

A6 OPINION



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### Ashes, ashes, we all fall down in exhausted city

ABOUT one and a half hour's flight from Fukuoka to Shanghai means a flight from a pedestrian's paradise to a pedestrian's valley of fear.

Last Tuesday I came back from Fukuoka only to be enveloped in brown smog and choked by black fumes belched from buses on the road from Pudong International Airport to my rented apartment in Puxi, or Shanghai west of the Huangpu River.

That road typifies the doldrums of an over-motorized city: we stagnate in traffic jams while we suffocate in emissions.

To be sure, Shanghai is much better than many other Chinese cities, such as Beijing, in terms of air quality. And China's developing country status must be factored in.

But can't we set our hopes higher and have a broader vision? Can't we escape the dirty "pollution first, treatment later" path that many industrialized countries trod and then took great pain to correct (not all successfully, of course)?

We can, only if we care. Fukuoka is a brilliant case in point. The prefecture's Kitakyushu City was heavily polluted in the 1960s in its crazed pursuit of industrialization, but in less than 30 years it shut down polluting plants and was recognized by the United Nations as a global model of an eco-town.

It took Kitakyushu much less time to cure its pollution than many Western cities that had blindly pursued industrialization.

The reason is that Kitakyushu's people knew they could make a difference, that they could avoid the same mistakes made by those Western cities, that they must act immediately.

If Kitakyushu City is a model eco-town, Fukuoka City (of Fukuoka Prefecture) is a pedestrian paradise.

Fukuoka is a city of about 1.4 million people living in 340 square kilometers. Shanghai has about 17 million people living in 6,340 square kilometers.

Certainly there are many cars in Fukuoka, but the best part of the city is its wide pe-

destrian streets, often wider than motor lanes.

I like a city without many cars, but if homo "sapiens" are yet to create such a dream city, Fukuoka is one of the best modern models: make pedestrians the king of the road.

You can't feel this in Shanghai. As my colleague Douglas Williams observes, Shanghai is gripped in a car mania. Almost everyone wants to have a car, a better car, a newer car, to outshine his or her neighbors.

In Shanghai, as in many other Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Beijing, there're more and more elevated bridges and expanded motor lanes to accommodate an ever-increasing number of private cars. There is scarcely any attempt to expand pedestrian space, as in Fukuoka.

#### City on wheels

A city on wheels has many problems: air pollution, traffic jams, and endless demands on fossil fuels. All these translate into a high economic cost and an unhealthy way of life (the more you drive a car to your office, the less your exercise and the likelier you are to become obese).

Toshi Noda, director of the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific of the UN Human Settlements Program, said in Fukuoka last week that a society should promote what he called "sustainable transportation" by encouraging walking, cycling and public transport.

In other words, a society should promote non-motorized transport.

Homo "sapiens" (I don't know whether we should call ourselves "sapiens") created cars to have a comfortable life, but now it's clear that cars do us more harm than benefit.

F. Scott Fitzgerald says in "The Great Gatsby": "This is a valley of ashes — ... where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."

In a motorized city, ashes also take the forms of cars and buses that have pushed pedestrians to nowhere.

# Road rules overruled by rude and unruly drivers



Douglas Williams

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ONE of those strange truths about Chinese traffic is that the better the car the worse the driver.

The car driving at speed the wrong way up a bicycle lane is invariably a big black Audi.

The car shooting past in a residential driveway missing the pram-pushing woman by a millimeter, it's a Benz.

The car that cruises through the intersection regardless of the red light, it's a BMW.

Consideration isn't a quality associated with many Chinese drivers, fancy car or not, but, as a Chinese friend pointed out, the considerate driver is the stationary driver.

That makes a sort-of sad sense. Giving way is an altogether alien concept here.

It involves much the same mentality as queue-jumping, another plague: each man, or woman, for himself, or herself — no waiting in line.

Another friend pointed out that the guys with the flash cars were too busy earning the money to buy the car to take proper lessons.

That doesn't wash in a number of ways. First, many of the drivers are ex-cab drivers who made good, hired "chauffeurs" who don't own the car.

Which in itself begs the question: Is the passenger in the back, probably the boss, too busy closing a business deal to notice that the driver is a raging, homicidal lunatic?

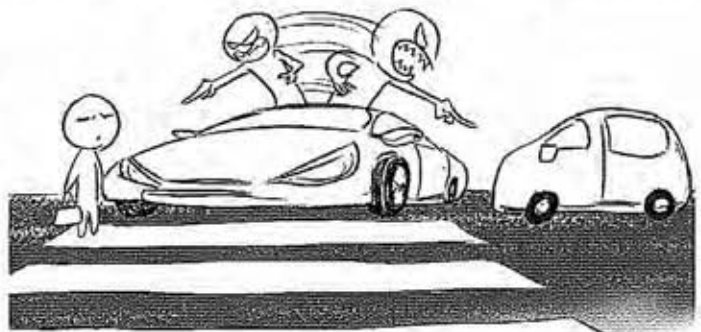
Second, in most Western driving tests there's an important element that involves not interfering with the traffic flow.

In the UK practical test, if another driver has to brake because the examinee pulls out of a junction in front of them, then the test is failed.

In China it's absolutely normal. Whether the other driver has to stomp on the brakes, veer into the cycle lane or both, it matters not a jot to most Shanghai drivers who pull out regardless.

It's more than an impatience thing, it's a complete lack of consideration and it's rude. A stunt like that in one of London or LA's seamier boroughs could land the offending driver in a whole world of trouble.

I want to know what the drivers turning right on a red light are thinking as they intimidate their way through the pedestrians crossing on a green?



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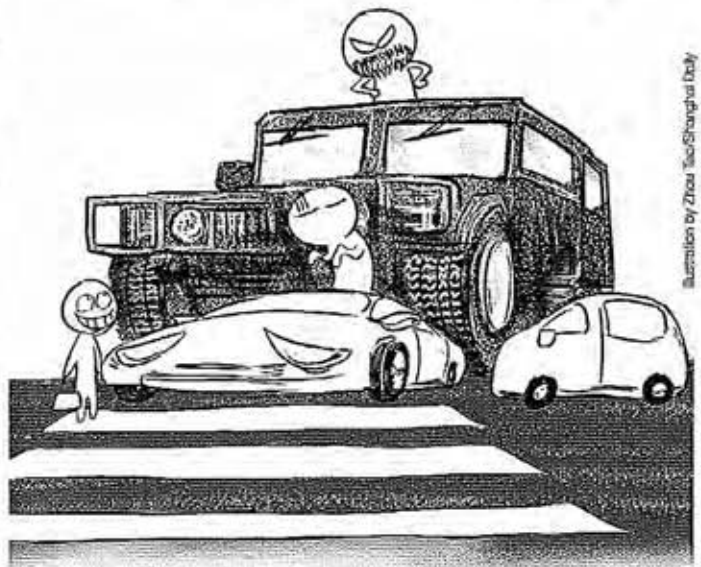


Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily

"Get out of my way or I'll run you over?" Nice!

How many pedestrians are injured or killed by such drivers? How difficult would it be to stop? Although the sounds of horn honking are returning, the horn ban initially and quickly made a huge difference in the downtown area.

Couldn't the same policing practices be implemented? Red means stop, no exceptions. It's really not that radical.

A public information program followed by spot fines might work. It did for the horns (sort of).

Seat belts in the back of taxis? Make them usable and encourage their use.

Seat belts save lives, they do, it's been scientifically proven beyond a shadow of doubt and they're really not that much of a drag.

It's easy to lay the boot into Shanghai's traffic situation, many already have.

The truth is it's actually a

whole lot better than the traffic in many other cities — Mumbai, Jakarta and Ho Chi Min City spring to mind.

That is hardly the point, Shanghai is supposed to be a modern, dynamic city. As one of China's showcase cities, Shanghai attracts a lot of visitors and it's attracting more and more.

#### Window on China

The World Expo 2010 expects to attract 70 million visitors. As with any urban environment the state of the traffic makes a big impression.

Currently the impression that many visitors will take with them is that, if people's driving reflects how they really are, then the Chinese must be a pretty rude and inconsiderate bunch.

There are strong mitigating factors and it's not a lost cause. First, compared with much of the developed world, China has come to driving late.

Driving has figured large in most developed countries for the past 50 years, in China it's only really become a common skill in the last 10.

The People's Republic of China's drivers are therefore to be excused to some extent and it's hardly surprising there are some rough edges.

There is, however, no shortage of people who would willingly help drivers here get their highway code in order.

Form an orderly queue, all those auto manufacturers looking for a healthy and positive bit of PR, and sharpen your pencils all ye motoring correspondents. It's no joke.

China's death toll per vehicle in accidents is 10 times that in the United States. Measures can and must be taken.

I'd respectfully suggest that the first is for those important passengers in their big black Audis to put down their personal organizers and fire their dumb, dangerous drivers.



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