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Capitalist Roaders

By TED CONOVER

Zhu Jihong cannot wait to get started on his holiday road trip. At 6 a.m. on Saturday, the first day of the October National Day week (one of three annual Golden Weeks in China, intended to promote internal tourism and ensure that workers take some time off), Zhu has parked his brand-new Hyundai Tucson S.U.V., with its limited-edition package of extras like walnut trim and chrome step-bar, in front of my hotel in downtown Beijing. He is half an hour early, but he is in a hurry. He cannot believe I'm not ready.

Li Lu, a friend who is coming along as my interpreter, has found me in the hotel restaurant. She was roused even earlier than I, at her apartment a couple of miles away, and calculates that Zhu, to make it into Beijing from his home on the city's outskirts, must have gotten up at 4. She adds that she's a bit concerned: she helped me book a spot on this car trip and had assumed that the driver whose car we shared would be a person of, well, culture. But Zhu, she says, is "not educated."

"What do you mean?" I ask as we leave the hotel's revolving glass doors and come upon Zhu.

Zhu is nicely dressed, in the dark slacks, leather loafers and knit shirt of many Chinese businessmen. Cigarette in one hand, hair recently cut and wavy on top, Zhu, in his 40's, has a somewhat dashing, youthful air. Before Li Lu and I are out the revolving door, he is at the back of the Hyundai, making room for my knapsack and pointing me in the direction of the leather passenger seat. He stops to shake my hand only after I pause and offer mine. Li Lu is our intermediary and tries to effect the introduction I'm after, but Zhu is not one for formalities; he gives a tiny nod, then circles the car, hawks noisily and spits by his door, climbs in and turns the key. Li Lu, from the back seat, gives me a look that says: See? What did I tell you?

But as the car fills with smoke from his cigarette and the CB radio battles for supremacy with operatic Red Army tunes on the CD player, I don't much mind Zhu's manners (which, Li Lu explains, reflect the factory owner's peasant background) because we're off on an adventure and Zhu's excitement is infectious. Our trip is a seven-day excursion from Beijing to Hubei Province in Central China, including stops at the Three Gorges Dam and a mountainous forest preserve called Shennongjia, fabled home to a race of giant hairy ape-men. And though the trendy enterprise we are part of is known as a "self-driving tour," we are not

going alone: a dozen carfuls of other people have signed on with the tour, organized by the Beijing Target Auto Club, one of the for-profit driving clubs that are sprouting all over China.

Zhu is ready for a long day at the wheel — our destination, Nanyang, is more than 500 miles away — but it's going to be even longer than he thinks. Our rendezvous with the other cars at the Zhuozhou rest stop, normally an hour away, will be delayed four hours, as thick fog closes the expressway. Heavy rain will fall, and our early start will count for little by midday as the highways swell with holiday traffic. There will be wrecks, like the fatal one-car rollover we'll pass on a bridge around midnight, an upside-down Beijing-plated Mitsubishi. The hotel's dinner will be waiting for us at 1 a.m., and we'll all be happy to see our rooms. But right now Zhu is pouring himself tea from a thermos and telling Li Lu how rich he is and how lucky we are to be in his car.

"He says he is an excellent driver and we will go very fast," she reports wearily.

The figures behind China's car boom are stunning. Total miles of highway in the country: at least 23,000, more than double what existed in 2001, and second now only to the United States. Number of passenger cars on the road: about 6 million in 2000 and about 20 million today. Car sales are up 54 percent in the first three months of 2006, compared with the same period a year ago; every day, 1,000 new cars (and 500 used ones) are sold in Beijing. The astronomic growth of China's car-manufacturing industry will soon hit home for Americans and Europeans as dirt-cheap Chinese automobiles start showing up for sale here over the next two or three years. (Think basic passenger car for \$10,000, luxury S.U.V. for \$19,000.)

But of course the story is not only about construction and production; car culture is taking root in China, and in many ways it looks like ours. City drivers, stuck in ever-growing jams, listen to traffic radio. They buy auto magazines with titles like *The King of Cars*, *AutoStyle*, *China Auto Pictorial*, *Friends of Cars*, *Whaam* ("The Car — The Street — The Travel — The Racing"). Two dozen titles now compete for space in kiosks. The McDonald's Corporation said last month that it expects half of its new outlets in China to be drive-throughs. Whole zones of major cities, like the Asian Games Village area in Beijing, have been given over to car lots and showrooms.

In other ways, though, the Chinese are still figuring cars out and doing things their way. Take the phrase used to describe our expedition: "self-driving trip." It is called self-driving to contrast it with the more customary idea of driving in China: that someone else drives you. Until recently, everyone important enough to own a car was also important enough to have his or her own driver. Traditions grew up around this, like the chauffeur joining his boss at the table for meals while on duty — something still commonly seen.

But those practices are growing fusty. What are new and explosively popular are car clubs — some organized around the idea of travel, like the Beijing Target Auto Club, and others organized around the idea of. . . well, simply fun. The Beijing VW Polo Club, for example, has an active Web site and hundreds of youthful members. (The Polo is a VW model popular in Europe and Latin America and now manufactured in China as well.) Club members meet regularly to learn about maintenance, deliver toys to orphans and take weekend pleasure drives reminiscent of America in the 30's and 40's. To celebrate the 2008 Beijing Olympics, four-dozen members recently turned up in a giant parking lot to form the Olympic logo with their compact, candy-colored cars, each circle a different hue. Single members have found mates in the club, and at least one of their weddings featured an all-Polo procession through the streets of Beijing.

In the West, cars can still excite, but the family car soon becomes part of the furniture. In China, however, it's nothing of the sort. Li Anding, author of two books on the car in China and the country's leading automotive journalist, told me why when he invited me to join some of his industry pals for dinner in Beijing. "The desire for cars here is as strong as in America, but here the desire was repressed for half a century," he began. All private cars were confiscated shortly after the Communists came into power in 1949, supposedly because they were symbols of the capitalist lifestyle. Having a car became the exclusive privilege of party officials.

Across the table, Li Anding's colleague Li Tiezheng explained that "people my age loved Russian movies. They gave us the idea we should all own a car, and we all wondered why we couldn't." Li Tiezheng bought his first car — a Polish-made Fiat — when private ownership was finally permitted in the mid-1990's. But the stigma against ownership was still huge. "The pressure was so great, I couldn't tell anyone. I lied that I had borrowed it."

That didn't last long. By 2000, enough regulations had been removed, and enough people were making money, that car ownership became a reality for many Chinese for the first time. Li Anding, born in 1949, the year the Communists came to power, said he was still astonished at the change: "When I started writing about cars, I never expected to see private cars in China in my generation, much less some of the world's fanciest cars, being driven every day."

As the men around the table listened to Li's history and added to it, there was a palpable sense of pride. This wasn't simply progress on the level of a convenience — analogous, say, to your neighborhood moving from dial-up to high-speed Internet. To them it was China finally entering the world stage and participating fully in human progress. It had the additional meaning of something long denied that could finally be acquired, like a wrong being rectified. Over and over again, the group described car ownership with a term I would never have thought to use:

"Once China opened up and Chinese people could see the other side of the world and know how people lived there, you could no longer limit the right to buy cars."

"This right is something that has been ours all along."

"Driving is our right."

When Li Lu noticed the sign for the Zhuozhou Service Area of the Jingshi Expressway, Zhu Jihong was on one of his favorite subjects: destinations. He had done self-driving to Mongolia and Manchuria, he said, to Xinjiang and to Xi'an and the Silk Road. He made a round trip to Tibet — fantastic! — and was considering one to Hong Kong. The main problem with our current itinerary, in his opinion, was that it was too short: "A week isn't long enough to really feel like you've been away." His wife was less and less interested in these odysseys, preferring, lately, to stay home and mind the hotel and restaurant he had bought near his hometown outside Beijing. And his son, oddly enough, wasn't interested in driving at all.

Li Lu interrupted Zhu and made sure he noticed — this was where we were to pull off and finally meet the group. Though it was early afternoon now and Zhu had been driving for hours, he barely looked tired. I thought to peek at the odometer of his two-month-old Hyundai as he slowed; it showed 7,700 kilometers, or nearly 4,800 miles. That was an annual rate of nearly 30,000 miles, and most of them would be pleasure driving.

Though the parking lot was the first time most members of the trip had seen one another, they had been talking for hours: each driver, before today, had stopped by the Beijing Target Auto Club office to pick up a CB radio and rooftop antenna. The rendezvous was on one side of the lot, and in the middle of the group was a vehicle with the biggest antenna of all, a thickly bumpered, sticker-plastered, red-flagged Chinese-made four-by-four belonging to the president of the Target club, Zhao Xiangjie.

Zhao and his truck were decked out for safari: he was wearing a khaki utility vest with many zippers, busily meeting members of the group as they arrived. Across the lot, a self-driving group from Guangzhou was similarly mustered, easy to spot by the big stickers with numbers on everyone's side doors and rear windows. And this, it turned out, was Zhao's next duty, to adorn each vehicle with its numbers. My driver, Zhu, accepted his with great ceremony, cleaning his doors first to ensure good adhesion, making sure the number decals were straight and even. If one theme here was safari, another was road rally, the decals suggesting that everyone was part of a speedy team.

Though most are organized around the idea of trips, Chinese car clubs come in many flavors. Some are

run by dealers (like a Honda dealership in Guangzhou), and others (like the VW Polo Club in Beijing) are nonprofit and organized around a particular model. At least one is the offshoot of an outdoor-recreational-gear manufacturer. Many are just for four-wheel-drive vehicles and aim to go to the back of beyond. Travel agencies sponsor some; others are run for and by motorcyclists.

One of Zhao Xiangjie's advantages, at the Beijing Target Auto Club, is good connections in officialdom. He has worked as a composer, filmmaker and official celebration organizer; he knows important people and has succeeded in getting them to steer big commissions his way. His auto-club offices are in the government-run Olympics Center. In a speech he gave to the 2005 Auto Clubs and Fans C.E.O. Forum, I heard him assert that more government involvement was needed if automobile-related industries like the clubs were to develop in an optimal fashion. I sensed that he wouldn't mind being China's first under secretary of car clubs.

But an alternate strategy may have more momentum. Back in Beijing, a young man named Chen Ming helps run what appears to be the largest self-driving organization in China: the auto-club arm of Beijing traffic radio FM 103.9. His employees, around 100 of them, occupy a floor and a half of a midsize office building. Chen Ming has high volume and a rapidly growing business. Linking an auto club to traffic radio seems inspired. Members pay \$27 a year and receive benefits that include group insurance rates, gasoline rebates, "auto rescue" within Beijing's Fifth Ring Road, free rental cars if a repair takes more than three days, et cetera. Chen got his start in the business as Zhao's protégé — he was assistant manager of the Beijing Target Auto Club — and when I spoke with him in Beijing, he shared his belief that Zhao's approach, his eagerness to stay involved with the government, is outdated.

Maybe half of the vehicles in our group were S.U.V.'s and the rest were passenger cars, almost all with foreign labels — Toyota, Volkswagen, Mitsubishi, Citroën — not the cheaper Chinese models that made up the majority of cars on the road, the Fotons, Geelys, Cherys, JAC's. (More than 40 local brands are currently manufactured in China.) One of the foreign cars caught my eye: a flashy white Volvo S80, driven by a man who was also a distinctive dresser. With his white leather loafers, tight jeans, white belt with a big silver buckle and white shirt ("Verdace," read the logo), Fan Li, a television producer, cut an intriguing figure. He was accompanied on this trip by his pretty 24-year-old daughter, Fan Longyin, who was recently back from film school in France. Longyin was quickly becoming friends with Jia Lin, a single female reporter for The Beijing Youth Daily, who was in her 30's. Jia wore a tan leather jacket with a winged glossy-lip logo on the back that said "Flying Kiss." Like me, Jia came without a car, but it looked as if she would start riding with the Fans.

And then there was the attractive young family in the white Volkswagen Passat, the Chens: Xiaohong

(who uses the name Peter with English speakers), the personable information-technology executive; his wife, Yin Aiqin, an electric power consultant; and their 4-year-old daughter, Yen Yi Yi, whom, I would soon learn, was already taking voice lessons at home from a member of the Beijing Opera.

More nerdy but genial were the bespectacled Wangs, in their Citroën Xsara: she ran part of the back office of Air China; he worked for an international freight firm. They, too, had an unattached passenger who shared the driving and expenses. He was the urbane Zhou Yan, a partner in China's third-largest law firm.

And then there were the businessmen. Organized by a cement-plant owner, Li Xingjie, these 10 or 11 guys from the same Beijing suburb, Fangshan, rode in S.U.V.'s and tended to stick to themselves. Some of them owned coal-processing plants, which meant they were rich.

Soon all 11 cars were bedecked with numbers and the club logo. Pit stops and snack purchases were completed; the service area looked a bit like one on an American toll road, though there was no landscaping, the simple restaurant was not a fast-food franchise and the convenience store was not as elaborately stocked as in the States. The gas station — state-run Sinopec — filled Zhu's Hyundai for about \$1.85 a gallon, and I paid in cash, gas and tolls being my contribution to expenses. (Sinopec stations only recently began accepting credit cards.) Everyone piled back in their cars, and we hit the road. We would reconvene for dinner.

China's first modern expressway, the Guangzhou-Shenzhen Superhighway, was built in the early 1990's by the Hong Kong tycoon Gordon Y.S. Wu. Wu studied civil engineering at Princeton in the mid-50's, when construction was beginning on the U.S. Interstate Highway System. At the same time, the New Jersey Turnpike was being widened from four lanes to many lanes, and Wu has said it inspired him. (His powerful firm, Hopewell Holdings, is named after a town near Princeton.) Though Wu ran short of money and the ambitious project had to be rescued by the Chinese government, the toll-road model of highway development caught on.

Wu's Guangzhou-Shenzhen Superhighway was the beginning of an infrastructure binge that seems to be only picking up steam: the government recently announced a target of 53,000 freeway miles by 2035. (The U.S. Interstate Highway System, 50 years old last week, presently comprises about 46,000 miles of roads.) Some new roads, especially in the less-developed western parts of the nation, are nearly empty: China is encouraging road construction ahead of industrial development and population settlement, assuming those will follow.

The goal, of course, is not simply to replicate the boom of coastal areas, where the majority of the

country's population now lives. China's larger aim is to consolidate the nation. Its version of Manifest Destiny — the "great development of the West" or "Go West" policy begun in January 2000 — envisions far-western territories, like Tibet and the fuel-rich province Xinjiang (the name translates as "New Frontier"), fully integrated, ethnically and economically, with the rest of the country. It seems quite likely that, similar to the case with American history, local indigenous cultures stand to lose along the way. What the United States gained (and lost) with the Pony Express, covered wagons and steam trains, China may achieve with roads and automobiles.

If highways in China's west are so far awaiting traffic, easterners have the opposite concern. As we headed south from Shijiazhuang toward Zhengzhou, the roads packed with vacationers and truck traffic, Zhu jostled for position with all the other people who were late getting where they were going. His style of driving helped me understand better why China, with 2.6 percent of the world's vehicles, had 21 percent of its road fatalities (in 2002, the most recent year for which figures are available).

Of course, there must be many reasons. The large number of new drivers is one; few of today's Chinese drivers grew up driving, and road-safety awareness seems low. Many roads are probably dangerous — though not, I would venture to say, the beautiful new expressway we were on. It was like an American Interstate, only sleeker: the guardrails were angular and attractive, not fat and ugly, and in the divider strip there was typically a well-pruned hedge, high enough to protect drivers from the glare of beams from opposing traffic at night. Beyond the guardrails, grassy embankments sloped down to buffer areas carefully planted with a single species of tree, often poplar. The road surface was perfectly smooth, transitions even, signage sparse but clear. Periodically we saw orange-suited workers hand-pruning the center hedge or sweeping the wide shoulder with old handmade brooms. There was never a maintenance truck nearby; wherever they came from, they apparently walked.

It was the sweepers I worried about. Officially, there were two lanes of travel in each direction. But each side also had a shoulder, and on this expressway, at least, the shoulder was exactly as wide as the travel lanes. Thus Zhu and others (despite signs asserting that it was forbidden) used the shoulder as the passing lane. Occasionally, of course, a sweeper would loom, or a disabled vehicle, and Zhu would slam on the brakes and veer into the truck lane. Once past the obstacle, he would floor it and swerve back out, brake once again, swerve, honk — it was almost like being in a video game, except that video games end or you can walk away. We, on the other hand, had a long way to go.

"Li Lu, does Mr. Zhu know that more Chinese die on the road every day than died here during the entire SARS epidemic?" I asked her. She translated. Zhu looked at me and laughed. "I think he didn't understand," she said. We consulted, and soon Li Lu announced from the back seat that we both really

wished he would slow down a bit. Zhu looked at me sidelong and then, if anything, speeded up.

The next morning Zhu was tired, finally, and asked if I wanted to drive. I hesitated for a moment. I had researched the issue and was fairly certain that foreign tourists were forbidden to drive between cities in China. Most Chinese, however, seem never to have considered the possibility of foreigners behind the wheel, and from the beginning, Zhao asked whether I would be willing to help with the driving. Far be it from me to shirk this responsibility. So I said sure and climbed into the driver's seat.

This day's driving was different from the previous day's. As we moved farther from the coast and its expressways, we spent more time on national highways, which generally are two-lane and pass through a lot of towns. Everyone in the club stuck pretty close together, and there was a lot of chatting over the radio. Our leader, Zhao, began by apologizing for yesterday's overlong drive. Even if there hadn't been a highway closure due to fog, slowness due to rain and holiday congestion, it was too long a drive for the first day, and he was sorry. But he was also upbeat and sounded excited about getting to Three Gorges Dam that afternoon. He moderated the CB chat that followed, prompting each car's occupants to take turns introducing themselves. Some told a joke, some sang a song. Fan, in the white Volvo, put on an [Elvis Presley](#) CD and held his mike to the speaker, playing "Love Me Tender" in honor of me, Elvis's countryman. As we passed through one village an hour past breakfast, a clamor rose for a pit stop.

The men had little trouble finding places to relieve themselves near the edge of town, but women were in more of a bind. China's car culture — not to mention consumer culture — has not yet reached the countryside, and there was no restaurant nearby, no fast-food joint, no gas station/convenience store. Chen Yin Aiqin, her daughter at her side, knocked tentatively on the door of a farmhouse and was soon welcomed inside and ushered to the latrine out back. Afterward, before their car pulled away, she dashed back to the farmer's door with a small box of chocolate from Beijing.

The lack of infrastructure for touring drivers is one reason that these organized self-driving tours are so popular. Besides having planned in advance (through arrangements with local travel agents) where we would stop to eat and sleep every day, Zhao had an expert mechanic in his four-by-four: repair garages were few and far between, and one of the Beijingers' main fears was breaking down far from home, with nobody trustworthy nearby to help.

The national roads, while more interesting to drive than the expressways, were also more nerve-racking. There were considerable numbers of people on bicycles, on foot and on small tractors; there were crossroads; and least expected by me, there were many places where I had to swerve toward the middle of the road because of farmers having appropriated a strip of pavement along the edge for drying their grain, usually corn. Sometimes the grain was laid out on blue tarps; other times the drying zone was outlined by

rocks or boards; more than once, traffic slowed because of it. I had heard of Chinese farmers sometimes laying their wheat across the road so that passing vehicles would thresh it for them. But there was something aggressive about this appropriation of the highway.

The suggestion of rural hostility toward traffic and the number of people using the road for walking put me in mind of the famous "BMW Case," which received a lot of media attention two years before. A rich woman in a BMW, probably traveling on a road like this, was bumped by a farmer transporting his onion cart to market. Enraged, she struck the farmer and then revved her car and drove into the crowd. The peasant's wife was killed, but despite widespread outrage, China's [Lizzie Grubman](#) received only a suspended sentence.

BMW's seemed to be a sort of class-divide lightning rod. Recently, the number of kidnappings for ransom has shot up in China — the government reported 3,863 abductions in 2004, higher than the 3,000 a year reported on average in Colombia, the previous world leader. "In one case," according to The China Daily, "police searching the apartment of kidnappers in Guangdong Province found a list of all BMW owners in the city that appeared to have come from state vehicle registration rolls."

I was hoping to needle Zhu a bit, and so I asked him, if he was so rich, why didn't he have a BMW?

"Bad value," he said, explaining that while many foreign carmakers had plants in China and produced high-quality cars at a reasonable price, BMW's were all imported, with huge taxes added on. And indeed, this is true: tariffs and taxes add about 50 percent to the price of imported cars, making them high-status items. If you want to be really ostentatious, you do what rich guys like coal-mine operators from Shaanxi Province increasingly do and come into the city to buy a Hummer — those cost upward of \$200,000. But Zhu thought that was ridiculous. The Volkswagen Passat he kept at home for his wife to drive was made in China, he said, as were growing numbers of other excellent foreign-designed cars, all of them produced under joint ventures with Chinese companies (some state-owned or -controlled), an arrangement the government hoped would encourage the growth of a domestic car industry. "Like my Hyundai," Zhu said proudly, putting his cigarette in his mouth so he could pat the dashboard. "Made in Beijing."

Not long after lunch, we started seeing signs for the Three Gorges Dam and accessed the site through tunnels along an expensively built mountainside road. Security was tight, with numerous guard posts, cameras and warning signs, and I was happy to swap seats with Zhu as we pulled into a roadside waiting area — just before an official came by to collect every driver's license. A guide boarded our leader's car and, over the radio, began a running commentary. I asked Zhu, between her remarks, what he thought of my driving.

"He says you are a good driver, but he has some advice," Li Lu reported. "He says to improve, you must be more brave!"

Three Gorges Dam, one of the largest construction projects in history, seemed a fitting first attraction for our trip, evoking superlatives in this land of superlatives. It has cost an estimated \$75 billion so far (including corruption and relocation costs); it will require more than a million people to be relocated; it would generate more hydroelectric power than any dam ever had; and it spans the Yangtze, the third-longest river in the world. The reservoir began filling up in 2003 and has six years left to go; it presents a huge military target.

Like so much in China, the scale is almost too large to fathom. The 30-odd people in our group parked and then boarded buses that took us up to a visitor center above the dam; we peeked at a model dam indoors and then, like scores of others, scrambled around the viewpoint, taking lots of pictures. Fan turned out to have a serious interest in photography: his daughter posed, posed and posed again as her father assumed an exaggerated wide stance with his heavy Nikon digital camera. Others focused on the astonishing dam, proudly making sure I got a good look, witnesses to a great change who were, themselves, harbingers of a change.

Zhu was back at the wheel the next day as we drove from the Three Gorges area to Hongping, a town deep in Hubei Province and the jumping-off point for visits to Shennongjia, the forest reserve where everyone hoped to see a yeti.

His Hyundai had a six-CD changer in the dash, and among the titles in it were "The Relax Music of Automobiles," which turned out to be instrumental versions of the love songs of Deng Lijun, the Taiwanese pop singer of the 1970's. What Zhu really loved, however, was the old-time music on "The Red Sun: A Collection of Military Songs, Volume II." He played the CD again and again. The soaring, triumphalist music evoked bygone days, and I expressed surprise that a modern business guy like him loved the old socialist music so much. Zhu responded that it was the music he grew up with. He had worked on a farm, he confirmed. His grandfather became rich, but the Communists took it all away.

"Don't you dislike Mao for that?" I asked. He looked at me full on when Li Lu translated the question and then, at 60 miles per hour, turned sideways in his seat to show me the pin on his left lapel. It was a dime-size brass relief bust of the Great Helmsman himself. Steering with his knees, he put his chin to his chest, unpinned it and handed it to me as a gift.

"Many people still admire Mao very much," Li Lu explained. "They know he made mistakes, but they also

think he did much good. He got rid of the Kuomintang. He brought China together. He is still a very big hero, like a god to some."

Fan, the television producer, I had noticed, was also in the worshipful camp. He had the leader's portrait, in Lucite, affixed to the top of the dashboard of his Volvo so that he could not see anything through the windshield without Mao appearing in his peripheral vision. After I asked about that and complimented him on the DVD screens built into the back of the front seats (for rear-seat passengers), Fan invited me into the Volvo for the better part of a morning's drive. Longyin, his daughter, took a seat in the back, along with Jia Lin, the reporter, and offered some background on her father. "My parents both suffered a lot in the Cultural Revolution," she began. Fan interrupted impatiently.

"Oh!" Longyin said. "My father is saying: 'There is no such thing as a perfect person. Everybody makes mistakes. Mao saved many people, but to do it he had to sacrifice his son, his wife, his whole family — everything. Now he's gone, but I want to go back to that time, when people shared everything.'"

But do you really want to share everything? I asked Fan. Wouldn't sharing equally mean that a privileged few wouldn't be able to own new Volvos?

"I think now is a necessary period," Fan said, as his daughter translated. "We have to advance."

"Capitalism is something we've been waiting to try for a long time," Longyin said, quickly adding: "Personally, I hate the whole Mao thing. I think it's weird. I don't miss the sound of those old days at all." She did miss France, however, and her French boyfriend. She said she hoped to play a part in the growth of the Chinese film industry, perhaps by becoming an actors' agent. And some time in the next two or three months, she hoped to get a driver's license.

I was pleased to get to Hongping. The mountain hamlet was shrouded in mist, and the air was cool. Steep hillsides covered with deciduous trees rose on either side, and a creek ran through town, reminiscent of Vermont. We arrived at our hotel early in the afternoon, a nice change. It was three stars, clean, basic, but without a restaurant, elevator or easy parking, and soon we were checking out. "Beijingers are very picky," Li Lu told me. They didn't like it, and so Zhao had to find another. The new place seemed only incrementally better to me, but others were satisfied by the change. At dinner, Zhao was back to apologizing profusely for his poor judgment. But the men, anyway, were more interested in getting soused, and the error was soon forgiven.

When everyone rolled out of the restaurant, vendors were on the sidewalk, and Fan made us — and them — laugh with his uncanny shrill imitation of an older woman who had been hawking a melon. Zhou and

others had heard there was a "cultural promotion" — a show featuring local ethnic talent — on the edge of town and proposed we attend en masse. Zhu demurred, asserting that a strip club would be more fun, if only one could be found. We walked there without him, arriving early and securing a row of seats in the front.

Though Zhou, the lawyer, spoke little English, I very much enjoyed his company. He was witty and sophisticated and, after a drink, warm and outgoing; every time he opened his mouth, it seemed, he made Li Lu break into laughter.

Zhu, on the other hand, was a challenge. Along with being his passenger, I was his roommate, a difficult proposition. He smoked heavily, whether while sitting naked after a shower, braying into the phone at his wife or watching TV in bed, his head propped up by pillows. Often I knew he was awake in the morning by the click of his lighter and the smoke wafting over my bed. He snored raucously. He didn't believe in lifting the toilet seat. And always he fell asleep with the television on. This wasn't such a bad thing: usually I just reached over to the night table and clicked it off with the remote.

But that night in Hongping, there was a snag. When I came back from the cultural show, Zhu was lying in bed on top of his sheets, watching a famous black-and-white movie from 1956, "Railroad Guerrilla," about Chinese peasant fighters throwing off the yoke of their Japanese imperialist occupiers. The guerrillas were just entering the imperial administrator's quarters when I came out of the bathroom: an extended storm of hacking machetes ensued, the Japanese falling left and right. Zhu murmured appreciatively and soon drifted off. I watched Japanese get cut down until I couldn't believe any could be left alive on the planet and then, over Zhu's rising snores, looked for the remote. It was nowhere to be found. The television itself had no on-off button, and its plug was hidden behind a heavy dresser; I needed to find the remote itself. Finally I spotted it, poking out from underneath Zhu's butt. I turned him over and extracted it, put in my earplugs and went to sleep.

The next morning, Li Lu sympathized with my desire to switch roommates. Zhou the lawyer had said he would happily share with me. But she declared it was an impossibility: Zhu would lose face if I abandoned him. "And there is nothing worse for a man like him than losing face," she said.

The next morning we hiked through the misty, craggy hills of Shennongjia. The area, known as "the Roof of Central China," is a [Unesco](#) biosphere reserve of 272 square miles, with six peaks measuring up to 10,190 feet above sea level. It was equally famous, among our group, as the home of China's Bigfoot. This creature, in the local lore, lumbered through the mists with a big-bosomed mate; an artist's rendition of the hairy couple appeared in the corner of a park billboard. But though the trails were beautiful and

mysterious and we could imagine an ape-man happy there, none were spotted.

The police were directing traffic at the park entrance, and as we left, one officer noticed me in Zhu's passenger seat and waved us over. Foreigners are not permitted to travel in the direction we were headed, he declared, pointing to a sign. Zhu pulled over and summoned Zhao on the radio. Our entire group stopped, and major discussion ensued, which resulted, some 20 minutes later, in the policeman consenting to my passage. Zhao could be very persuasive.

"What was that all about?" I asked Li Lu.

"There are army bases in the mountains ahead," she said. "It is thought there are missiles there, to protect the Three Gorges Dam. You can't see them from the road, but the army is afraid of spies."

"But times are changing, right?" I asked. She looked uncertain, and I wasn't sure the answer was yes.

We drove for more than an hour, stopping for lunch in another little mountain town, Muyu. Halfway through the meal, a policeman looked in the room where we were eating. Uh-oh, I thought. As we left, a different policeman spotted me and uttered something grave. Zhao was summoned again. Other policemen arrived. My passport was requested, a phone call was made. Word came down: I had to go back. The old China was still around.

Zhao took me aside reassuringly and pressed a roll of yuan bills into my hand. Li Lu and I were to take a taxi back to Hongping, he said, while he figured out an alternate plan. We would call his cellphone from there.

The solution, we gathered, looked arduous: take a taxi, train and taxi, meeting up with the group the next night, or take a single long and expensive taxi, meeting up with them the next afternoon, but missing the Wudang Mountains and their monasteries famous for martial arts. As we waited for a driver, a call came in from the group up ahead: the cops in Muyu went home at dusk, they had heard. After dark, we should be able to blow through without any trouble. We consulted with some locals, and they concurred. And so it was decided.

We zoomed through Muyu without a hitch and, around midnight, passed as well through a couple of halfhearted traffic-boom-across-the-road checkpoints staffed by soldiers. I entered my hotel room in Wudang around 2 a.m. Naked on his bed, Zhu was sawing loudly, the television was blaring and the lights were all on. It was good to be back.

The next day we took a cable car to a cloud-shrouded monastery atop the Wudang Mountains. A particular temple there is said to be a place where cash offerings can influence your destiny. After conferring a moment with the attending monk, Jia Lin, the reporter, made a largish donation: 100 yuan, over \$12. Li Lu explained to me that Jia really wanted to find a husband and hoped to effect that result. Jia's search, in fact, was the reason she came on this trip, which she imagined to be the kind of exciting adventure where you might meet a man. So far, however, things weren't panning out.

So belief in prayer was alive in China. What was less clear to me, after my brush with the police in the mountains, was how many in the urban, affluent world of self-driving tourers still believed in government authority.

My test question was speeding. National highways were typically posted with limits of 50 miles per hour, and expressways up to 75 miles per hour, and the orientation brochure that each driver had received from the Beijing Target Auto Club insisted that we adhere to those limits. ("This is only self-driving, not car racing!" the brochure read. "Speeding is not necessary.") Yet all the drivers, including Zhao, paid the rules no attention whatsoever, often driving 100 m.p.h. or more. Police cars were seldom seen; when drivers spotted them, to my surprise, they paid no attention at all. The cops rarely used radar, it turned out, and they almost never tried to pull you over.

What did concern Zhu and the others, though, were the speed cameras mounted unobtrusively on poles in the median. If you went too fast past a camera, it snapped your picture, and the ticket arrived in the mail. Simple as that. Zhu knew the location of most of the cameras along his normal routes around Beijing, but whenever he headed afield, the bills really piled up — sometimes \$70 or \$80 a month.

His solution was friends in the police department. They had given him a special red license plate that was affixed beneath his regular one; he believed this stopped a lot of the tickets in their tracks. But Zhu — like many others on the trip — was also intrigued by a device in the Nissan S.U.V. of Li Xingjie, 42, the leader of the Fangshan businessmen's group. The short, bald man was widely envied among members of the tour for his radar detector, reputed to detect not only radar but also cameras. I joined him one afternoon, and he proudly demonstrated: the rumors were true, and the device also gave advance notice of tollbooths and service areas. Made in Taiwan, the detector cost Li \$350 and, as it stated in English on its bottom, detected "all speed equipment on mainland!" He used to pay about \$1,250 annually in fines, but no longer did.

"But isn't this kind of seditious?" I asked via Li Lu. "Isn't this Taiwan helping to undermine the laws of the mainland?"

On the contrary, Li said, "this detector helps me obey the law. You have to obey laws. We have to obey the government!"

I wasn't sure whether he was sincere. As we blew by an aging police cruiser at over 100 (the cruiser, by my reckoning, was traveling closer to 50), I asked him to help me unravel more mysteries of Chinese highway law enforcement. "Why isn't anybody worried about those police? Why don't they chase anybody and give out tickets?"

That's just not how it's done here, Li said. Occasionally you were hit with an expressway fine when you stopped at the next tollbooth, but ordinarily, unless there had been an accident or some other irregularity, cops wouldn't chase you; tickets just arrived in the mail. Police cars were slow, but the mails were reliable.

He portrayed himself as very straight: "Twenty years ago, I was driving a tractor — I was a model peasant! There were almost no cars in China. I didn't learn to drive until 1988.

"Under [Deng Xiaoping](#), I got lucky because I was uneducated. Educated people think in traditional ways, but Deng said we should take chances." He did, and now he owns the Beijing Fangshan Banbidian Cement Factory, which he started when he was 28. Li Xingjie was mild-mannered and unassuming, but when I later showed Li Lu his business card, she was in awe: "This cellphone prefix means he has had the phone a long time — since they were really expensive. He is very, very rich!"

I considered this as the group reconvened for the last time, just on the other side of a glitzy new toll plaza, its lines limned in neon that had been illuminated as the sun started down. All of the cars in our group — and the majority of cars you see in China, period — were recent models. Almost all the wealth of the drivers was first-generation. The digital cameras, the shiny wristwatches, all of it where I come from said nouveau riche. But the pejorative back home is the normative here: practically every wealthy person is nouveau riche, so the idea is meaningless.

The more instructive comparison, as we stood on this fancy bit of highway surrounded by rice fields and, here and there, people at work in them, was with the rural poor, the peasantry, the hundreds of millions of Chinese who do not yet (and, you imagine, will not in their lifetimes) share this prosperity. Many villages still are not connected to roads at all. When an expressway just south of here was completed last year, I was told sotto voce in Beijing, a series of demonstrations by peasants at a toll plaza delayed its opening. They were angry because the road had taken their land, and this, we are now seeing, is the story all over China: the government itself counted nearly 80,000 mass protests in 2005 alone. The country's economic growth is fantastic, the urban atmosphere heady. . .but then you see through the glass the peasants just in from the countryside, burlap bags at their feet, looking utterly from another planet, representatives of

hundreds of millions of others, almost standing still while Zhu and Li zoom on by.

We spent our last night in a four-star high-rise hotel in Luoyang. By the time I made it to our room with my suitcase, Zhu had already welcomed two sleek female "massage therapists" to our quarters; they were perched glamorously on the edge of my bed — legs crossed, lips glossed, high heels dangling — and beckoned me to join them. Zhu chortled with glee at my reticence, and I wondered which part of car travel he enjoyed most: the hours behind the wheel or the hours just after? Certainly, he seemed to take full advantage of all of them.

The end was anticlimactic: everyone was heading back on the same expressway, and Beijing was less than a tank of gas away, so there was no further need to stick together. Chatter on the CB dropped off slowly until the radio was utterly quiet, and in terms of its group dimension anyway, the trip was over.

Li Lu seemed pleased as Zhu's Hyundai eased into the perpetual traffic jam that is Beijing. She confessed that her friends were amazed she had gone on a trip like this: "I'm just a Beijing girl, a taxi girl!" — not a sporting, auto-club type. But Zhu seemed a bit disappointed to be off the open road. He wanted to treat us to dinner at a favorite noodle restaurant near the city center, but first we had to get there.

Creeping along on the highway, we talked about how the Beijing government was trying to control the huge new popularity of cars: one solution to the growing chaos of the streets has been to severely restrict motorcycle use in the city. Zhu thought that was better than Shanghai's fix: trying to cut down on car ownership by setting a high price (presently almost \$5,000) on car registration. Trying to ease traffic and cut down on accidents, Shanghai had even banned bicycles from many main streets, news that still amazes me.

A policeman friend of Zhu's met us at the restaurant and, in fact, even picked up the tab. (Zhu's rapport with the department was quite impressive.) I asked him about the street racing I had heard was becoming a problem in the city. Yes, he said, he had heard of it but had not seen it himself, yet. Zhu looked a bit too interested in the subject.

In the coming days, Zhu would entertain me and others at the restaurant-hotel he ran as a hobby on the outskirts of Beijing; likewise, Zhou the lawyer would treat a group of us, including the Wangs of the Citroën, to a fabulous dinner on trendy Houhai Lake. Clearly, nobody wanted the trip to end. ("Was it really that relaxing?" I had asked several of them, many times, after 12-hour days at the wheel; all had sworn that it was.)

An ebullient atmosphere surrounds the automobile in China. You can see the excitement continuing, even growing, as more people buy cars: China now has fewer than seven of them for every thousand people, roughly the same level as the United States had in 1915. Everyone expects the ownership rate to keep growing, which means there could be 130 million vehicles on China's roads by 2020. By 2030, according to one estimate, there could be as many as in the United States.

It is reminiscent of a fading romance in American life, this crush on the automobile, the thrill of car ownership, and it is fun to see. But in this area, American culture seems more mature than Chinese culture, and with the benefit of hindsight and statistics, it is not hard to spot a multicar pileup in the making. While I was in Beijing, the journal *Nature* reported that the city's air pollution was much worse than previously thought. Concentrations of nitrogen dioxide have increased 50 percent over the past 10 years, and the buildup is accelerating. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Beijing's sulfur-dioxide levels in 2004 were more than double New York's, and airborne-particulate levels more than six times as high. Last year China enacted its first comprehensive emissions law, but it is expected to have little effect on the transport sector's copious carbon-dioxide emissions, which by 2030 are expected to exceed those of the United States, the world's largest producer. The nation's growing demands for gasoline make it increasingly our competitor for the finite global supply; by 2030, according to the International Energy Agency, China may be importing as much oil as we do.

On the snail-paced drive back into Beijing, Zhu had passed through a zone on the edge of town that had been bulldozed and was being rebuilt as upper-income, car-friendly suburbs. In fact, this was happening around cities all over China: new gated communities, new themed enclaves, all for the car-owning class. What was conspicuously missing was a corresponding investment in mass transit, in public spaces and public access. And, in heavy traffic at the end of a tiring trip, it was easy to worry that the Chinese, rather than charting an innovative, alternate route into the automotive era, were on their way down a road that looks a little too familiar.

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