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From Forever to L.A.: **On the Brink of “Car Society”**

By Alexander J. Brenner

MAY 1, 2005

BEIJING, China—Bag of oranges in hand, I turned around from the fruit stand to find a group of older men crowded around my new bicycle, bought days before.

“Forever. Old famous brand,” proclaimed one.

A brand new Forever is a rare sight in China today. Similar old-style bikes abound, but the overwhelming majority of them are run-down and rusty. For those opting to buy new, popular choices are electric-powered bicycles or mountain bikes. These have a particularly strong SUV-like appeal to urban boys who, having never seen a dirt road, believe that regular bikes are for sissies. Most wouldn’t dream of riding to school on a Forever, whose styling has remained basically unchanged over several decades and looks like something their grandfathers rode.

To the men gathered around my bike, the combination of its antique design and sparkling paint job seemed to transport them back in time, perhaps to a first girlfriend sitting on the rack, clinging to their waists.



Sadly, my Forever lasted about a year before it was stolen.

“A Forever bike was considered one of the ‘three big items’ (*san dajian*),” explained another. “When we were young, there were three main things a young man needed to get a girl. A bike. A wrist-watch. And a sewing machine.”

What are the “three big items” needed to get a girl today, I wondered?

“Today, the three big items are an apartment, a car and, and...” The men couldn’t think of anything in particular. “A car and an apartment for sure.”

“It seems I don’t have much hope. I don’t have a car or house. Does *renting* an apartment count?” I enquired with mock-hope.

“No way, no renting allowed!” they laughed. In a country still emerging from a system where people rode government buses and rented government housing for most of their lives, *owning* something as expensive as an apartment or a car possesses a novel and weighty importance.

The evolution of the identities of these “three big items” is a telling way to

track China's economic development over the last half century. The initial three bigs remained the same for most of the Maoist era—a sign of the country's slow economic growth, and of how little of it trickled down into consumer goods. Throughout the quarter century of the reform era, the bigs have been changing in accelerated fashion: during the 1980s they meant a refrigerator, a washing machine, and a color TV; by the early nineties, a home phone, a VCR, and an air conditioner. (We are naturally speaking here of urban residents; farmers have lagged far behind in acquiring such consumer goods, and the very poorest still don't have wristwatches or bicycles.)

About ten years ago, the concept of the three "super-bigs" was introduced—a car, an apartment, and a cell phone—purchases only the super-rich could afford. Cell phones have of course shrunk in importance and price to the extent that China has more of them than any other country, America included; meanwhile, the creation of an urban middle class has meant owning a home and car have shrunk from super-bigs to just bigs. The result is that China is now the world's fastest growing market for both housing and automobiles. As one might expect, these trends in real estate and transportation are increasingly linked. While this housing construction boom has meant soaring costs for international commodities like iron ore, the reorganization of Chinese society around the automobile is likely to have a much deeper long-term global impact. Scientists, for example, worry about the potentially grave effects on global warming of a motor-vehicle fleet that will number in the hundreds of millions. The country's rising oil consumption is already contributing to higher gasoline prices at pumps around the world; many analysts assert that competition over access to energy supplies will be one of the most likely sources of conflict between China and America. This report, which

attempts to offer some insights on the underlying causes of the car mania sweeping China, will hopefully provide background for understanding these major stories as they play out over the coming years.

* * *

When I told friends I was writing about China's infatuation with the automobile, they said, "hurry up, the market is collapsing." Indeed, the situation has changed since the great explosion in car-sales in 2002 and 2003, when purchases jumped 57 percent and 75 percent respectively, numbers that translated into yet more startling statistics—for example, the China market provided Volkswagen with 80 percent of its global profits during the first six months of 2003. Last year, however, the market suffered a violent deceleration, with growth slowing to 15 percent. The China Auto Industry Association reported that profits in 2004 dropped for most carmakers, with eight of the 23 largest manufacturers even losing money. Thus far this year, growth has dropped to about ten percent. Speaking about the turnaround in the Chinese market at Volkswagen's annual meeting this month, chief executive Bernd Pischetsrieder announced that "for the whole of the automotive industry, we can say the gold rush is finished." The gold rush has ended in part because of the success of Beijing's policies to prevent the overheating of the economy as a whole; policies targeting the automotive sector specifically have included cuts in the amount of loans state-run banks can offer to car dealers and consumers.

While this slowing of growth in China's car market is dramatic, in the long term it's also entirely irrelevant. A comparison with America is useful: A report released earlier this year by the Washington-based Earth Policy Institute shows that China has surpassed America in the

consumption of every basic food, industrial and energy commodity, except oil. A central reason the United States uses three times as much oil as China is that Americans own close to ten times as many cars. Indeed, automobiles are one of the last few major consumer products still found in greater numbers in America. In 2003 there were 224 million automobiles in the US, or about 770 per 1,000 residents, versus 26 million in China, or only 50 for every 1,000 people.

This yawning gap in per-capita car ownership lies at the root of the global auto industry's obsession with China. About five million vehicles were sold here in 2004, making China the world's third-largest car market. In terms of annual sales, most estimates see China surpassing Japan around the year 2010 and catching America sometime around 2020, when the market in both countries will be around 20 million vehicles. These





The April Lifeweek cover story on "Car Society." The subtitles read: "Seventy-four million Chinese households have the ability to buy a car" and "In 15 years 76 percent of oil will need to be imported."

forecasts extrapolate from at an least eight-percent GDP growth rate in China, by no means a sure thing. Even if the economy expands more slowly, China is already headed toward an automobile-centered future. In its April 18th cover story, *Lifeweek* magazine said that 74 million Chinese households, or 20 percent of the national total, already had the purchasing power to buy a car. China is thus on the threshold of turning into a "car society." According to "international standards," the article explained, a country becomes a "car society" when one-fifth of households own an automobile. This sounds like yet another of those "international" standards Chinese love to use to gauge their development, but that few others have heard of. In this case, however, the proportion may be about right: car ownership is just now in the process of becoming deeply entrenched in models of residential and commercial development, so much so that the Chinese relationship to the automobile may one day look like that in the West.

While it's possible to find critics of a car-centered society, as the years pass these nay-sayers, mostly environmentalists and academics, are starting to sound a bit like

the Unabomber. A decade ago a sociologist like Zheng Yefu could actually instigate some debate with tracts entitled "Against Car Civilization" and "A Member of the Bicycle-Riding Nation Shouts Out." Over the course of the last ten years, however, his cries have been progressively drowned out by a relentless procession of pro-automobile policies, and the resultant spread of car mania among the populace. The domestic press continues to trot out Zheng and his fellow bicycle travelers: "It is ridiculous for a person weighing 50 or 60 kilograms to drive a machine weighing several tons," the sociologist Zhou Xiaozheng complained recently to the *China Daily* before going on to advocate a return to bicycle usage. The point of such exercises, however, seems to provide comic contrast to the official view, exemplified in this quote from the same article: "Our policies should not be directed against the increase in automobiles, but ought to target how to welcome this new civilization, a feature of which is the leading position of cars in society." True, local authorities have recently found themselves forced to take measures to limit rush hour traffic, and the national planners have worked to cool both supply and demand in the automobile sector as part of overall efforts to combat overheating in the economy. In the long-run, however, the official position remains an aggressively automobile-centered one—a position best characterized by a massive road-building effort that within 15 years should give China a highway system more extensive than America's.

To understand the car's leading position in this "new civilization," however, we will need to return repeatedly to the topic of bicycles. First, they still far outnumber cars. In Beijing, for example, about four million bikes are used as regular transportation, twice the number of cars. According to *Lifeweek*, in major Chinese cities bicycles account for one third to one-half of the to-



Many drivers seem to feel entitled to park and drive in bike lanes at will. At least this bike lane in downtown Changsha is still extant. Shanghai has taken the lead in entirely removing bike lanes from some major downtown streets.

tal number of individual trips taken, with public buses accounting for up to another quarter (taxis and private cars and, in a few cities, subways, make up the rest).

The problem with the bike is that it reeks of low social status. Witness my experience last year, when a friend took me along for drinks with a small group of thirtysomething art-world types (successful painter, literary magazine editor, TV-actress, art critic). When we walked out at the end of the evening, I asked them to wait a moment while I got my bike, parked down the street.

A moment of disbelief. "You're joking, right?" one of them asked.

"No. That's my bike right over there."

The group stood in bemused and slightly awkward silence as I unlocked the bike. Okay, so the foreigner doesn't have a car. But why didn't he at least take a taxi? Was he trying to save money? Is he that poor? (What was the name of the that strange foundation on his business card?) Although at this point only the painter and editor owned cars, all present made sure to confirm to the others that they hadn't ridden a bike for years. In any case, I was quite sure they hadn't shown up for social engagements on one. Riding a bike today is a sign that you don't have enough money not to. Image-conscious urbanites try to limit their association with bikes and, preferably, with the sorts of people who ride them.

So here we have a major force behind China's car craze: showing others you are not on a bike. You also want to show others you are not on the bus, or the subway. Until about five years ago, when private automobile purchases began to take off, most urbanites seemed to do fine without their own cars. They walked, biked or took public transportation to work. Then the magical convergence of rising disposable incomes, falling automobile prices and favorable terms for loans suddenly made purchasing a car possible for a thick cross-section of urban residents. A study released this March by the British market-research firm TNS suggested that only 15.5 percent of China's automobile purchases in 2004 could be attributed to actual transportation necessity. Meanwhile, the majority of new cars were bought to satisfy cravings for "feelings of belonging" and, most importantly, "status." Zhong Shi, a Chinese researcher who has done extensive studies on automobile purchasing, explained to *Lifeweek* the almost farcical importance of the car in bestowing status. In the late nineties, for example, conventional wisdom among industrialists coalesced around the idea that "when talking business, you had to come in a BMW, or else people would feel you lacked status." Similar logic then spread to the performing-arts world, where the belief was, if you showed up to discuss compensation in a BMW, "who would then have the nerve to try to bargain you down?"

While most Chinese car buyers may not face these

kinds of deal-making situations, they share similar concerns about image and belonging. The city where I live, Beijing, has one of the highest concentrations of such affluent, status-hungry residents, and they have helped make traffic here the worst in the country. As state media have commented, Beijing's rush hour "actually consum[es] 11 hours of the day." To give you an idea, at the height of the purchasing boom, about 1,000 new cars were spilling onto the streets each day. Even with a return to slower growth rates in the past year, the long-term accumulation of such quantities of cars presents the city's traffic planners with a seemingly intractable problem. Thus far, the city's "scientific" efforts have led to some gains, with transportation capacity, or the volume of traffic covering a given distance in a given time, increasing by about 15 percent last year. This sounds impressive, but given our starting point, all it really means is that more and more Beijingers can now get stuck in the exact same traffic jams.

Is there a way out? It's slightly alarming when someone like Liang Wei, deputy director of Qinghua University's Urban Planning and Design Institute, can be full of ideas about how to improve traffic flows and yet simultaneously expect ever-worsening gridlock. Having spent time at MIT, Liang has direct experience with how Americans use their motor vehicles. "Cars in the US are like bikes in China; they are tools. In America you think about cars rationally. But in China we don't have a mature car culture. Right now people are like children. They have money, and they think having a car is important, they think this is something I can own and show off." Liang asserts that problems stem not from the number of automobiles, but rather from how and when people use them on road networks never designed to handle such pressure. "Even if people live right on a subway line, they still take their car to work. They drive 500 meters to the store to buy cigarettes."

Of course some Americans also drive around the



Many of the millions of drivers who have had their licenses less than one year identify themselves with a sticker that says "practicing."

block for cigarettes—but they do so out of lazy habit, not for the sheer thrill of driving around the block. Liang seems to be right-on in stressing the “immature” nature of China’s automobile culture: The excitement and status associated with car ownership here compares favorably with the American high-school experience, when passing your driving test provided a popularity boost and when you cruised the block just to impress yourself and your friends. In urban China today it’s sophomore year, where half the people on the road got their cars and licenses just months ago (and still act like they can’t quite believe it) and the other half are all cramming for their driver’s tests.

Warning that Chinese city centers are sometimes as densely populated as Manhattan, Liang suggests his country learn from New Yorkers, many of whom choose not to buy a car, or at least not to rely on one for daily transport. As cars continue to spill onto the roads here, more frequent traffic jams, escalating parking fees and higher gas prices have already begun to weigh on drivers. As the cost-benefit calculus shifts, the allure of automobile ownership may gradually weaken. Meanwhile, however, experts expect people will go on buying cars just because they can—and because everyone else is.

Add to this competitive consumerism another recent but growing motivation for buying a car: actually *needing* one to get to work. A car may be one of the “biggs,” but the bigger big is the house—and the housing market is key to the next phase in the evolution of China’s automobile culture. While very wealthy Chinese have relied on private cars for years to ferry them to and from clusters of villas in the outskirts of major cities, such auto-reliant single-home dwellers were and remain a small elite. Today, however, mid-scale real-estate development is accelerating on the urban fringes, where cheaper land and more affordable apartments open up new home-owning options to an ever broader segment of residents.

For many Beijing residents whose courtyard dwellings and older apartments in the city center have been demolished to make way for luxury hi-rises, “options” is not the operative term. If a family wants to maintain



Here’s a typical traffic jam in the hutong, or narrow streets, near my house in the center of Beijing. The hutong was never designed for car traffic, much less two-way car traffic—hutong are one-way but most drivers interpret this to mean one-way in whichever way they happen to be going. In these photos, the truck apparently got stuck making a turn. This was a signal for various drivers to get out and blame each other, as well as for pedestrians and locals to congregate and watch the action. This all went on for a good 15 minutes as a dozen more cars backed up.



anything close to the same-size apartment they previously inhabited, they will *have* to move to cheaper new developments outside the fourth and fifth ring roads. The result has been the accelerating dispersal of Beijing residents to neighborhoods served barely, if at all, by public transportation. Duan Jinyu, also at Qinghua’s Urban Planning and Design Institute, where he is Director of Transport Research, told me that a notable shift in car-buying patterns in the past year are increasing sales to those moving to outskirts of town who, thanks to falling prices, can also afford small cars.

Duan is describing China’s emerging answer to the commuter suburb: apartment blocks located far from city centers, their residents dependent upon private cars. Given the population density in these housing developments, it would seem feasible to send public transportation out to meet them. Unfortunately, planning decisions made a decade ago favoring road construction—and the

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Adventures in Chinese-style Parking *Sauvage*

"A civilized city," commented Adam Gopnik in a recent issue of *New Yorker*, "is one without enough parking." While this may be true in the West, when a Chinese city doesn't have enough parking, parking simply gets created through methods that are anything but civilized. At the end of 2004, there was an estimated shortage of 400,000 parking spaces in central Beijing, where 1.5 million vehicles vie for about 1.1 million spots. This means 400,000 daily instances of parking *sauvage*, usually on the sidewalks (in his own way, the pedestrian is as lowly an urban life-form as the migrant). Such parking is supposedly illegal, but I have never seen anyone ticketed for it. If the sidewalk is wide enough, this kind of parking is merely disrespectful. Many sidewalks, however, are so narrow and cars parked on them block passage entirely. In such cases pedestrians are forced to walk in the bike lane to get around the cars, which means bikers need to swerve in and out of the car lane to avoid the pedestrians. This naturally results in many accidents and injuries, and undoubtedly even deaths.

The one positive aspect of this shortage of parking spaces is that it has created a whole new profession of "caddies" who, though they never get behind the wheel themselves, help you park your car. Restaurants in particular hire young migrant men to wait on the street and guide arriving cars up onto curbs, between trees, etc. Although it may beat working on a construction site, this is not an enviable job, especially in winter when it involves standing around late into the night in sub-zero temperatures. During these months you usually see caddies bundled up in big green People's Liberation Army overcoats—save during holiday promotions, when they are often forced to wear Santa Claus costumes, complete with white cotton beards (these costumes are flimsy, so you sometimes end up with the "Santa-joins-the-PLA" look). Another part of the job description for restaurant caddies is to drum up business by screaming and waving their arms at passing cars. It isn't clear how effective a strategy this is, but at least it helps keep you warm.

The basic problem is that these caddies, who are from the countryside and who may have never set foot in a car, are charged with assisting urbanites who have just gotten their licenses. You thus wind up with the spectacle of parking attendants who can't drive yelling instructions at drivers who can't park. Not that the instructions are of much use: it seems



that caddie training consists of just one lesson: yell the word "*dao!*" continuously at the driver. *Dao* literally means "back up," but the term has become an unhelpful catch-all that also means "go forward" or "go sideways"—basically, "go whichever way you need to park."

Every so often, the sight of a parking disaster in progress compels you to action. One evening, for example, I went to a concert at a hall located in the park just next to the Forbidden City. Although it's a fairly new concert hall, whoever decided to put it in this location obviously did so without realizing that yuppies, the kind of people who come to classical music concerts, would soon all be showing up in their cars. Indeed, the scene at the tiny, hopelessly-overwhelmed parking lot near the entrance is alone worth the ticket price. That evening I had just locked my bike when I noticed a young woman trying to fit her brand new black Buick Regal between a tree and a brand new black VW Passat. She clearly had no idea how to coordinate the steering wheel and the gear box, and the poor caddie attempting to assist her was going apoplectic screaming "*dao!*" lest she hit the Passat and he lose his job. I finally went over, tapped on her window and asked I could help. She looked incredibly relieved, and immediately slid over into the passenger seat to let me take over.

No sooner had I shut the door than I was ambushed from behind by a four-year-old girl: "Mommy, mommy, there's a foreigner driving the car!" she shrieked, standing up on the rear seat and bopping me repeatedly over the head with what my peripheral vision indicated was a stuffed rabbit. Despite this assault and all the *dao!*-

screaming, I somehow managed to wedge the Buick in without incident.

By far the worse case of parking-related screaming, however, is when it wakes you up at six in the morning. In the usually-quiet *hutong* neighborhood where I live, parking spaces are close to non-existent, and those that are available become sacred territory. Sometimes if a driver comes back and finds someone is in the spot he feels entitled to, out of either revenge or laziness he will simply leave his car in front, blocking the other car in. If the driver of the trapped vehicle needs to leave earlier the following morning, he may thus commence frantically yelling something like "*Jipu che 4289! Jipu che 4289!*" such that everyone in the whole building wakes up. This is of course shorthand for: "Will the owner of the Jeep whose plate number ends in 4289 get out of bed and move his car!" If the Jeep driver doesn't appear, the hollerer will sometimes go back inside—only to return a half hour later to shout everyone awake again.

In this kind of situation it's impossible to know who is most at fault, so I think the proper attitude is general disapproval of all those, the blockers as well as the blocked, who park in tight *hutong* corners and create the potential for such conflict. On two occasions a driver has actually starting going around to bang on each door in my building and ask who owns the offending car. At 6a.m. most people ignore this kind of disturbance, but I make a point of getting up and answering the door, just so I can give a bleary-eyed, guilt-trip-inducing glare and then snarl: "It's not my car. I ride a bike."

car industry—mean the city’s barebones subway and light-rail networks are just beginning to be extended. Beyond high costs, the main problem with subways and train lines is that they take a long time to build. When you look at a map showing Beijing’s projected rail system in 2012, it will still provide far less coverage than those in London or Tokyo. A network of high-speed public-bus lines will supposedly help make up the difference, but that won’t be fully operational until 2020.

Of course, given people’s attitudes, even if public transport is available, many will still favor their cars. This may change, but for the foreseeable future residents in Beijing will turn to the automobile, out of choice *and* necessity. Knowing more cars will keep pouring onto the roads, Liang and Duan have many suggestions to improve traffic in Beijing, most of which apply to other cities as well: Encourage new residential developments to include through-roads such that pressure is taken off main arteries; Create more than one downtown area, perhaps by moving some government offices out of city centers; Limit downtown parking; Change the way government business is conducted so that each time you need approval for some project you are not obliged, as Liang explained, to “go to twenty different bureaus to get twenty different stamps, each stamp five different times.” Even if such measures are carried out, however, they could well be insufficient. “In the end the way this may be solved is when the roads turn into parking lots,” Liang admitted. “When no one can move, people will give up their cars.”

If and when Liang’s prediction comes true, the car you will want to be driving is a new electric prototype designed at the Wuhan University of Technology. For a price equivalent to US\$12,000, it will be marketed with an onboard-computer, an onboard GPS—and an onboard bicycle that, according to the vehicle’s designer, allows you to park your car on the roadside and pedal your way out of a traffic jam. This on-board bicycle is apparently truly meant for such a purpose, but its inclusion would seem also a tongue-and-cheek com-

mentary on the pitfalls of the spreading car culture, as well as on the irrationality of Chinese feelings about their new automobiles. People here are so taken with their self-image as car-owners and drivers, so eager to join this “new civilization,” that they will keep inching forward through worsening traffic congestion—until at last they have become completely immobilized, at which point they will once again countenance riding a bicycle.

* * *

As the Qinghua urban planners and market researchers have all stressed, status-seeking has been a major force fueling China’s car mania. But what, then, is fueling the status-seeking? Allow a brief detour via another iconic consumer item: the cell phone. The only phone I have ever used in China is a four-year-old Ericsson A2638sc, discarded by a friend. This model was literally designed in the last century; compared to new ones, it resembles an unwieldy brick. My own phone looks particularly beat-up, and I can’t recall how many times people have commented on it. Taxi drivers, for example, like to tell me I need to “retire” it. Market research shows a sizable chunk of urban youth change their cell phones every three months (versus an international average of every 18



Planes are to trains as cars are to bikes. White collar Chinese who travel by plane now boast that they haven’t taken a train in years. Indeed, most anyone who flies regularly these days probably has a car or, as advertisers understand, is considering buying one. I figured this out on a flight when I stood up for a moment and realized that every single newspaper opened in the rows in front of me was turned to the car section.



months), so you can see how younger people in particular cannot fathom why a foreigner would be carrying so outmoded a device. Sometimes, however, initial befuddlement triggers deeper introspection. I was sharing a table with a man about my age at a dumpling stand when he remarked on how old my phone was. Then, after a pause, he said: "I really admire you Westerners. You don't care what people think."

This was not the only occasion on which Chinese have commented to me how Westerners seem less affected by peer pressure. While Westerners of course care what people think, at this particular juncture I have little doubt that Chinese people *do* care more—in a sense, they feel *obliged* to be concerned with others' views of them, even if they might wish they didn't have to. There are various reasons for this, but I will highlight two main ones. First is a terrible pressure to differentiate oneself in a country of a billion-plus people. While people everywhere realize they must compete with their peers, a much greater space in the Chinese psyche is occupied with the imbalance between population on the one hand and limited opportunities and resources on the other. Indeed, it seems like every day the same one-line answer comes up in discussions of why traffic is so bad, or why the education system is structured as it is, or even why the country isn't ready for democracy: *Zhongguoren tai duo*. "There are too many Chinese people." People have long been attuned to the pressures posed by the country's high population density, but such concerns have been enhanced by the introduction of market forces into the economy. Parents who grew up with a planned system and a guaranteed "iron rice bowl" now make clear to their children: You had better work even harder. And to survive on this crowded battlefield, a first step is to clad yourself in the armor of status symbols—*e.g.*, if you want your business partner to take you seriously, *do* pull up in a BMW, but *do not* pull out an Ericsson A2638sc.

Beyond population pressure, a second reason for inflated concerns about status is the fact that China has been developing so quickly. Given the speed with which urban Chinese have been accumulating wealth, consumer goods have become an unavoidable *de-facto* scale for measuring one's ability to keep up. Sustained rapid growth means many urbanites find themselves in the position of being perpetually *nouveau-riche* compared to where they were just a few years ago—and perpetually insecure *vis-à-vis* those still wealthier. In a sense, it's fortunate this kind of growth cannot go on indefinitely. Slower economic expansion should lower expectations about rising living standards and counteract some of the insecurities driving status-seeking and its tight linkage with consumer products. At some point, one would expect society's dictates on what car or phone to have to weaken; like Westerners, people just won't have to care as much.

However, even when these more superficial concerns about status begin to weaken, the automobile itself should retain a particularly strong appeal based on its ability to

enhance private control, or at least the experience of private control, in what will remain a hyper-competitive society. To get at least part way toward an explanation, allow me to share a story about an individual Chinese family's decision to purchase its first car.

Last month, on a visit to the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, I met with a favorite history professor with whom I had studied five years ago. The last time I had had a long talk with him was in 2002, when one of the topics we discussed was the sad fate of the humanities in China's universities. The humanities had long sat atop the hierarchy of the Chinese scholarly world, and though they took a major hit during the Cultural Revolution, they made a comeback in the 1980s. Deepening market reforms and rapid growth during the 1990s, however, once again restructured the academic landscape, with departments that prepared students for professions in the market economy in ascendance. While humanities departments languished, lacking both funding and allure, top students scrambled to enroll in "hot" majors like international finance, computer science or law. As if monopolizing the best students weren't enough, the demand for faculty in these fields to work as private-sector consultants allowed them to substantially supplement their university salaries—leading my professor to note that legal scholars and economists had already bought cars, while the historians and philosophers were stuck riding bikes.

When I saw him again a few weeks ago, I was curious to see if, three years on, automobiles were now within the reach of humanities faculty. Indeed, my history professor had bought a car—senior humanities faculty can now afford one, although junior faculty, many of whom come from the countryside and must save to buy apartments, cannot. Given the academic predisposition to feel conflicted about mass-consumer phenomena, I wasn't surprised when he described the family decision to buy a car in a sheepish, almost defensive manner. In fact, he passed the blame to his wife, also a humanities professor: "Our daughter is in junior high school, and her mother thought that getting a car and dropping her off at school in the morning would mean ten less minutes standing at the bus stop. And that means ten more minutes to sleep. You know, students have so much homework they barely have time to sleep." It's a sad reality that junior-high-school students, under pressure to test into the best high schools, experience real trade-offs between sleep and studies (and whatever other activities are deemed essential for bolstering their competitiveness).

Now, it could be that this talk about the wife and daughter was just talk, and my professor really got his car in order to peel out of the faculty club and accelerate past the economists. I don't think so, however. Not that professors don't like to compete; they are just more likely to do so over theories of imperialism rather than megapixels in cell-phone cameras (it took an academic to give us "A Member of the Bicycle-Riding Nation Shouts Out," after all.) My professor later told me that of the



Everyone wants in on the car mania. This migrant father was trying to lasso a toy car for his children at a Chinese-New-Year outdoor festival. They won one—the only car in the household, I confirmed.

historians in his department who could afford cars, only a few had bought them. And knowing this professor, a modest fellow, his daughter probably was the deciding factor behind the purchase. Because of course, the other goal that fuels Chinese competitive juices is giving their children any edge possible, even if it's just saving them ten minutes at the bus stop.

In this case, the automobile was seen as enabling *control*: you free yourself from reliance on public transport and win a ten-minute sleep advantage on your competitors. Given how private cars need public roads, however, enhancements in control are not always so straightforward. First of all, they may cancel themselves out: in such a competitive society, all parents will want to save their children ten minutes, which may lead to everyone getting stuck in traffic ten minutes longer anyway (if specialized rear-seat study-desks are not yet being made and marketed to Chinese parents, here's betting they soon will be). More importantly, you may wind up with the opposite of the desired results. The SARS outbreak of 2003, for example, was a key factor behind that year's explosion of car sales, as families sought to avoid taxis and public transport — never mind that there were no confirmed cases of SARS transmission in taxis or public transport and that rushing to learn to drive, as many did, probably made you much less safe in your car, particularly

with so many others doing the exact same thing.

A similar phenomenon occurred after Sept. 11, when car sales in America jumped 20 percent above normal for the month of October 2001. The analyses I have read of this spike in auto purchasing emphasize multiple factors, starting with zero-percent financing offered by carmakers. Another factor, however, was the switch in preference to ground transportation over flying. And this is precisely the point: Americans knew that flying was statistically far, far safer, but opted for the direct, hands-on-the-wheel feeling of control offered by driving.

Given that time spent on the roads is the most-dangerous part of the average person's day, why exactly does driving give us such feelings of safety and control? It would seem the psychological rewards accruing to the driver are irresistible: as others have noted, the automobile's intense appeal rests in its unique ability make the driver feel secure and at home and yet simultaneously free and in motion. Behind the wheel, you control your speed and destination, not to mention the CD-changer and the air vents. You are the master of your fate, dominator of your inflatable lumbar cushion. This appeal is of course universal. In America, however, where the car has long been integrated into the culture, and where we become drivers before we become adults, we



*"A new look each year, a transformation in three years."
(From Vöckler, Kai et al, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen:
cities of the 21st century, New York: Campus, 2000)*

are brought up to take such a sense of control as a natural right. In China, on the other hand, the degree of control suddenly offered by the private car is totally novel; friends who have just started driving attest to newfound feelings of independence that we jaded Americans will never be able to experience in the same manner.

Indeed, the ability to own a private car and drive it wherever and whenever you want is an ultimate symbol of the expansion of personal control brought by the last quarter-century of reforms. From looking at some of the

Reform-era propaganda posters, you might even be tempted to conclude that building such a car culture was the whole point of Deng's modernizations. The 1999 poster reproduced here bears as its slogan a famous Deng quote: "A new look each year, a transformation in three years." And the ultimate goal of this transformation, it would seem, is to make China look like Los Angeles. The flyovers twisting off in every direction lead to a future where you will be free to go anywhere you choose. And the automobiles speeding along alluringly empty roads promise something else: Escape, from competitive pressures and the masses of fellow humans who cause them. All this, and a girl, too. When a single invention holds out latent relief for so many needs, we can understand why its functionality as a transportation device fades to secondary importance.

Probably one more psychological need is being met here. The highways in the poster don't just announce progress and choices for people inside China, but for the entire country as it rises on the world stage. Recall those "international standards" that China will soon attain, after which it will officially graduate and become a "car society." When viewed from the saddle of a Forever, the automobile's "leading position" in the West, rubbed in with each Hollywood film, has served as a long-standing reminder of China's developing-world status. In this sense traffic jams are already cause for a bit of pride, even while waiting for the freeways to open up. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows and their Activities

Alexander J. Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and worked as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship will base him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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