COUNTRY DRIVING

A JOURNEY THROUGH CHINA FROM FARM TO FACTORY

PETER HESSLER
diseases.” He built coffins. (“You must supply your own wood.”) He assisted in the carrying of wedding sedans. On the card, service number twenty-one involved moving bones to a new grave site—a common task in a nation undergoing a construction boom.

“I chose this site!” Zhang said proudly, pointing at the patch of recently dug earth. In front of the tomb, mourners took turns kowtowing: each person knelt, burned a stack of paper grave money, and waited as he knocked his head against the ground. Nobody seemed to mind my presence. In northern China, I had learned that funerals are almost always welcoming, in part because people rarely see foreigners. Nevertheless, I dropped my voice to a whisper: “Who’s the funeral for?”

But Zhang Baolong didn’t seem to hear my question; he was still talking about feng shui. “It’s arranged east-west,” he continued, pointing at the patch of earth. “The head faces west, and the feet are to the east. And that tree I planted is a poplar. We plant poplars for men and willows for women; the purpose is to tell the soul where the grave is. This particular place is good for a lot of reasons. The position of that signal tower is very important, for example. You see, this place is good because it’s high, and there’s water in that stream to the east. And you have the signal tower above, which serves to protect the tomb. A person buried in this location will have many wealthy descendants, who will rise to high civil, military, and scholarly positions.”

The men had finished kowtowing and now it was the women’s turn: one by one, they touched their heads to the ground. The women were louder and their cries echoed across the valley.

“My father and grandfather were both feng shui masters,” Zhang continued. “We’ve always done this in my family. And everybody in my family lives for a long time! My father lived to be ninety-five, and my mother was ninety-eight when she died. My grandmother lived to be ninety-nine!”

The keening rose another pitch. I wondered if a conversation about longevity might be more appropriate at another time, but Zhang kept talking. “I have three sons and three daughters,” he said. “My sons are feng shui masters, too! And one of my daughters”—he beamed, perhaps at the thought of security in this world and the next—“is a nurse!”
had approximately 1,500—but interest was intense. Chinese cities held car shows; the Shanghai newspaper Shenbao ran a weekly “Automobile Supplement.” By 1935, China had fifty thousand miles of good earthen motor roads, and it seemed only a matter of time before the nation would experience an auto boom.

In the end, that boom was postponed for more than half a century. The Japanese invaded northern China in 1937, and the war crippled the young auto market. After Mao came to power, decades of Communist economics made it impossible for people to buy cars. The road system of rural China languished, and it wasn’t until the Reform years that the government could improve such infrastructure on a major scale. In 1998, the Asian financial crisis provided motivation, somewhat like the famines of old. The government wanted to offset the economic threat, and it also saw an opportunity to finally inspire the long-delayed auto boom. History was being repeated: this was China’s second wave of car pioneers, and they were essentially starting over. In 2001, the year that I got my license, the country had a population of over 1.2 billion, but there were fewer than ten million passenger vehicles. The ratio was 128 people for every vehicle, similar to the United States in 1911.

For my road trip, I rented a Chinese-made Jeep Cherokee from a Beijing company called Capital Motors. It was a new industry—even five years earlier, almost nobody would have thought of renting a car for a weekend trip. But now the business had started to develop, and my local Capital Motors branch had a fleet of about fifty vehicles, mostly Chinese-made Volkswagen Santanas and Jettas. They were small sedans, built on the same basic model as the VW Fox that was once sold in the States. At Capital Motors, I often rented Jettras for weekend trips, and there was an elaborate ritual to these transactions. First, I paid my twenty-five dollars per day and filled out a mountain of paperwork. Next, the head mechanic opened the trunk to prove that there was a spare tire and a jack. Finally we toured the Jetta’s exterior, recording dents and scratches onto a diagram that represented the shape of a car. This often took a while—Beijing traffic is not gentle, and it was my responsibility to sketch every ding and bumper dent. After we documented the prenuptial damage, the mechanic turned the ignition and showed me the gas gauge. Sometimes it was half full; sometimes there was a quarter tank. Occasionally he studied it and announced: “Three-eighths.” It was my responsibility to return the car with exactly the same amount of fuel. Week to week, it was never the same, and one day I decided to make my own contribution to the fledgling industry.

“You know,” I said, “you should rent out all the cars with a full tank, and then require the customer to bring it back full. That’s how rental companies do it in America. It’s much simpler.”

“That would never work here,” said Mr. Wang, who usually handled my paperwork. He was the friendliest of the three men who sat in the Capital Motors front office, where they smoked cigarettes like it was a competition. Behind their veil of smoke, a company evaluation sign hung on the wall:

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION RATING: 90%
EFFICIENCY RATING: 97%
APPROPRIATE SERVICE DICTION RATING: 98%
SERVICE ATTITUDE RATING: 99%

“That might work in America, but it wouldn’t work here,” Mr. Wang continued. “People in China would return the car empty.”

“Then you charge them a lot extra to refill it,” I explained. “Make it a standard rule. Charge extra if people don’t obey and they’ll learn to follow it.”

“Chinese people would never do that!”

“I’m sure they would,” I said.

“You don’t understand Chinese people!” Mr. Wang said, laughing, and the other men nodded their heads in agreement. As a foreigner, I often heard that, and it had a way of ending discussion. The Chinese people had invented the compass, paper, the printing press, gunpowder, the seismograph, the crossbow, and the umbrella; they had sailed to Africa in the fifteenth century; they had constructed the Great Wall; over the past decade they had built their economy at a rate never before seen in the developing world. They could return a rental car with exactly three-eighths of a tank of gas, but filling it was apparently beyond the
realm of cultural possibility. We had a couple more conversations about this, but finally I dropped the subject. It was impossible to argue with somebody as friendly as Mr. Wang.

He seemed especially cheerful whenever I returned a freshly damaged car. In the States, I had never had an accident, but Beijing was a different story. When I first came to the capital and walked around, I was impressed by the physicality of pedestrians—I was constantly getting bumped and pushed. In a city of thirteen million you learn to expect contact, and after I got my license I realized that driving works the same way. The first couple of times I dented a Jetta, I felt terrible; after the fourth or fifth time, it became routine. I bumped other cars; other cars bumped me. If there was a dent, we settled it in the street, the way everybody does in China.

Once, a driver backed into my rental car near the Lama Temple in downtown Beijing. I got out to inspect the dent; the other motorist, by way of introduction, immediately said, “One hundred yuan.” It was the equivalent of about twelve dollars, which was generally the starting point for a midsize Beijing dent. When this offer was relayed by telephone to Mr. Wang, his response was also immediate: “Ask for two hundred.” I bargained for five minutes, until the other driver finally agreed to one hundred and fifty. Mr. Wang was satisfied; he knew you never get what you ask for. And every accident had a silver lining—dents were good business. There wasn’t any paperwork for these exchanges, and I suspected that the desk men at Capital Motors sometimes kept the cash.

Another time I hit a dog while driving in the countryside north of Beijing. The animal darted out from behind a house and lunged at the front of my Jetta; I swerved, but it was too late. That was a common problem—Chinese dogs, like everybody else in the country, weren’t quite accustomed to having automobiles around. When I returned the car, Mr. Wang seemed pleased to see that the plastic cover for the right signal light had been smashed. He asked me what I had hit.

“A dog,” I said.

“Gōnī wǒ sēnsī?” he said. “The dog didn’t have a problem, did it?”

“The dog had a problem,” I said. “It died.”

Mr. Wang’s smile got bigger. “Did you eat it?”

“It wasn’t that kind of dog,” I said. “It was one of those tiny little dogs.”

“Well, sometimes if a driver hits a big dog,” Mr. Wang said, “he just throws it in the trunk, takes it home, and cooks it.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking; he was a dog owner himself, but in China that doesn’t necessarily involve dietary restrictions. He charged me twelve bucks for the light cover—the same price as a midsize dent.

They never asked where I was taking the Jeep Cherokee. The rental contract specifically forbade drivers from leaving the Beijing region, but I decided to ignore this rule—they wouldn’t figure it out until I returned the Jeep with a loaded odometer. In China, much of life involves skirting regulations, and one of the basic truths is that forgiveness comes easier than permission. The Jeep was the biggest vehicle on the lot, a Cherokee 7250, and they gave me a special price of thirty dollars a day. It was white, with purple detailing along the sides; the doors were decorated with the English words “City Special.” The name was accurate—the thing would be worthless in rough terrain, because it was strictly rear-wheel drive. I was certain that at some point on my journey I’d get stuck in mud or sand or snow, but there was no point in worrying about that now, because Capital Motors had nothing better to offer. At any rate, if things got bad in the west I could always call Mr. Zhang, the feng shui master. On his business card he offered to “tow cars and trucks”—service number twenty-two, listed between “collecting bones” and “playing horns and drums.”
the empty dirt track, the parked City Special. Down below, the lights of Ninglu village had been extinguished, and the rising moon cast shadows across the steppe. For a moment I sat still, waiting for my fear to settle, hearing nothing but the wind and the pounding of my heart.

IN THE EVENINGS I worried about visitors, especially the police. There wasn't yet a tradition of cross-country driving in China, and rules were strict for foreigners. I wasn't supposed to take the City Special outside of Beijing, and some parts of the west were closed completely to outsiders, because of poverty, ethnic tensions, or military installations. And a foreign journalist was technically required to apply to local authorities before traveling anywhere in the country. That was one reason I brought my tent—I hoped to avoid small-town hotels, which hand over their guest lists to the police.

On the road I followed my own set of guidelines. I waited until sunset to pitch my tent, and I left at first light; I never started a campfire. If I needed to stay in a small town, I looked for a truckers' dorm, where foreign guests are so rare that they usually don't have police registration forms. I carried enough water to last for days. I generally drove under the influence of caffeine and sugar—the City Special was fully stocked with Coca-Cola, Gatorade, Oreo cookies, and candy bars. If I traveled for a few days without a shower, I stopped at a barbershop and paid somebody to wash my hair. Every small town in China has at least one barbershop, and a standard service is the wash and head massage, usually for about a dollar. At noon I often pulled off the road to take a nap. I never drove at night. Fatigue is such a factor on Chinese roads that it appears on the driver's exam:

133. If you drive for four hours, you must stop the car and take a mandatory rest of at least
   a) 10 minutes.
   b) 20 minutes.
   c) 15 minutes.

The correct answer is B—if you rest for a quarter hour, you're still five minutes short of legal. Chinese driving is a physical endeavor, or at least that's how it's portrayed in the rulebook. According to law, a truck driver must be at least 155 centimeters tall, whereas the driver of a passenger car has to be 150 (four feet eleven inches). In order to get a license, you need to have at least three normal fingers on each hand. Thumbs are nonnegotiable. Each ear must be capable of distinguishing the sound of a tuning fork at a distance of fifty centimeters. You can't be red-green color-blind. You can't suffer from epilepsy, congenital heart disease, vertigo, or Ménière's syndrome. The law explicitly forbids any driver stricken by "hysteria." If your legs happen to be of different lengths, and the difference exceeds five centimeters, you are legally banned from operating a standard transmission vehicle.

The driving law spells out such physical requirements in detail, as if sound health and body are critical to road safety, which clearly is not the case. The issue isn't traffic volume, either—in 2001, when I drove across the north, China had about one-fifth the number of cars and buses as the United States. But there were more than twice as many traffic fatalities, and the government reported a total of 750,000 road accidents. It was a nation of new drivers, most of them negotiating new cities, and the combination was lethal. People might have done better if surroundings had remained familiar—in Beijing, drivers tended to be brilliant in old parts of town. Traditionally, Beijing is composed of hutong neighborhoods, networks of narrow brick-walled alleyways that had originally been laid out in the thirteenth century. Every time I drove into a hutong, the walls pressed close and I broke out in a sweat, but everybody else seemed unfazed. They were patient and they were skilled: a Beijing hutong driver could dodge an oncoming Santana, cruise cleanly through a pack of schoolchildren, and park his car within inches of a Ming-dynasty brick wall. If the nation's road system somehow could have channeled the hutong mentality, maybe all of us would have been fine.

But people didn't respond as well to the open space of a new road. Some of it was poor planning: by 2001, Beijing had suddenly become home to over one million vehicles, and the city's infrastructure struggled to catch up. South of the hutong where I lived, old neighborhoods had
been cleared out for bigger roads, but traffic rules were often bizarre.
At one major intersection, some genius urban planner had located the
left turn lane on the far right side of the road, which meant that any-
body heading in that direction had to cut across five lanes of traffic.
If he successfully made the turn and continued straight for another mile,
he reached another intersection where the traffic signals had been mis-
timed so badly that lights were green in all directions for a good five
seconds. Elsewhere in the city, entire districts were under construc-
Roads were half built; signs were poorly planned; unmarked ramps led
to mystery thoroughfares. Beijing maps featured cloverleaf exchanges
that could have been designed by M. C. Escher:

![Cloverleaf intersections](image)

Even today, when some of the road problems have been improved,
city driving is an adventure. And trouble is inevitable in a place where
most drivers are rookies. In China, the transition has been so abrupt
that many traffic patterns come directly from pedestrian life—people
drive the way they walk. They like to move in packs, and they tailgate
whenever possible. They rarely use turn signals. Instead they rely on
automobile body language: if a car edges to the left, you can guess that
he's about to make a turn. And they are brilliant at improvising. They
convert sidewalks into passing lanes, and they'll approach a round-
about in reverse direction if it seems faster. If they miss an exit on a
highway, they simply pull onto the shoulder, shift into reverse, and
get it right the second time. They curb-sneak in traffic jams, the same
way Chinese people do in ticket lines. Tollbooths can be hazardous,
because a history of long queues has conditioned people into quickly
evaluating options and making snap decisions. When approaching a
toll, drivers like to switch lanes at the last possible instant; it's common
to see an accident right in front of a booth. Drivers rarely check their
rearview mirrors. Windshield wipers are considered a distraction, and
so are headlights.

In fact, the use of headlights was banned in Beijing until the late
1970s, when the nation's leaders began going overseas in increasing
numbers. During the early Reform years, these trips were encouraged by
Governments in Europe and the United States, who hoped that glimpses
of democracy would convince Chinese officials to rethink their poli-
cies. In 1983 Chen Xitong, the mayor of Beijing, made one such visit to
New York. On the way to and from his meetings with Mayor Ed Koch
and other dignitaries, Chen made a crucial road observation: Manhattan
drivers turn on their lights at night. When Chen returned to China, he
decided that Beijing motorists do the same. It's unclear what conclu-
sions he drew from his encounters with American democracy (eventu-
ally he ended up in prison for corruption), but at least he did his part
for traffic safety.

Nevertheless, Chinese drivers haven't grasped the subtleties of head-
light use. Most people keep their lights off until it's pitch-dark, and then
they flip on the brights. Almost nobody uses headlights in rain, fog, snow,
or twilight conditions—in fact, this is one of the few acts guaranteed to
annoy a Chinese driver. They don't mind if you tailgate, or pass on the
right, or drive on the sidewalk. You can back down a highway entrance
tamp without anybody batting an eyelash. But if you switch on your
lights during a rainstorm, approaching drivers will invariably flash their
brights in annoyance.

For the most part, though, they're unflappable, and it's hard to imag-
ine another place where people take such joy in driving so badly. On
the open road it feels like everybody has just been unleashed from a
kuaizi—there's a sudden rush of speed and competition, and the great-
est thrill comes from passing other motorists. People pass on hills; they
pass on turns; they pass in tunnels. If they get passed themselves, they
immediately try to pass the other vehicle back, as if it were a game.
From what I can tell, that's the only question on the written driver's
exam with three correct answers:
77. When overtaking another car, a driver should pass
   a) on the left.
   b) on the right.
   c) wherever, depending on the situation.

On the exam, questions are taken directly from government-published study materials, and the Public Safety License Bureau provided me with a booklet that contained 429 multiple-choice questions and 256 true-false queries. Often these questions capture the spirit of the road ("True/False: In a taxi, it’s fine to carry a small amount of explosive material"), but it’s less obvious how they prepare people for driving in China. In fact the trick is to study the wrong answers. They describe common traffic maneuvers with such vividness that you can practically see the faces behind the wheel:

81. After passing another vehicle, you should
   a) wait until there is a safe distance between the two vehicles, make a right-turn signal, and return to the original lane.
   b) cut in front of the other car as quickly as possible.
   c) cut in front of the other car and then slow down.

117. When approaching a marked pedestrian crossing, you should
   a) slow down and stop if there are pedestrians.
   b) accelerate in order to catch up with the car directly in front of you, and then cross closely behind him.
   c) drive straight through, because pedestrians should give vehicles the right of way.

80. If you prepare to pass a car, you notice that it is turning left, making a U-turn, or passing another vehicle, you should
   a) pass on the right.
   b) not pass.
   c) honk, accelerate, and pass on the left.

Lots of answers involve honking. In a Chinese automobile, the horn is essentially neurological—it channels the driver’s reflexes. People honk constantly, and at first all horns sound the same, but over time you learn to interpret them. In this sense it’s as complicated as the language. Spoken Chinese is tonal, which means that a single sound like ma has different meanings depending on whether it’s flat, rising, falling and rising, or falling sharply. A single Chinese horn, on the other hand, can mean at least ten distinct things. A solid hoooonnnnnkkkkk is intended to attract attention. A double sound—hoooonnnnnkkkk, hoooonnnnnkkkk—indicates irritation. There’s a particularly long hoooonnnnnnnnnnnnnkkkkkkkkkkkk that means that the driver is stuck in bad traffic, has exhausted curb-sneaking options, and would like everybody else on the road to disappear. A responding hoooonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn proves they aren’t going anywhere. There’s a stuttering, staggering honk honk honk honk honk honk honk honk honk honk that represents pure panic. There’s the afterthought honk—the one that rookie drivers make if they were too slow to hit the button before a situation resolved itself. And there’s a short basic honk that simply says: My hands are still on the wheel, and this horn continues to serve as an extension of my nervous system. Other honks appear on the exam:

353. When passing an elderly person or a child, you should
   a) slow down and make sure you pass safely.
   b) continue at the same speed.
   c) honk the horn to tell them to watch out.

269. When you enter a tunnel, you should
   a) honk and accelerate.
   b) slow down and turn on your lights.
   c) honk and maintain speed.

355. When driving through a residential area, you should
   a) honk like normal.
   b) honk more than normal, in order to alert residents.
   c) avoid honking, in order to avoid disturbing residents.
I picked up my first hitchhiker on the way to Smash the Hu. At sunrise I had taken down my tent, and after studying the map I decided to try a route that paralleled the north side of the Ming wall. This turned out to be the worst road thus far—it began as a dirt track, high on the mountain, and then it descended steeply. Water runoff had badly rutted the surface; the City Special lurched and groaned. To my left, the Great Wall perched neatly atop a ridgeline—it seemed to float effortlessly while I banged down the broken road. Halfway to the valley floor, a young woman stood beside the dirt track, waving madly. I rolled down the window.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Smash the Hu, then Slaughter the Hu," I said. In Chinese those village names really roll off the tongue.

"Can I get a ride to Smash the Hu?"

"No problem," I said, pushing open the door. The woman carried a sack of fresh pork, the fatty meat glistening white and pink against the plastic. She set it on the floor and hesitated before entering.

"How much is it?" she said.

"How much is what?" For a moment I thought she was talking about the pork.

"To Smash the Hu," she said. "How much?"

Good question—how can anybody put a price on destroying indeterminate nomadic tribes? "Don't worry about it," I said. "I'm going there anyway."

Her name was Gao Linfeng, and she was twenty-seven years old. She told me that she had grown up in Smash the Hu but now she worked in a factory in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. She was traveling home in order to see her grandmother—the pork was a gift. In these parts, transport was rare; she had caught a ride on the Ninglu bus, which only took her as far as the pass. From there she had planned to continue on foot until a ride came along. She wore a new gray business suit and fresh makeup, and her hair was neatly styled. How was it possible to look so good on a dirt road in Inner Mongolia? I was dressed in an old gray T-shirt and dirty trousers; it had been two days since somebody last washed my hair.

Like many rural Chinese, Gao had left home to find work in the city. In 1978, at the beginning of Reform and Opening, approximately 80 percent of the population lived in the countryside. As the economy boomed, it created an increasing demand for construction workers and factory staff, most of whom came from rural regions. Chinese farms had always been overpopulated, and young people were glad to leave; by 2001, an estimated ninety million had already left home. To drive across China was to find yourself in the middle of the largest migration in human history—nearly one-tenth of the population was on the road, finding new lives away from home.

Most migrants went to coastal regions, but there were also opportunities in provincial cities like Hohhot. Gao told me that she had started on the assembly line but worked her way up, and now she was in management. Her factory produced wool sweaters for export. She had a three-year-old son in Hohhot, and they rarely returned to Smash the Hu. "It's so poor here," she said. "Farming is hard, because of the elevation and the dryness. Look at that corn." She pointed outside, where a field of dusty green stalks bordered the road. "In most places it's already been harvested, but everything happens so late here, because it's so high."

After we chatted for a while, she said, politely, "You're not from our China, are you?"

"No."

"Which country are you from?"

It was tempting to say that I was Hu, but I told the truth.

"My factory exports sweaters to your country!" she said happily.

Like many young people in the factory towns, she had studied some English on her own, although she was too shy to practice it with me. She was curious about life in America—she asked how many people were in my family, and if farmers lived in my hometown. "Do you drive on the same side of the road as in China?" she asked. I said yes, although at the moment it was irrelevant, because our route had deteriorated to a single pair of tire ruts. And if there was any irony in having a friendly