



## **A Single Pebble**

*John Hersey*

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A young American engineer sent to China to inspect the unruly Yangtze River travels up through the river's gorges searching for dam sites. Pulled on a junk hauled by forty-odd trackers, he is carried, too, into the settled, ancient way of life of the people of the Yangtze -- until the interplay of his life with theirs comes to a dramatic climax.

## A Single Pebble Details

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Author : John Hersey

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## From Reader Review A Single Pebble for online ebook

### Susan Ludwig says

short book about an American engineer on the Yangtze River. Not very exciting, but a good enough read

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### Janet Aileen says

This is a deceptively simple story about a journey up the Yangtze River in a junk. In the hands of John Hersey, it becomes a small masterpiece. With clear, concise prose, he captures the drama in the lives of the river workers and their daily challenges. For me, it was a memorable journey.

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### David says

Eh, another white guy decides it would have been better not to mess around with the lives of other people. Kind of obvious from the start and not much else to it. Decent and with good details, but kind of thin overall.

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### Tony says

A SINGLE PEBBLE. (1956). John Hersey. \*\*\*.

An American hydraulic engineer travels to China to explore the potential of building a dam across the Yangtze River to ultimately provide power and facilities for irrigation to the region. He signs on to travel with a junk that is travelling up-river in order to reach his destination. He has a knowledge of Chinese language that allows him to get by with the captain and crew, but soon learns that language is not the only skill that he needs. There is a great difference between our engineer and the crew and administration of the junk. There is a wide difference between the value systems of the two countries that firmly hinder our engineer from getting really close to the Chinese. In the process of adjusting to his new environment, he manages to get close to the wife of the 'captain', though there is still a wide difference between them. The relationship runs hot and cold, and our engineer is on a continuous learning curve – but he cannot necessarily discriminate useful from ancillary learning. This novel takes a long and subtle look at the interaction between two societies. At the end of the day, we believe that there is no good way for a comfortable relationship. This is brought home when the junk encounters a dangerous passage through an area of violent waters and the captain is lost at sea. The effects of this loss are like night and day upon the crew vs. the engineer, and we are left with little hope of any permanent conciliation between the cultures. This is not Hersey's best book, but it is still a good story well told. I'm not sure how much Hersey is read today, but if you are new to his work, it is worth exploring. The highlights – for me – were "A Bell for Adano" and "Hiroshima." Look for them.

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### Judy says

John Hersey is a good writer. He creates characters well, his stories move along with great energy and he makes a reader care deeply about what goes on. But sometimes, despite all those qualities, he just misses.

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This is one of those times.

A young American engineer has been sent to China in the 1920s to inspect the Yangtze River for possible locations on which to build a dam. He travels up that unpredictable and powerful river on a junk, through gorges, rapids and whirlpools. Surrounded by the junk's owner and his young wife, the cook and a large crew of trackers, who literally pull the junk, the young man tries to reconcile his American belief in progress with the legends and ways of a primitive culture. He becomes obsessed with understanding Old Pebble, the head tracker, who takes on the personality of almost a river god.

The story of the journey is gripping as the extreme adventure of prevailing over all the river's dangers is told. Hersey excels in writing the detail and realism of such a foreign location and people. Obviously the theme is east meets west, a theme which is shown by the events of the story contrasted with the young American's reactions.

Unfortunately we are rather hammered over the head by the engineer's attempt to come to grips with the contrasts, which feels like being lectured to instead of being allowed as a reader to draw one's own conclusions. Possibly such a tone was needed in the mid 1950s, but reading the book in the 21st century, knowing that the dam got built, puts it in a different light.

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### **Lauren says**

First of all, I found the young engineer/narrator to be arrogant and insufferable. He exhibits the perfect example of Western pretension in the way he assumes that the way things have been done for a thousand years is inferior to new fangled machinery and thinking. He is unaware that his dam project will ultimately be built a hundred years or so later, and is depressed at the prospects of it ever happening. The author does a good job of describing the fantastic landscape of the Yangtse River, some of which does not exist anymore because of the dam. It seems he is not well liked by the Chinese who accompany him on his journey up the river, but he does attempt to make connections however clumsily. When tragedy befalls the endeavor, he does not seem to know how to reconcile himself with the reactions of the people around him, and is confused and traumatized. This book was on my list of favorites once upon a time, but I can't remember why.

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### **Pascale says**

This novella is absolutely gripping. It tells the story of a 24-year old American engineer who sets off to explore the Yangtze in order to draft plans for a major dam - an undertaking which, as we now know, wasn't actually completed until 2008, nearly a century after the events imagined by Hersey. The young man travels up river on a junk owned by Old Big, an experienced mariner who has had his share of misfortunes, and in fact lost a boat on a previous journey. Old Big is married to Su-ling, a pretty girl half his age. The crew also includes a cook and, last but by no means least, Old Pebble, the head tracker of the expedition. The young foreigner, who has learnt Mandarin, spends a fair bit of time with Su-ling, who seems to be under orders to tell him all sorts of legends about the areas they go through. He is attracted to her, while surmising that she is in love with Old Pebble, who is in fact young and amazingly athletic. His other title is Noise Suppressor, because part of his job consists in singing to cover the groans of the trackers as they pull the junk up river against the fierce current. From the very beginning, the American is fascinated not only by Old pebble's strength, agility, and beautiful voice, but also by his declared contempt for money and all the other signs of success the American believes in. For instance, when he wins at some game and his fellow trackers accuse him of cheating, he throws all the coins he's won into the river. Hersey does a marvelous job of describing

the narrator's complex feelings towards the Chinese. He is deeply ambivalent towards Old Pebble, whom he admires tremendously, yet would like to convince of his own superiority as a scientist. He doesn't know how to interpret the superstitious rituals in which the tracker and the cook take part with both deep conviction and manifest irony. He's very proud of thinking that, thanks to himself and others like him, there will soon be no need of trackers. He fancies himself a great liberator of mankind, while being reminded at every turn that junks have gone up the Yangtze for thousands of years, and that these incredibly brave, sturdy and skillful people are justly proud of what they can do. The themes of this book are universal: youth versus maturity, modernization versus tradition. The American has a Western sense of time, and nearly loses his rag when he suspects Old Pebble of having stolen his watch, in retaliation for his boasting about the future dam and the likes of Old Pebble becoming redundant. A further irony being that the narrator's watch was already broken. Eventually, in a particularly tricky bit of the gorge, Old Pebble loses his footing and has to be dropped into the raging waters to prevent a more serious accident to the team and the loss of the junk itself. The owner first seems to rejoice over the accident, then takes enormous risks in a doomed attempt at rescuing the drowning man. While the narrator believes Old Big dead, the junk arrives at destination. Feeling sad at parting with people he's spent so many weeks with in sometimes life-threatening circumstances, the engineer invites Su-ling and the rest of the crew to a banquet, but when they show up at his inn, where he's had time to change into clean clothes, he's shocked to see how ragged and unkempt they look. The precarious conviviality he experienced on the junk cannot be replicated on land, and the cultural gap between them yawns wider than ever. At this point, Old Big reappears, and forces the engineer to compensate him for the loss of the head tracker, which the young man half believes to have been a form of suicide. This is one of the densest and meatiest studies of communication problems between people of different cultures I've ever read, among many other things. WOW.

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### **Don says**

I only give it four stars because the author purposely revealed where the story was going and I don't particularly like that. However, it was so well written that I would suggest this book to anyone.

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### **Andrew says**

The last couple of books I have read by John Hersey were both disappointments, really not his best stuff. But with *A Single Pebble* he again is lyrical and clear, subtle and bold in his writing. It was a really good book, and I would really recommend it.

*A Single Pebble* tells the story of an American engineer who goes to China in the 1920s to figure out how to dam up the Yangtze River. He is the narrator of his own story, told from a large span of years, he is old now. And the sense of his nostalgia is palpable, as is also his sense of disdain for the young arrogant man he once was.

To survey the river he has to travel upriver by Chinese junk, hauled by ropes on the shore by a crew of 40. It is a perilous journey for these men, called trackers. Led by the fearless and wild head tracker, who keeps the march going by his songs, the young engineer is first impatient with the slowness of the journey, and then gets lost in the timelessness of it. His first thoughts are of making the journey easier through locks and canals, but his ideas are morphed through events of the long journey upriver...the dangers and skills of the trackers, the acceptance of the crew to their fate.

This is a journey of self discovery for the young engineer, but the discoveries are meted out over his lifetime.

His understanding of the journey gets stronger as he gets older. And Hersey writes well that melancholy, that sense of wonders past. He is lyrical and poetic, and never rushed, but never slow. He creates tension as the flow of the river becomes greater, and his words and cadence feel much like the river.

This is a very good little book, one of my favorite of Hersey's...it has moments that I will not forget and it is a book that is not easily shoved to the back of your mind.

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### **Andy Plonka says**

Beautifully written story of a trip in a junk up the Yangtze River in which a young British man tries to communicate with the Captain of the Junk and the Crew. Not only was language a barrier but the whole outlook on life was very different. Trying to make peace and understand his companions on the journey was at once beautiful and sad.

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### **Christine Schmidt says**

for Book Club. Just research any visual footage of trying to get a Chinese junk up the Yangtse rapids.

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### **Samuel says**

This was one of two books gifted to me on my wedding day from one of my all-time best friends: Tony Mercer (who actually officiated our ring ceremony). His inscription indicated that he thought I'd enjoy John Hersey's classic tale about twentieth-century tensions of West vs. East and modernity vs. tradition particularly given my two years as a missionary in southeast Asia. Indeed, he was correct. Here is a passage from the book that resonates almost perfectly with my feelings at the end of my two-year mission in Malaysia and Singapore:

" . . . in mid-current, I felt the beginnings of something I had never experienced before at that age, a feeling very deep that I would have found hard then to define--something close to anger, yet close as well to love, a feeling in which pain and joy were mixed; something like determination; perhaps the very first stirring of understanding in me, though I was terribly troubled still by the many things I did not understand. This strange new feeling was, at any rate, more a physical sensation than anything else in those first moments, an upsurge in my chest of elation-with-despair, of a palpable ache that somehow gave me comfort. I know now, for I have experienced it often, that this feeling was really a kind of wishing--that things could be different, that I could be a better person, that the world could be a better place; and with the wishing, a feeling of sadness, regret, and even, it may be, of hopelessness....The feeling quickly passed that time, supplanted by a rush of the misery of parting--of leave-taking from a place that demanded awe, from an experience I could never forget, and from human beings whom I had come close to understanding" (172-173).

The book itself is an easy read with a simple structure, but I found the protagonist's struggle for understanding and the description of his emotional wrestling fantastic. It indeed reminded me of those ephemeral years, now muddled memories of joyous struggle, when I was living in a foreign land interacting with a diversity of people with whom I had little in common with--sometimes no more than a smile (and often not even that). Nevertheless, I felt then and I can recall now some of the most profound connections of my life: human to human, friend to friend, soul to soul. It is a melancholy realization that the majority of our

connections in this life are transient if not wholly fleeting--I have very sporadic contact with people from those years and likely will not see the majority of them again in this life. But I have hope that their will be a joyous reunion with those we commune with in this life in the next. At very least, my soul yearns for such a communion, and I hold the feelings that this book triggered in me as something sacred, even if I do not fully understand them.

This story has an easiness to it, though I will admit there were more than a few \$10 words peppered in there along the way. As a twenty-something American engineer makes his way up the Yangtze River in the 1920s aboard a Chinese junk (a large engine-less boat) to scout the ideal location for a modern concrete dam, he finds himself at times charmed and at other times confused by the contrasting world views held by him and the Chinese crew. He is especially enamored and challenged by Old Pebble, who despite his name is the strong, young head tracker who loves the river and river life. The American protagonist is flabbergasted by Old Pebble's "simple life": Old Pebble asks only for friendship and labor: to toil alongshore pulling junks upriver avoiding whirlpools, cliffs, and other hazards as has been done for millennia. His disregard for material things goes as far as his dumping into the river a substantial lump of money he won in gambling after being accused of cheating for financial gain. The young engineer struggles to understand why telling Old Pebble about the life-changing construction of a dam that would make the river exponentially safer to navigate is so upsetting. The main tragedy of the book does not fully dispel the ambiguity about the significance of "a single pebble" amidst the myriads in the world, but there are some beautiful realizations of partial clarity and understanding that the author unfolds. He does so without being too heavy-handed or oversimplifying what to make of life and the diverse lives to be found while living.

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### **Diane says**

I originally read this book in about 1960 but it is cited by many of the authors of books on China that I have recently read. I liked it very much as a metaphor for the cultural, social, political clashes and changes awaiting China as it entered the world scene. I particularly liked the idea us all trying to navigate up a huge river with steep massive gorges and impossible rapids using old techniques and wondering about how new technologies might help or might not and even more difficult being the gorge of understanding each other.

I read this at the same time as I was reading 1491 and the two books were an excellent compliment to each other.

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### **Mark says**

Exquisitely done. This book still makes me think, many years after reading it, how significant and insignificant each of our lives can be, depending on perspective.

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### **Nancy says**

A young American engineer is sent to China in the 1950's to explore the possibility of building a dam on the Yangtze river. He takes a trip on a junk to check out building sites, thinking in theory and ending in the reality of life and death. Some of the prose is wonderful, some a little more technical than I wanted. But you definitely get a feel for time and place and attitude. Hersey's background is that of a journalist (and Pulitzer

Prize winner) and that comes through in his writing. It is sparse and clean, with little flowery description. Our book club discussion centered on the Chinese people's attitude and thought process at that time that things were fine as they were, keeping traditions alive were most important, and respect of authority was crucial. And how that has changed so radically now where modernity is what they strive for and keeping history and tradition alive are not at all important. Our conclusion was that the Cultural Revolution screwed everything and everyone. A good read.

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