

Assimilating Abroad: Americans in Asia

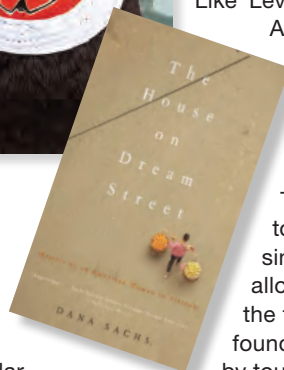
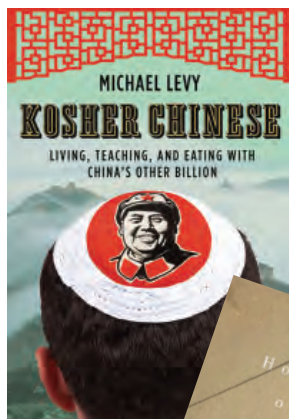
In his groundbreaking China memoir, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (Harper Perennial, 2001), Peter Hessler describes how colleagues and students at a small college in Sichuan province assume he must be Jewish because he's so intelligent. Hessler is not Jewish, though the association that he highlights makes an interesting discussion in itself.

But what if he had been Jewish? Would Hessler have experienced those stereotypes almost on a daily basis? These questions are central to Michael Levy's upcoming memoir, *Kosher Chinese: Living, Teaching, and Eating with China's Other Billion* (Henry Holt, 2011).

Like Hessler, Levy traveled to China as a United States Peace Corps volunteer. When Levy signed up for the Peace Corps, he joined with the hope of serving his country after the United States' devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. He had no particular preference as to where the Peace Corps sent him. So when he learned he was going to China, he started learning about the country that would soon become home. Levy's tour of duty lasted from 2005 until 2007, a time when many of China's coastal cities sky-rocketed into the 21st century, all while the inland provinces continued to lag far behind. Levy has termed the interior population "the other billion" (people who don't appear in glossy magazines or vacation overseas several times a year).

With less access to international news and foreigners, the students and colleagues Levy met in Guiyang, where he taught at Guizhou University, had never met a Jew. Levy quickly learned that he was placed right up there with Einstein and Karl Marx. He tried to balance how to keep up with certain Jewish customs and while at the same time assimilating into Chinese society. At one point he wrote that he'd eaten more non-kosher food in China than all his Levy ancestors put together. And then there's Christmas. Between trying to explain the difference between being American and celebrating Christmas and trying to get out of dressing up as Santa at the local Wal-Mart, Levy treaded new waters in his new home.

Levy also developed close friendships with his students, a group of Chinese minority peasants who lived in a nearby village, and his university basketball teammates (yes, he's recruited for the varsity basketball team, even though he's not a student; each university is allowed one foreign player).



He learned what it meant to be a minority in China, not just from his own experience, but from his new village friends, too.

At the end of his two years in the Peace Corps, Levy left China with a better understanding of the country, a near fluency in the language, and a special place in his heart for his new friends and home in Guiyang.

Like Levy, journalist Dana Sachs happened upon Asia by happenstance. In her mid-twenties, Sachs worked as a journalist in San Francisco and decided she needed a break. So she and a friend quit their jobs and backpacked through Asia in 1989. When Sachs and her friend landed in Thailand, they learned the travel restrictions to Vietnam had softened for the first time since the fall of Saigon. Americans were now allowed to obtain travel visas to go there. So the two women jumped on the opportunity and found themselves in beautiful Vietnam, unspoiled by tourism.

In fact, her month in Vietnam, when she traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, made such an impression that she moved back to Hanoi three years later at the ripe age—in Vietnamese standards—of twenty-nine.

The House on Dream Street: Memoir of an American Woman in Vietnam (Seal Press, 2003) chronicles Sachs' assimilation into Vietnamese society in the early- to mid-90s. Although Sachs had dreamed of Vietnam ever since her month-long journey in 1989, the title of her memoir refers to the Honda Dream motorcycles which lined her street.

On Dream Street she learned about Vietnamese family life through her landlords' intrusive bursts into her room. She also learned about intimate relationships in Vietnam when she dated a Vietnamese guy who repaired motorbikes down the street.

Sachs' Judaism doesn't occupy a forefront role in her memoir as it does in Levy's. In fact, she rarely mentions religion until much later in the book when her new American boyfriend, Todd (whom she later marries), arrives in Vietnam to visit her. While Todd refuses to eat pork, Sachs—like Levy—develops a when-in-Rome outlook when it comes to eating in Asia.

Hardly 'Ugly Americans', both Levy and Sachs live by the Jewish concept of tikkun olam as they successfully learn to assimilate into their new environments. 