

Return to River Town

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.

I am in the White Crane Ridge Underwater Museum near the city of Fuling. The museum is the strangest sight here – it's under 40 metres of water on the side of the Three Gorges Dam*. I've known the museum director, Huang Dejian, since before the museum existed. The last time I saw him, the Three Gorges Dam was still under construction 450 kilometres down the river. Fuling is at the junction of the Yangtze and the Wu Rivers. In the mid-1990s it felt sleepy and isolated. There was no main road or railway line. The Yangtze ferries took seven hours to reach Chongqing, the nearest large city. Foreigners were rare – if I ate my lunch in the town centre, a crowd often came to watch me. The city had one escalator, one nightclub, and no traffic lights. I didn't know anybody with a car.

From 1996 to 1998, I worked at Fuling Teachers College. My students came from rural homes and they wanted to be English teachers. My students taught me many things. They helped me to understand people's experiences of moving from the countryside to big cities. They also taught me about the complexities of poverty in China. My students didn't have much money, but they were optimistic and they had opportunities.

During my return visit, about 15 students come back to Fuling to meet me. They tell me about their classmates who have left Fuling. One is a Communist Party official in Tibet, another started a taxi company and became a millionaire. One woman presented a radio show for years. 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.' Another, Emily, tells me about her cousin, who has become richer, but not happier.

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. Now I am surprised to discover that everything is almost the same for them. They are still fishermen. The fishing on the river is still good. The dam has not changed everything in Fuling.

*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.