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A Study of Narrative Strategies in *Country Driving*

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Abstract

Peter Hessler, a contemporary American writer, created the "China Trilogy" through non-fiction writing based on "personal records and observations", shaping the image of China in the eyes of contemporary foreigners. His writings describing China are favored by numerous readers. Country Driving, the final work of Hessler's "China Trilogy", recounts his experience of driving around the Chinese mainland. Abandoning flat plot narrative, the book reveals China's changes and development and showcases its social landscape through multi-dimensional narrative perspectives, diverse rhetorical devices, and rich language. Based on a close reading of the text, this thesis utilizes Genette's narrative focalization theory, Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory, and Critchley's humorization theory as the main interpretive tools. It mainly explores the application of narrative focalization, rhetorical devices, defamiliarization, and humor in the text, interpreting the specific manifestations of its narrative techniques. Hessler's utilization of diverse narrative strategies enhances the literary and historical nature of the text, inspiring readers to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary China.

Keywords

Country Driving, Narrative Strategy, Peter Hessler

1. Introduction

1.1 Peter Hessler and Country Driving

Peter Hessler is a contemporary American non-fiction writer, journalist, and essayist who was born in 1969. He has published four notable books, including China Trilogy, which comprises *River Town* (2001), *Oracle Bones* (2006), and *Country Driving* (2010). The latter chronicles his road trips across China, observing economic and industrial growth. Additionally, *Strange Stones* (2013) is a collection of essays reflecting on his experiences in China.

Peter Hessler served as a volunteer in Fuling, a small Chinese city by the Yangtze River, which laid the foundation for his deep understanding of China. He spent many years traveling and living in China as a correspondent for *The New Yorker* and has written extensively on various aspects of Chinese people,

society, culture, and history.

Country Driving: A Journey from Farm to Factory is set at the beginning of the 21st century in China and goes through the economic changes at that time, such as Reform and Opening Up. In this book, Hessler traces the growth of China through three distinct stories: the wall, the village, and the factory. In the first part, *The Wall*, driving 7,436 miles across northwestern China, Hessler documents the experiences along his travel journey across Hebei, Shaanxi, and Gansu Province. Picking up hitchhikers and visiting relics in the plateau, desert to the end of the Great Wall, Hessler paints a vivid portrait of different evolving regions. In the second part, *The Village*, he pays attention to Wei Ziqi's family in a small village called Sancha, located in northern Beijing. Hessler carefully observes the effects of automobiles causing huge changes in the Wei's family, who shifted from farming to business. In the last part, *The Factory*, he lays emphasis on a city called Wen Zhou, and a few factories in Li Shui, and notes the impact of industrialization and economic development on people's lives. The desolate deserts, depopulated villages, and the prosperity of industrial cities form a great contrast. During a decade of traveling, Hessler develops his understanding of China.

Hessler's writing transcends the confines of contemporary events, intertwining with numerous historical events and allusions from the past. This approach not only provides ample evidence and support for his narrative but also fosters a unique connection between modern and historical China through a foreigner's lens. Furthermore, Hessler's book centers on the life of real, ordinary people within a broader context, allowing him to discern the extraordinary facets of China's economic transformation. Consequently, this book is not only readable but also meaningful and thought-provoking.

As a cross-cultural work, *Country Driving* exhibits salient characteristics of literary trends of the 21st century, including cultural diversity, environmental conservation, and emphasis on social identity and equality. As economies and technologies advance, globalization facilitates increasingly convenient and frequent communication between diverse cultures. Consequently, writers of this era have begun to prioritize cross-cultural experiences, producing works that encompass varied backgrounds and perspectives.

In the text, there are numerous cross-cultural elements, particularly between China and the United States, that merit our attention and reflection. These are often displayed through the use of contrast that incorporate defamiliarization and humorous elements. The author compares the details of modern Chinese society that he has observed with those of the United States, thereby achieving a sense of defamiliarization and humor for Chinese readers.

In addition, there exists many details that reflect the author's views of nature. As environmental problems have become increasingly serious in the 21st century, writers have started to pay attention to environmental protection, climate change, and sustainable development and also called for human being's reflection and action on environmental protection. In *Country Driving*, when Hessler drove to the Northwest desert of China, he noticed that more people cared about economic growth than sustainable development, and expressed his sympathy and reflection on the balance between human and nature.

Moreover, there are plenty of proofs that illustrate the author's views of social status and gender equality. In the 21st century, writers are beginning to address issues like identity politics, gender, race, and sexual orientation, and create works that reflect social inequality and justice, which can also be discovered in *Country Driving*. In the text, the author noticed the differences among different walks of life, for example, the officers and the farmers, how they react differently according to their social status or situation, and illustrated the complex situation of China. He also noticed the difference between men and women in social status in rural and traditional China.

The narrative strategies used in this book distinguish *Country Driving* from the other works as it uses multi-dimensional narrative focalizations, multiple rhetorical devices, and rich language. As a well-developed term in narratology, narrative strategy is defined as "in recounting a narrative, the set of narrative procedures followed or rhetorical devices used to achieve some specific goal" (Prince, 2003: 64).

This thesis explores the narrative strategies in Peter Hessler's *Country Driving*, mainly focusing on its application of narrative focalization, rhetorical devices, defamiliarization and humor.

1.2 Literature Review

The research on *Country Driving,* a novel published in 2010, is still in its development phase.

Domestic scholars primarily focus on non-fiction narrative, Chinese storytelling, Chinese images, and the transmission of Chinese culture along with cultural interpretation.

In the realm of non-fiction narration, Wang Lu (2014) argues that Hessler employs descriptive writing techniques to spotlight underprivileged regions, individuals, and overlooked aspects of China's economic progress, thereby articulating his perspectives on the psychology and function of Chinese society. For instance, Wu Qiong (2018) scrutinized the textual characteristics in Hessler's novel to depict contemporary China at various levels, portraying the everyday experiences of ordinary Chinese citizens through meticulous observation of particulars, thereby reflecting the core of China's transformation and dispelling misconceptions held by Westerners about China and the self-perceptions of Chinese people, consequently, presenting an authentic portrayal of China. Differing from prior investigations, Zhang Weidong (2020) delves into the distinctive narrative artistry of Peter Hessler's "China Trilogy", concentrating on scrutinizing his writing techniques and the concealed interrelations between each segment. He dissects the rhetorical strategies in the Chinese trilogy as well as the artistic methods of cultural spatial representation and thematic transitions. He posits that the author's ideology may appear fluid and oscillating among various "events," yet it essentially constructs a tapestry of myths, illustrating an "artistic" multi-dimensional China for readers.

Regarding Chinese storytelling, Peng Yixin (2018) examines from the standpoint of "the other", delving into the global dissemination of Chinese social phenomena crafted by Hessler and evaluating the narrative style and attributes of his works. In contrast, Shen Yanxia (2015) underscores the impact and significance of Hessler's publications. She advocates for confronting the harsh realities and producing scholarly works within the Chinese context, cautioning against the dichotomy of academic and

ideological realms, and advocating for a modernized approach to scholarly output. Shen Yanxia expresses discomfort with China's detachment from the global community upon reading Hessler's China narrative, asserting that *Country Driving* should serve as the foundational text for all humanists to contemplate.

In the realm of research on Chinese images, Yin Ping (2019) notes that the discourse surrounding the "Chinese image" originates from Hessler's personal encounters with reality and his introspection as a foreigner, encapsulating the misunderstandings and challenges arising from the disparities between Chinese and Western cultures. This narrative encapsulates the intricate and individualistic nature of contemporary Chinese existence, palpable in the continual friction, and holds innovative implications. Conversely, Yang Wei, Sun Xiaomeng, and Liu Xinmin (2020) dissect the tensions between societal transformations and individual destinies, between objective truths and subjective sentiments reflected in the text, and the complexities of China's integration into the global arena from diverse perspectives. Hessler's non-fiction works are widely recognized for their comprehensive exploration of various aspects of Chinese society, enhancing the depth of the texts through firsthand observations. He strives to strike a balance between accurately portraying social realities and enhancing the artistic merit of his writings. Foreign scholars' perspectives offer a unique vantage point through which both global audiences and Chinese individuals can gain new insights into China.

Wang Xiaoying and Ming Wei (2021) examine the intricate mechanisms of communication aimed at eliciting recognition within narrative texts. They argue that Peter Hessler's literary works effectively convey China's story and project a positive international image of the country, a subject worthy of contemplation and exploration by Chinese academics. Shang Wu (2018) delves into the autobiographical elements of Hessler's writings through the lens of cultural translation. By considering cultural translation from both anthropological and cultural studies perspectives, Wu sheds light on the challenges Hessler faced and the coping strategies he employed. Wu's analysis suggests that the concept of cultural translation can serve as a versatile descriptive tool for interpreting cross-cultural travel narratives, offering valuable insights for individuals navigating multicultural environments.

Oversea scholars have shown interest in exploring Chinese culture, particularly the driving culture depicted in Hessler's work *Country Driving*. Kevin Rushby (2010) praises the cultural significance of the book, noting how Hessler's narrative guides international readers through the urban landscape of China. David King (2010) underscores the book's insights into the interplay of economics, incentives, and cultural dynamics in the context of China's ongoing urbanization process, with a focus on the pivotal role of automobiles. Qiu (2010) highlights an interview with Peter Hessler, where Hessler reflects on the rapid pace of societal transformation in China, particularly the migration of young individuals from rural villages to urban centers for employment opportunities. Cohen (2013) characterizes Hessler as a multifaceted figure encompassing roles such as teacher, archaeologist, anthropologist, travel writer, and storyteller, commending his contributions to deepening American understanding of contemporary Chinese society.

In conclusion, Peter Hessler's *Country Driving* remains an under-explored subject among scholars both

domestically and internationally, particularly regarding its narrative strategies. Existing research predominantly focuses on Hessler's China Trilogy, with limited specific analysis of the narrative techniques employed in *Country Driving*. As the concluding part of the China Trilogy, *Country Driving* delves into China's economic development and the impact of automobile culture on Chinese society. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of its narrative strategies can facilitate a deeper comprehension of China's evolving landscape, bolster the influence of Chinese culture, and enhance cross-cultural communication on the global stage.

2. Narrative Focalization in *Country Driving*

Narrative focalization, a concept proposed by literary theorist Gérard Genette, refers to "the perspective from which a story is narrated" (Genette,1980). It shapes readers' comprehension of events, characters, and emotions within the narrative. Gérard Genette divides narrative focalization into three categories: narrative with zero focalization, narrative with internal focalization, and narrative with external focalization.

In narratives featuring zero focalization, the narrator exhibits omniscience, possessing knowledge surpassing that of any character in the story. This narrative perspective enables the narrator to disclose information that exceeds the understanding of individual characters, offering a comprehensive view akin to a divine perspective. Readers are granted access to concealed truths, diverse character viewpoints, and overarching themes. Nonetheless, this approach may create a sense of detachment from specific characters, diminishing emotional closeness with them.

Internal focalization centers on the consciousness of a particular character. The narrator is limited to what the character knows, perceives, and undergoes. This immersion into the character's inner world allows readers to explore their inner thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences, fostering empathy and intimacy. Readers can witness events through the character's perspective and empathize with their situation. However, this approach restricts access to information beyond the characters' awareness.

External focalization involves the narrator revealing less about characters' internal states. The narrative prioritizes objective descriptions and actions, emphasizing a more detached viewpoint. While this technique sustains suspense and enigma, it may impede readers' emotional involvement and spiritual connection with the story.

In Peter Hessler's *Country Driving*, the changes in narrative focalization are quite distinctive from others: in addition to zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization, the narrative skillfully incorporates a combination of multiple narrative focalization techniques. To be more specific, from a macro scale, the narrative employs both zero focalization and multiple focalization techniques; At a micro level, internal focalization, external focalization, and occasionally zero focalization are employed to enhance the depth and complexity of the storytelling. Hessler serves both as an observer, an experiencer, and a narrator in this book. As an observer, he objectively looks into the past and present of China's development including the history and its influences on modern times, which interweaves individual and

country. As an experiencer, he employs humor and defamiliarization to spotlight the ups and downs, growth and harsh of ordinary individuals, which adds depth, warmth and sympathy to the story. As a narrator, he writes down the misunderstandings and cultural contrasts he encountered during his journey, which provides insights for cultural exchange and communication.

2.1 Zero Focalization in Country Driving

A narrative with zero focalization or a non-focalized narrative refers to a narrative with an omniscient narrator, which allows the narrator to know more than any character in the story. Todorov symbolizes it by the formula *Narrator* > *Character* (Todorov,1980), which represents that the narrator knows more than the character or any of the characters. An omniscient narrator is like an all-knowing god, he has access to every character's thought and emotion and able to describe characters and events in all aspects, no matter they are internal or external, virtual or real, dynamic and static, or etc. Besides, time is unrestricted in zero focalization. The omniscient narrator can see both the past and future and make comments on them without limitations. However, readers are forced to passively follow as there is limited or no room for them to imagine or recreate.

In *Country Driving*, the use of zero focalization mainly occurs in background information at the beginning of each story or the introduction of characters. It allows the author to better arrange and explain the characters' backgrounds, environment, atmosphere, such as introducing the panorama of Sancha Village before actually stepping into it or getting to know Wei's family members or villagers' comments before meeting Wei himself. Therefore, it serves as an introduction that the readers can have a previous understanding of the following narrative content.

Zero focalization can describe the past, present, and future in the same place without limitation of time. At the beginning of the first part, *The Wall*, the author reviews the changes in China's map at that time, exposing the rapid changes caused by urbanization and then makes up his mind to get a driver's license to catch up with this trend. Before applying for China's driving license test, Hessler uses the zero focalization to describe the past, present, and future of China: in the present, "there are still empty roads", and "vacant streets" (Hessler, 2010); in the past "less than a generation ago", "residents traveled by foot" (Hessler, 2010); in the future "terraced fields are destined to become the suburbs of tomorrow" (Hessler, 2010). This gives readers a feeling of witnessing the changes of China's roads, allowing readers to have a preliminary understanding of the content of Hessler's analysis of China's driving license test in the following part. In this passage, the narrator is like an all-known God, arranging the objects in an orderly manner, thus making his following decisions and description of China's driving license test reasonable and sensible.

The author's all-encompassing view of zero focalization allows us to understand the village's past, present, and the ongoing changes in the future. It occurs in the second part of the book, when the author introduces the Village Shacha, telling us about its situation at that time: economic decline, and population loss: "in recent years it had become even smaller", the population turns from "three hundred in the 1970s" to "now there were fewer than one hundred fifty people left" (Hessler, 2010). The focus is on objective

facts rather than any character's personal experience, and also lays the foundation and gives a hint for Sancha Village to develop better and better under the background of Reform and Opening up and become a prosperous commercial village in a few decades, which allows readers to witness the changes that are going to happen in this small village and gives readers a sense of engaging.

When introducing the character Little Long, the only person in the plant who was not Han but a Miao, the author uses zero focalization to introduce the background information of this minority group. "Miao, an ethnicity that's native to parts of southwestern China, and culturally related to the Hmong of Laos and Vietnam" (Hessler, 2010). The author here not only describes the history of Miao, but also introduces its culture and locations, which allows readers to know more about the character and his nationality from a narrative with zero focalization.

In summary, narration with zero focalization occurs often at the starting point of the whole narration and mainly serves as an introduction or background information without the limit of time or space. In *Country Driving*, zero focalization is often used to describe changes in events or the characters that occur from past to the future, which gives readers a sense of all-known god.

2.2 Internal Focalization in Country Driving

A narrative with internal focalization means that the narrator merely expresses a character's inner world, and is in line with a specific character's consciousness. The focus is on the thoughts and emotions experienced by the characters and cannot provide anything that the character himself does not see or experience. Todorov's formula for it is "*Narrator = Character"* (Todorov, 1980). Besides, internal focalization involves multiple focalizers. Genette classifies internal focalization into three categories: "multiple internal focalization, variable internal focalization, and fixed internal focalization" (Genette, 1980). Variable internal focalization means that the author selects different objects to describe different events. Fixed internal focalization "only takes a person's point of view to observe a thing" (Genette, 1980). Multiple internal focalizations refer to the "narration of the same event through the perspectives of different people" (Genette, 1980), which help readers to understand one thing through different points of view. Internal focalizers describe a story "from characters' own perspectives" (Genette, 1980), so sometimes they lack information to grasp the whole picture thus leaving a mystery or space for readers' imagination and creativity.

Fixed internal focalization occurs much in Hessler's *Country Driving*, mostly for the characterization of various characters. By utilizing internal focalization, the author speculates on Master Luo's persistence on work even while asleep, revealing his diligence and conscientiousness and on the other hand, the oppression of the workers by the capitalists. In the third part of the book, *The Factory*, the author meets an experienced worker Master Luo whose salary was reduced by half all of a sudden without sufficient reason, which violates the men's contracts and workers can complain to the local labor bureau. But Master Luo refuses to do that and chooses to handle this on his own by working harder and harder. The author Hessler speculates on his inner thoughts and recent dreams, even nightmares, "his nightmares usually featured long pointless arguments with bosses" from his perspective (Hessler, 2010). We can

better understand Master Luo's image as a typical Chinese worker. Through Hessler's lens, ordinary Chinese workers tend to suffer the injustice in silence and swallow the unfair treatment of their factories rather than complain about it to the authorities, which is costly and risky for common people without high social status or decent pay and exposes the reality of worker's subordinate situation under the factory's bosses at that time.

Peter Hessler's *Country Driving* primarily uses variable internal focalization, which allows for multiple character perspectives and a more comprehensive depiction of events and characters. This technique differs from fixed internal focalization, which is used less frequently in the book:

By using internal focalization, the perspective is not restricted to a single character, but shifts among different characters throughout the story, which is a distinction from fixed internal focalization. In the first part of the book, The Wall, Hessler picks up several young women in a village, who are curious about the foreign driver traveling in rural China and the author speculates the inner world of a group of people who are conjecturing Hessler's identity as an ethnic minority in China, Uighur, Hui and even Mongolian by using "they were curious about...", "they couldn't imagine" (Hessler, 2010) and "a couple of passengers guessed that ... others thought..." (Hessler, 2010). The story is made more vivid and diverse by the dynamic changes in perspectives, which provide a variety of viewpoints for characters throughout the narration.

In summary, through employing internal focalization in narration, the author delves into the psychological intricacies of characters, offering diverse portrayals of individuals or situations. This shift in perspective offers readers a fresh experience, enabling them to empathize and connect with characters on a deeper level by understanding their thoughts and emotions.

2.3 External Focalization in Country Driving

A narrative with external focalization means that "the narrator says less than what the character knows and focuses solely on observable actions, behavior, and the external world." (Genette, 1980) The narrator remains detached and objective, describing events without delving into the character's inner thoughts. Readers receive information from an external viewpoint as if observing from the outside. Todorov symbolizes it by the formula "*Narrator < Character"* (Todorov,1980). In contrast to internal focalization, which explores characters' consciousness and emotions, external focalization entails the narrator lacking direct insight into characters' minds, relying solely on their dialogue and actions. Consequently, the narrator possesses less knowledge than the characters themselves. Despite seeming objective, this narrative approach ultimately complicates the understanding of the novel.

External Focalization is a relatively common perspective adopted by Peter Hessler and mostly appears in the description of the appearance of characters, environment, and the dialogue among people, which has the effect of leaving space for the reader's imagination, putting a veil of mystery over the subject.

For example, the author utilizes external focalization to observe a group of three Chinese cadre engaging in bargaining with a Mongolian attendant, assuming the role of an onlooker and portraying a typical Chinese scene of bargain. He meticulously detailed the conversation, capturing the repetitive back-and-

forth of negotiation, as well as the tempo and duration of their exchanges, such as phrases like "spoke very slowly" and "continue... for several minutes" (Hessler, 2010). Through this exchange, we discern shifts in psychological states on both sides: the cadre's endeavors to secure a lower price by repeatedly probing with questions like "How about this?" and "special price" (Hessler, 2010) signaling a willingness to compromise, while expecting reciprocal concessions from the attendant. However, the attendant remains obstinate by insisting the price of "one hundred" (Hessler, 2010), refusing to yield. This dialogue encapsulates a typical Chinese bargaining style as perceived through the lens of a foreign observer.

Hessler met Wei Ziqi's brother and made an external description of his appearance in detail, which enables readers to have a basic knowledge of the character and triggers their curiosity and creativity by leaving mystery. The words the author used to describe him were "in his late forties", "a handsome face but his gaze was unsettling", "something calculated", "alone" and "gruffly" (Hessler, 2010), which indicates the man's odd, unsociable, eccentric, and irritable personality. However, the specific details of what caused this wariness are not explicitly stated. It could be related to the man's demeanor, behavior, or appearance, which lays the suspense and foreshadowing for the following plot. Also, the author describes him as: "There was something calculated about it—he had none of the open curiosity of the other villagers" (Hessler, 2010). The calculated gaze and lack of openness also contribute to the overall sense of mystery surrounding this character, which invites readers to continue to read more and attracts their curiosity and imagination.

Essentially, external focalization in narration primarily manifests through the objective portrayal of characters, encompassing their speech, appearance, and actions. With this approach, the author possesses comprehensive knowledge and knows almost everything but selectively reveals only a portion of the story, thereby introducing a sense of mystery or suspense for readers to unravel independently. However, this technique also somewhat impedes the reader's emotional connection with the characters.

3. Rhetorical Devices in *Country Driving*

Rhetoric is defined as: "a tool that enhances composition; its aim is to persuade, to inform, to express a personal thought, or simple to entertain the reader" (McGuigan, 2011). By developing rhetorical devices in narration, it can enhance persuasion, and "help strengthen the strategies of the paper" (McGuigan, 2011). In *Country Driving*, the most frequently used rhetorical devices are allusion, contrast, simile and metaphor. They enhance persuasion, add emotional closeness to readers, improve communication and challenge traditional opinions in *Country Driving*.

3.1 The Use of Allusion

Allusion is defined by *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* as: "an implicit reference, perhaps to another work of literature or art, to a person or an event" (Cuddon, 2019). According to Robert Harris, "the best sources for allusions are literature, history, Greek myth, and the Bible" (Harris, 2020). The allusions in *Country Driving* can be classified into two categories: historical allusion and literary allusion. Historical allusion refers to historical events, figures, or periods. Literary allusion makes reference to characters, events, or

themes from literature.

In *Country Driving*, historical allusion is the most commonly used literary device, followed by literary allusion. Hessler made a lot of efforts to learn about Chinese culture and history and get familiar with them. The functions of historical allusion in *Country Driving* are mainly to help readers to better understand the setting or circumstances of the story, add depth and richness to fulfill the narration, and make thematic comparisons by drawing upon shared cultural knowledge and references. The functions of literary allusion in *Country Driving* are mainly to create connections between different works of literature, enhancing the reading experience.

Hessler employs historical allusions to provide readers with insight into the story's setting and circumstances. By referencing significant historical events such as the "Reform and Opening" initiated by "Deng Xiaoping in 1978" (Hessler, 2010), and noting the concentrated "development in the coastal region" (Hessler, 2010) of southeast China, the author underscores the reasons behind the rapid changes in the area. When the author examines a map for drivers and observes the proliferation of cities and extensive road networks in southeastern China, he is reminded of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies. Deng Xiaoping, a prominent Chinese leader and reformer, played a pivotal role in shaping China's modern history. Reflecting on this historical context prompts Hessler to embark on a journey to experience firsthand the economic changes unfolding in southeast China.

Hessler utilizes historical allusions here to illustrate the historical reasons of population migration and evoke emotional impact and empathy for rural workers in cities. The author encounters Gao Linfeng, a young woman hailing from a rural Mongolian background but presently employed in a factory in Hohhot. Her experience of migration to big cities mirrors the experiences of countless others in China during this period, evoking the widespread phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration spurred by the Reform and Opening policy. This demographic shift saw a surge of young individuals leaving rural homes to seek better economic prospects and personal growth in urban centers. By anchoring his observations in historical data, such as the staggering statistic of "80 percent of the population lived in the countryside, by 2001, an estimated ninety million had already left home" (Hessler, 2010), the author substantiates the realities of rural Chinese migration, lending authenticity and credibility to his portrayal of societal dynamics during that era.

Hessler juxtaposes Chinese history with that of Europe and other nations, illustrating why map awareness is lacking among the Chinese populace by using historical allusions to make comparisons to convey a theme that authority's policies have a significant and profound impact on nation's development. When the author becomes disoriented at a gas station and seeks directions from locals, he discovers the passers-by' limited knowledge of roads and inability to provide clear guidance. This leads him to ponder the absence of map literacy, even among educated Chinese individuals, attributing it to the exclusion of maps from modern cultural norms. The situation prompts reflections on China's early cartographic history, characterized by a practical yet non-scientific approach heavily reliant on verbal descriptions, hindered further by governmental restrictions, which stifled innovation. In contrast, European and Arabic

cartographers flourished during the Renaissance, fueled by trade connections and a focus on exploration, resulting in significant advancements in mapping and navigation. These divergent historical routes between China and Europe have profound implications for contemporary circumstances.

Hessler employs literary allusions to establish a link between the challenging life of a Russian woman and the narrative of "Sister Carrie" thereby facilitating English readers' comprehension and prompting deeper analysis. Upon learning about the presence of a Russian prostitute in Shaanxi Province, the author, also a foreigner in an unfamiliar land, becomes intrigued by her experiences. This curiosity leads him to draw parallels between her tragic circumstances and the themes explored in Theodore Dreiser's novel "Sister Carrie", fostering a nuanced understanding of her story and its broader implications. And he makes a comparison that "some terrifying post-Soviet version of Sister Carrie that began in Vladivostok and ended in the Hexi Corridor" (Hessler, 2010), which also uses the geographical references "Vladivostok", a city in Russia, located near the borders with China and North Korea and "Hexi Corridor", a historical and strategic region in northwest China. By mentioning these locations, the author further conveys a sense of foreboding and uncertainty within a specific historical and geographical context and help American readers better understand the story.

Hessler also utilizes literary allusions to underscore the cultural and historical significance of The Great Wall, not only to the Chinese people but also to the global community. By referring the journal *China Today*'s portrayal of the Great Wall: "a symbol of multi-ethnic unity--more like a river than a barrier" (Hessler, 2010), the author concludes that the interpretation of the Great Wall evolves over time, highlighting its unique cultural importance. The author observes that "in the 18th century, western explorers and missionaries began to visit China in greater numbers" (Hessler, 2010). An Englishman named John Barrow extrapolated a rudimentary understanding of the Great Wall from his observations. "In 1923, *National Geographic Magazine* claimed that the Great Wall is visible to the human eye from the moon. (In truth, nobody on the moon could see it in 1923, and they still can't)" (Hessler, 2010). The use of literary allusions reflects the curiosity and significance attached to it by international scholars, and its role in global cultural diversity.

In essence, the author frequently employs the rhetorical device of historical and literary allusions, particularly when introducing individuals or concepts, thereby bolstering the narrative with historical context and evidence that underscores China's rich cultural heritage. This technique expedites readers' comprehension while forging a vital link between past events and contemporary themes, enabling a deeper and wider understanding of the text.

3.2 Contrast as a Narrative Technique

Contrast is defined by *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* as: "the juxtaposition of disparate or opposed images, ideas, or both, to heighten or clarify a scene, theme or episode." (Cuddon, 2019)

There are basically two types of contrasts in *Country Driving*: contrasts between Chinese and American culture and contrasts between old and new China. Cultural contrasts highlight differences between

cultures. In *Country Driving*, there are mostly contrasts between China and America based on Hessler's own experience. Contrasts between old and new China mainly show social status' differences between ancient and modern female and some progressive advancement made by Chinese people. These contrasts add depth, complexity, and resonance to character development and also sublimate the themes of the work.

In *Country Driving*, cultural contrast is the most frequently used technique by Hessler. Because as an American journalist in China, Hessler has experienced a lot of things that are similar or different from his own experiences in America, which makes him think a lot and even surprises him.

Hessler makes a comparison of the driving age of America and China, underscoring the societal and economic differences in each country. He picked up a passer-by named Zhen, a single soldier in the 1990s, who has nearly finished a driving course and longs for a car of his own. It amazed the passenger when he found out that Hessler started to drive at sixteen because "the Chinese minimum driving age is eighteen" (Hessler, 2010) and most Chinese cannot afford a car at such a young age until they are in their middle age around thirty, which is "the financial issue" (Hessler, 2010) that impedes car-buying in China mentioned by the author. The author's reflection on the minimum driving age sheds light on the divergent societal and economic factors influencing transportation culture in China and America.

Hessler also makes a comparison of the meaning of the Great Wall domestically and internationally across different historical periods, and the varying interpretations of the Great Wall illuminate broader cultural dispositions and historical contexts. Early in twentieth-century of China, the Great Wall was "the greatest engineering feat" (Hessler, 2010), and "the forerunner of modern national defense" (Hessler, 2010); In the 1920s and 1930s, it represented "everything bad about Chinese culture", "a wonder and a curse" (Hessler, 2010), probably because of the historical background of the New Culture Movement; "The journal *China Today* portrayed it as a symbol of multi-ethnic unity---more like a river than a barrier" (Hessler, 2010). While foreigners see it as a barrier from others, China views it as a symbol of unity. The different understandings of The Great Wall illustrate the different thinking patterns and cultural backgrounds of various nations. Chinese people advocate collectivism, which means the Chinese value peace most, seek common ground while reserving differences, and seek harmony without conflicts. However, the West upholds individualism, which shows that personal interests come first. In essence, the differing perspectives on the Great Wall illustrate broader cultural dispositions, with China advocating harmony and unity, while the West champions individual autonomy.

Hessler makes an observation of the contrasting perspectives on emergency infrastructure and technological reliance in China and America, which illustrates cultural differences. During the construction and opening of a new highway, Hessler meticulously compared the details to those in America. Notably, he observed a high density of free emergency phones in China, "all along the road, at an interval of every thousand meters, stood a free emergency phone" (Hessler, 2010), a feature that would be considered extravagant in the U.S. This discrepancy arises from differences in population density and national circumstances. Hessler's attention to this seemingly trivial detail reveals deeper insights into the

countries' distinct approaches. Beyond the surface, it emphasizes fundamental differences between China and America. And he expresses his appreciation for China's rapid development: "one that's hardly necessary in China, where cell phone coverage is excellent" (Hessler, 2010), which portrays the image of a rapidly developing, constantly updating and changing China.

In his decades of journey, Hessler experiences the rapid change and development of China and makes contrasts between old and new China.

The author makes contrast between the social status of male and female in ancient China and modern China. When visiting the tombs of the ancients, Hessler noticed that "the woman isn't even named—such details are irrelevant in a male-dominated world of group labor" (Hessler, 2010). That illustrates his reflection on old China's gender roles in male-dominated world, female is subordinate. It also emphasizes his sympathy for those unknown female heroes in ancient times. However, in the second and third parts of the book, female characters' situation are greatly improved. Images of independent, aspiring Chinese women are depicted. When celebrating a girl's birthday party, the author was amazed and made a contrast. He writes that "in the United States, few girls could prepare a seven-course banquet for a sweet sixteen birthday party" (Hessler, 2010) to indicate Chinese parents' love and care to their daughters.

Moreover, the author notes that Chinese women have achieved significant progress in their careers independently, highlighting the growing momentum towards gender equality in contemporary China. The author also reflects on the potential for women's upward mobility in modern China, particularly in the workforce. "Smart Chinese women with little education often become accountants or secretaries, and from these positions they can rise in the factory world" (Hessler, 2010). According to his analysis, female with limited educational resources may still get avenues for advancement and have opportunities to higher positions in career, illustrating the independent and uprising status of Chinese women.

Hessler also makes contrasts between the traditional and contemporary education systems in China. He expresses disapproval of the repetitive, rote-learning style of teaching in the past, stating: a student "wasn't encouraged to tell stories or express opinions; instead, he copied set phrases and idioms that are part of the Chinese literary tradition" (Hessler, 2010). However, in the present, the author acknowledges the advancements China has achieved in the enlightenment and innovation of its education system, particularly in mathematics. Specifically, the author notes, "since the nineteenth century, Chinese educators have struggled to find some balance between old and new, native and foreign.....It worked beautifully for math—those textbooks were far more advanced than the equivalent in an American school" (Hessler, 2010). The ongoing efforts of Chinese educators to advance educational approaches suggests a notable strength or achievement in China's education, particularly in the field of mathematics, which underscores the importance of continuously adapting educational systems to meet the demands of contemporary society.

In summary, the text employs contrast to highlight subtle differences and unexpected similarities between China and America, the traditional and modern China, prompting readers to reflect on these distinctions. This approach provides powerful support and establishes a firm groundwork for enhancing cross-cultural

communication and the country's development. By delving into these nuances, the readers gain deeper insights into the progress China has made in few decades of the fast-changing world. Ultimately, fostering mutual understanding serves as the steppingstone of effective cultural communication. Also, looking back at the past is a better way to look forward to the future and gain insights for development in China.

3.3 Simile and Metaphor in the Narration

Simile is used in Peter Hessler's *Country Driving*. Simile is defined by *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines as "a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, in such a way as to clarify and enhance an image. Compared with metaphor where the comparison is implicit, it is an explicit comparison recognizable by the use of the word 'like' or 'as'" (Cuddon, 1986).

There is basically one type of simile in Peter Hessler's *Country Driving*: explicit simile, in which "sense or point of similarity is stated directly" (Fadaee, 2010). It is used to describe scenes, buildings and characterize figures by creating vivid imagery.

Hessler uses an explicit simile to compare pamphlets to dying birds. This occurs when the author drives behind a truck, which is loaded with foreign paper imported to China for recycling. Then the truck's door opened and the printed material was flying across the highway. Pamphlets are typically flat, lightweight pieces of paper used for distributing information. "Dying birds" (Hessler, 2010) are near the end of their lives, often weak and struggling.

By using the simile, the author vividly conveys the image of pamphlets fluttering down to the road just like birds nearing the end of their lives. It emphasizes the fragility, fluttering motion, and descent of the pamphlets, much like dying birds fall gently to the ground, which creates a sensory image and portrays a visual impact to trigger readers' imagination.

Hessler uses an explicit simile to compare the Ming wall to a springtime snake. "The Ming Wall" refers to the ancient walls built during the Ming dynasty in China. "Springtime snake" refers to snakes that emerge from hibernation after winter, which are more active, and their colors may appear pale due to shedding. Firstly, the author compares the length of the wall to a snake. Secondly, the winding shape of the Wall is just like a snake. Thirdly, the author compares their colors. The Wall's color becomes faded with time and the color of a snake appears pale after shedding. The simile "like a springtime snake" paints a vivid picture of the Ming Wall's appearance.

Hessler utilizes an explicit simile to characterize the individual. By comparing the man's face to "that of a lion", the officer emphasizes that the man's face is aggressive, perhaps rugged, and has a certain intensity as lions are often associated with strength, fierceness, and a distinctive appearance. Then the officer compares the man's walking shape to a duck: "he walked like a duck", which emphasizes his stoutness and solid, sturdy build. By using similes, the figurative characteristics of a character come to life vividly on paper.

In summary, simile is a common literary device used by Hessler. Through similes, the depiction of the Great Wall unfolds with magnificence and beauty, imbuing the narration with artistic depth. Character and the flying scene of the sheets are rendered vivid, dynamic, and complex. These explicit comparisons

resonate clearly and are readily understood by readers, enhancing the overall impact of the narration.

In addition to simile, metaphor is also employed within the text. Metaphor is defined by *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* as "a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another", "a comparison is usually implicit" (Cuddon, 2019).

In Peter Hessler's *Country Driving*, while metaphor does not occur as frequently as simile, it nonetheless plays a significant role in the narrative. In *Country Driving*, there is essentially one primary type of metaphor: conventional metaphor, which is widely understood and accepted within a particular culture or language. This type of metaphor can "not only adds rhetorical flourish to a speech or text but also transfer conceptual content" (Lakoff, 1980), thereby creating vivid images that enrich the narrative.

Hessler utilizes a metaphor to compare sustainability to luxury to illustrate the dilemma in disadvantaged areas. Against the background of the unstable economic situation, herdsmen who live in desert areas only focus on short-term interest and tend to chase money as soon as possible without much consideration for future generations, because they can hardly support themselves. Here sustainability refers to practices that ensure the long-term well-being of the environment, society, and economy. Luxury is typically associated with something desirable, exclusive, and often beyond basic needs. It implies that prioritizing sustainability is similar to having a luxury—something that not everyone can afford. The metaphor "sustainability was a luxury" (Hessler, 2010) emphasizes the challenge of prioritizing sustainable practices in certain areas, especially where other pressing issues come near.

The metaphor in the sentence "History is free market" (Hessler, 2010) compares history to a free market. By using the metaphor, the author suggests that the field of Great Wall studies, which is ignored by the government and neglected by academia, operates similarly to a free market that everyone can step into. It emphasizes the lack of institutional support for Great Wall research, instead, the private individuals, driven by their interests and enthusiasm, play a more important role in promoting this field, much like participants in a free market economy.

The Road in Peter Hessler's *Country Driving* can also be seen as a metaphor. The road trip is not only the journey of Peter Hessler himself, but also can be regarded as a journey for China—full of twists and turns, ups and downs, and unexpected occasions. It symbolizes progress, challenges, and the pursuit of a better future for the well-being of the Chinese nation. In the text, road-building campaigns are frequently mentioned in various sections, indicating that "road building has often been a strategy for dealing with poverty or crisis" (Hessler, 2010). The text also draws comparisons between China's road-building campaign and that of America, emphasizing China's comparatively rapid progress.

In summary, Hessler uses metaphor to enrich his language, making the narration more vivid, concrete, and interesting. Different from simile, which explicitly compares two things, metaphor invites readers to explore a sense of mystery. The connotative depth behind metaphor allows it to convey the author's intentions and ignite readers' imagination.

4. Defamiliarization and Humor in *Country Driving*

Prior to writing this book, the author underwent formal writing training as a journalist, which subsequently impacted the narrative language style employed in their non-fiction works. This style is characterized by techniques of defamiliarization and humor.

4.1 Defamiliarization in the Text

Viktor Shklovsky's influential work *Art as Technique* (also known as *Art as Device*), written in 1917, explores the concept of defamiliarization and the role of art in making the familiar unfamiliar. Viktor Shklovsky claims defamiliarization as "a technique of art to make objects 'unfamiliar'", and "remove objects from the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky, 1917).

In *Country Driving*, Peter Hessler records his observations and experiences in China as an American journalist. This kind of "distance" from reality enables him to find the "extraordinary" in the "ordinary", and make the "unnoticed" things "noticed", which encourages readers to re-examine their cultural concepts and assumptions regarding interpersonal interactions, as well as provides valuable insights into the varied social norms and practices across diverse cultures.

Hessler encounters Chinese baijiu (a kind of alcohol) and juxtaposes the familiar stuff (herbs and reptiles in baijiu) with the unfamiliar (a mammal in baijiu), thus prompting a deeper examination of cultural norms, perceptions of health, and the boundaries of traditional practices. He describes the practice of infusing baijiu (a kind of alcohol) with medicinal ingredients such as "herbs and reptiles, with snakes being particularly popular" (Hessler, 2010). However, this peculiar practice: a baijiu containing a mammal, is an unfamiliar sight. Even Wei Ziqi, a local, "couldn't explain the specific health benefits of this drink" (Hessler, 2010), only vaguely stating that it is good for the qi, which "means energy" (Hessler, 2010). Notably, Wei Ziqi "never touched the stuff, and neither did anybody else" (Hessler, 2010), suggesting it is perceived as too gruesome even for those accustomed to medicinal baijiu with reptiles. The practice of using animals especially snakes in medicinal drinks is defamiliarized by the unusual inclusion of a mammal, which disrupts Hessler and other English readers' automatic acceptance of such practices. This challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries of the traditional health beliefs and the cultural norms surrounding it, pushing readers to think beyond their initial perceptions and cultural biases.

Hessler's observation about traditional Chinese medical beliefs defamiliarizes the concept of food and its effects on the body for readers who may be more accustomed to Western perspectives on nutrition. It happened when Wei Jia's summer vacation was about to begin and his family was going to travel for three days. Hessler asked Wei Jia's mother if there was anything he should not eat and his mother said cold drinks and ice cream, which triggered Hessler's attention. From Hessler's point of view, consuming cold food and drinks is common as Americans normally drink cold water. But in traditional Chinese medicine, "it's bad to put anything cold in your stomach" (Hessler, 2010).

For a Chinese male, cigarettes embody the essence of "guanxi" (Hessler, 2010), defamiliarizing the Western reader with the notion of using smoking as a form of communication and social interaction. In contrast to American culture, where cigarettes play a less prominent role in forging social relationships,

Chinese society assigns significant symbolic value to cigarettes. Hessler compares cigarettes as "a kind of semaphore" (Hessler, 2010). The comparison to semaphore suggests that each cigarette gesture carries a hidden meaning, like a coded signal. Then he analyzes the act of give-and-take and the absence of an exchange sometimes means objections or barriers: "every gesture with a cigarette means something" (Hessler, 2010). This description gives us a fresher understanding of the common things of cigarettes from a foreigner's unique observation.

The educational practice in Chinese writing classes defamiliarizes Peter Hessler who is accustomed with the conventional Western approach to writing instruction. When Hessler heard Wei Jia reciting verses from *Dao De Jing* and asked the boy what they meant, the boy did not have the faintest idea, which aroused the author's thinking about Chinese education. He maintains that classes should encourage students to tell stories or express opinions rather than copying "set phrases and idioms that are part of the Chinese literary tradition" (Hessler, 2010). The traditional Chinese education's emphasis on memorization and replication contrasts sharply with the Western ideas that focus on fostering creativity and individual expression through storytelling and opinion-sharing. By highlighting this difference, Hessler prompts readers to reconsider their assumptions about the role of writing education and the development of literary skills. The use of defamiliarization invites reflection on the cultural values and priorities embedded within educational systems, offering insights into the distinct approaches to language acquisition and literary expression in Chinese society.

Hessler defamiliarizes the concept of staring in Chinese culture, contrasting it with the Western tendency to avert one's gaze in embarrassment when caught looking. By highlighting the cultural difference where traditional Chinese people do not feel embarrassed or shy away when caught staring, stating that "people never glanced away in embarrassment when you caught them looking" (Hessler, 2010), Hessler prompts readers to reconsider their own cultural norms surrounding eye contact and curiosity. Instead of merely describing it as a neutral or impolite behavior, Hessler emphasizes its distinctiveness within the cultural context. The use of "never" defamiliarizes the expected social norm. Behind the staring behavior, we can see cultural differences: Chinese people like to ask personal questions to shorten the distance between each other as quickly as possible; Foreigners, on the other hand, tend to talk about the weather or other non-personal topics first to avoid offending others' privacy. Typically, when caught staring, people shift their staring due to embarrassment. Here, the absence of embarrassment challenges Hessler's usual perception, which makes him think unusual. Also, the juxtaposition of "open curiosity" (Hessler, 2010) of staring defamiliarizes the action too. Rather than portraying staring negatively, Hessler uses the words "saving grace" (Hessler, 2010), referring to a redeeming quality that a person or thing possesses, preventing them or it from being wholly undesirable. It highlights the sincere interest and genuine curiosity behind the action "staring". This unexpected perspective allows readers to reconsider these common behaviors. Through this description, the "ordinary" becomes "extraordinary", inviting readers to reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions about interpersonal interactions, offering insight into the diversity of social norms and practice across different cultures.

In essence, Hessler's thinking about the trivial thing makes English readers notice and reconsider their traditional dietary practice and their impacts on health and defamiliarizes the common habit. It also underscores the diversity of beliefs and practices surrounding health and wellness in different cultural backgrounds. Rather than simply recounting events objectively, the author infuses his narrative with personal reflections and viewpoints, creating a defamiliarizing effect that allows readers to perceive a "real but different" China through the eyes of an international acquaintance, breaking the miscomprehension and prejudice of the West against China. For Chinese readers, viewing our own nation through the perspective of "the other" is like gazing into a mirror, prompting introspection and fostering growth as we strive to better understand ourselves and our society.

4.2 Humor in the Text

Humor is defined as "certain psychological state which tends to produce laughter" (Veatch, 1998). Numerous scholars and researchers have proposed their own understanding of humor. Among them, Simon Critchley's perspective is particularly prominent, as he outlined three theories of humor: "the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory" (Critchley, 2002).

The third theory, the incongruity theory, is used to analyze Peter Hessler's *Country Driving* in this essay as it fits in with the humorous examples in the text. According to the theory of incongruity, "humor is achieved through an unconventional but reasonable logical judgment or development", that is, "unexpected but within reason" (Critchley, 2002). It destroys the receiver's conventional logic or expectation, and finally enables the two to reach a mutual understanding, and eliminate the gap between expectation and reality.

Hessler humorously exaggerates the diverse range of Chinese cigarettes, suggesting that each has "a distinct identity and meaning" (Hessler, 2010), evokes a sense of humor. According to Hessler, "there are more than four hundred different types of Chinese cigarettes," (Hessler, 2010) which initially presents us with an expectation. However, the subsequent part comes with a twist, illustrating that each cigarette has a unique function in social relationships. Then, the incongruity is created because we do not typically attribute deep identities and meanings to cigarettes as they are just rolled-up tobacco sticks. The sudden elevation of cigarettes to philosophical status creates a sharp clash between our ordinary perception and the unexpected conclusion. The humor lies in this unexpected pairing of ordinary objects, cigarettes, with profound properties, distinct identities, and meanings.

Hessler humorously depicts the Chinese approach to food criticism, highlighting the cultural contrast between verbal complaints and actual enjoyment of the meal and underscoring the passionate and commonplace nature of food discussions in China. The initial part sets up an expectation: "Master Luo and his friend criticize the restaurant's food" (Hessler, 2010), which seems ordinary and common in everyday life. However, the twist comes in the subsequent part: "they make their complaints while steadily continuing their act of eating" (Hessler, 2010). Normally, when we complain and criticize something, we do not savor it simultaneously. The disparity between what they say and what they do creates a sense of humor. The mention of "Chinese food criticism" adds a kind of cultural flavor. In China,

discussions about food are passionate and commonplace. The idea that criticism never interferes with appetite highlights Chinese people's love and enthusiasm for food despite its flaws.

Hessler humorously captures the chaotic and unpredictable traffic by comparing it to pedestrian behavior in Beijing in 2001 when over one million vehicles suddenly flooded Beijing, and the city's infrastructure can hardly to keep up. Initially, an expectation is set forth: "traffic patterns" (Hessler, 2010), which, in common sense, are associated with road design, traffic rules, and vehicle behavior. Then comes an unexpected twist that those "patterns come directly from pedestrian life" (Hessler, 2010) because we do not typically associate pedestrian behavior with driving. These two seemingly inconsistent ideas collide in an unusual way thus creating a sense of humor. Another layer of humor is achieved through irony that Hessler makes fun of the undeveloped traffic system at the beginning of the 21st century in Beijing's unbalance between rapid vehicles' increase and unmatched infrastructure and the collision between old pedestrian habits and rapid urbanization.

Hessler humorously depicts the unconventional approach to signaling turns in traditional Chinese driving culture, depicting a developing and changing China. The novice drivers Hessler observed "rarely use turn signals" (Hessler, 2010) but rely on "automobile body language" (Hessler, 2010). He initially mentions an expectation that drivers turn signals. Then the twist comes in the subsequent part that they rely on automobile body language and Hessler makes a detailed description of how they use automobile body language to replace traffic signals. These two seemingly inconsistent things connect in an unusual and sudden way, thus humor is created as we usually do not associate pedestrian behavior with driving. The second sense of humor is reached through the use of irony in the last sentence in that paragraph. "Brilliant" is a commendatory term to describe someone who is extremely clever, talented, or impressive. But here Hessler means their driving behaviors are irregular, fugitive, and unable to predict. So the positive word is used in a negative context, from which we can see the author's dissatisfaction with the novice drivers.

Hessler humorously points out the novelty of a Missouri driver's license being inspected in Gansu Province, China. Hessler was traveling across Gansu Province and a group of officers came and suspected him of being a spy just because they did not believe that a foreigner would pay a visit to the remote place in China. In general, a specific U.S. state's license has no connection with a remote Chinese province and will not be inspected by officers there, given the geographical and cultural distance between Missouri and Gansu. The humor emerges from this unexpected match that Hessler's "Missouri driving license was inspected by Chinese officials in Gansu Province" (Hessler, 2010). The phrase "the first time" (Hessler, 2010) can be regarded as an exaggeration, suggesting that this cross-cultural license inspection has never occurred previously, thereby enhancing the absurdity and humor of the stark cultural contrast encountered by an international traveler in China.

Hessler humorously highlights the unexpectedness of encountering a historical person of great importance in an ordinary setting. He uses many verbs to describe the vivid actions of passers-by when they see the face of a well-known person: "walk past", "do a double take" (Hessler, 2010), which indicates their surprise and disbelief. Then comes the expectation: Mao Zedong is a famous great man of

history (Hessler, 2010). It follows with a twist: he is “sitting in economy class, seat 25E” (Hessler, 2010), which is not going to happen with such an honored leader in China. But actually, that man is an actor who bears a remarkable resemblance to Mao and portrays him in a film. The incongruity arises from the juxtaposition of our typical expectations of encountering historical figures, who are unlikely to be found in the economy class of a flight, and the reality depicted in the sentence. Also the movement “double take” (Hessler, 2010) adds another sense of humor to this scene.

In summary, Hessler encounters numerous cross-cultural encounters during his journey through China, finding humor in misunderstandings and cultural disparities that portray a rapidly changing, developing Chinese image. From interactions with farmers to encounters with government officials, his narrative is filled with touches of humor that uncover the nuances of daily life. Through sympathetic portrayals and humorous anecdotes, whether depicting migrant workers, factory owners, or local officials, Hessler captures the essence of humanity with warmth and depth. His knack for finding humor in the mundane enhances the narrative, offering readers an engaging and enjoyable journey through his experiences, triggering them to reflect on cultural contrasts and creating a dynamic, vivid and authentic Chinese image.

5. Conclusion

This study applies narratology theory and literary analysis to Peter Hessler’s *Country Driving*, examining the text’s form and content through three core dimensions: narrative focalization, rhetorical devices, and language features.

In terms of focalization, Hessler integrates zero, internal, and external focalizations—along with their combinations—to balance narrative objectivity and readability, offering readers a multi-dimensional, authentic portrayal of China. Rhetorically, he employs allusion, contrast, simile, and metaphor, drawing on Chinese historical knowledge and cross-cultural comparisons to delve into the cultural and psychological underpinnings of Chinese society, enhancing the narrative’s vividness and depth. Linguistically, the text is marked by defamiliarization and humor, reimagining ordinary Chinese life to challenge stereotypes and provide fresh cultural insights.

The analysis highlights how these narrative strategies elevate everyday scenes into profound commentaries on human behavior and cultural norms, illuminating Hessler’s portrayal of a dynamic, complex China—intertwining tradition and modernity, and capturing individual resilience amid societal transformation. Driven by curiosity about China, a desire for cross-cultural communication, and a commitment to documenting historical change, Hessler’s work serves as a key resource for understanding China’s evolution domestically and globally. Ultimately, this study enriches the book’s literary appreciation, fosters critical reflection on cultural/ethical issues, and promotes cross-cultural exchange by dismantling stereotypes, offering insights for effective global dissemination of Chinese culture.

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