a valuable account of the central role played by the automobile in China's ongoing urbanization. Today, we have a unique opportunity to observe the changes in land development and personal travel brought by the automobile in real time; most of our understanding of this phenomenon has come from historical research that pieces together what happened in developed nations at the beginning of twentieth century. While it is possible to look at descriptive statistics and analysis to understand what is happening, a work like *Country Driving* provides valuable insights into how economics, incentives, and cultural factors play out among people.

References

Friedmann, J. 2005. *China's Urban Transition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.