

sing with the band, and for a moment I was back at the Die Masty watching Jhonny and Beach Boy sing karaoke. No pirate attacks had been reported in the Malacca Strait since I left. Indonesia and Malaysia had called on foreign governments to help fund their patrols. Without more resources, it is unclear how long the cash-strapped Indonesian navy will maintain its current level of vigilance.

As for the fate of this tanker, maybe, I told myself, Jhonny had embarked on a new path, thankful for legal work, loyally serving his new employer. But if there were more money to be made working another angle, I could hear him say, one must be true to the pirate's golden mean. After all, Jhonny Batam is a gentleman of opportunity.

PETER HESSLER

Wheels of Fortune

FROM *The New Yorker*

THE FIRST ACCIDENT wasn't my fault. I had rented a Volkswagen Jetta and driven to my weekend home in Sancha, a village north of Beijing. I parked at the end of the road, where the pavement widens into an empty lot. It's impossible to drive within Sancha; like virtually all Chinese villages, it was built before anybody had cars, and homes are linked by narrow footpaths.

About an hour after I arrived, my neighbor asked me to move the car, because the villagers were about to mix cement in the lot. That day, Leslie, my wife, and I were both on our computers, trying to do some writing.

"I can move it if you want," my neighbor said. His name is Wei Ziqi, and he had recently completed a driving course and received his license. It was his proudest achievement — he was one of the first in the village to learn to drive. I handed him the keys and sat back down at my computer. Half an hour later, he returned and stood in the doorway silently. I asked if everything was all right.

"There's a problem with the car," he said slowly. He was smiling, but it was a tight Chinese grin of embarrassment, the kind of expression that makes your pulse quicken.

"What kind of problem?" I said.

"I think you should come see it."

In the lot, a couple of villagers were staring at the car; they were grinning, too. The front bumper had been knocked completely off. It lay on the road, leaving the Jetta's grille gaping, like a child who's lost three teeth and can't stop smiling. Why did everybody look so ~~happy~~ happy?

"I forgot about the front end," Wei Ziqi said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm not used to driving something with a front end," he said. "During my course, we only drove Liberation trucks. They were flat in front."

I had parked the Jetta parallel to a wall, and he had backed up and turned the wheel sharply, not realizing that the front end would swing in the opposite direction. I knelt down and inspected the bumper — it was hopelessly bent.

He got some wire and tied the bumper to the front end. He offered repeatedly to pay for it, but I told him not to worry. I'd deal with the rental company. The next day, I set off to return the car.

Driving is something that I take very seriously. When I turned sixteen, I was told that handling an automobile is a privilege and a responsibility, and I still get nervous thinking about the day that my mother drove me to the Wilkes Boulevard United Methodist Church, in Columbia, Missouri, to take my first driving exam. The state's Division of Motor Vehicles rented office space in the building, and the exam began and ended in the church parking lot. In mid-Missouri, it was widely known that when it came to judging sixteen-year-old males the D.M.V. was even tougher than the Methodists. They failed boys for not checking the blind spot, for running yellow lights, for tiny adjustments on parallel parking. There were rumors that any boy who was visibly confident would flunk — if you believed that you were predestined for a license, then the folks at the Wilkes Boulevard United Methodist Church would prove otherwise. I took the test in my family's Dodge Caravan, and afterward the examiner gave me a stern speech. It began with the statement "You're lucky we don't professionally evaluate you," and ended with "I hope I don't see you in the hospital someday." Between these remarks, the man acknowledged that I had passed by the barest of margins, and that was all that mattered. There was no purgatory at the D.M.V. You either failed or you passed, and success meant that, as long as you avoided trouble and kept up the paperwork, you'd never have to take another driving exam in the state of Missouri.

After moving to Beijing, I was surprised that my Missouri license had some currency in the People's Republic. The country was in

the early stages of an auto boom; Beijing alone now registers almost a thousand new drivers every day. All Chinese applicants are required to have a medical checkup, take a written exam, complete a technical course, and then pass two driving tests. But the process has been pared down for any foreigner who already has certification from his home country. These days, a driver from overseas takes only a written exam, but in 2001, when I applied, I had to pass a special foreigner's road test. The examiner was in his midforties, and he wore white cotton driving gloves with tobacco stains on the fingers. He lit up a Red Pagoda Mountain cigarette as soon as I got in the car. It was a Volkswagen Santana, the nation's most popular passenger vehicle at the time.

"Start the car," the man said, and I turned the key. "Drive forward," he said.

We were north of the city, in a neighborhood that had been cleared of all traffic — no cars, no bikes, no pedestrians. It was the most peaceful street I'd ever seen in the capital, and I wish I could have savored it. But after fifty yards the examiner spoke again. "Pull over," he said. "Turn off the car."

The Santana fell silent; the man filled out forms, his pen moving efficiently. He had barely burned through the tip of his Red Pagoda Mountain. "Is that all?" I said.

"That's it," the man said. He asked me where I had learned Chinese, and we chatted for a while. One of the last things he said to me was "You're a very good driver."

That summer, I began renting cars from a company in southeastern Beijing. The car rental industry was a new one; five years earlier, almost nobody in the capital would have thought of renting an automobile for a weekend trip. But now my local company had a fleet of about fifty vehicles, mostly Chinese-made Jettas and Santanas. Usually, I rented a Jetta, which cost \$25 per day and involved an enormous amount of paperwork. The most elaborate part of the process was a survey of the car's exterior, led by an employee, who recorded dents and scratches on a diagram. This inspection often took a while — the Jetta is a small automobile, but Beijing traffic made the most of the limited canvas. After documenting the damage, the employee turned the key in the ignition and showed me the gas gauge. Sometimes it was half full; sometimes there was a quarter tank. Sometimes he studied it and an-

nounced, "Three-eighths." It was my responsibility to return the car with exactly the same amount of fuel. One day, I decided to make a contribution to the fledgling industry.

"You should rent cars with a full tank, and then require the customer to bring it back full," I said. "That's how rental companies do it in America."

"That would never work here," said the employee who usually handled my rental, whom I'll call Mr. Liu. He was a big man with thinning hair that flopped loosely over a wide forehead; he always seemed to be in a good mood. He sat with two other men in the front office, where they smoked cigarettes as if it were a competition. The room was so full of smoke that I could hardly read the company evaluation sign that hung on the wall:

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

"That might work in America, but it wouldn't work here," Mr. Liu continued. "People in China would return the car empty."

"Then you charge them a lot extra to refill it," I said. "They'll learn."

"You don't understand Chinese people!" Mr. Liu said, laughing, and the other men nodded. As a foreigner, I often heard that statement, and it had a way of ending discussion. The Chinese people had invented the compass, silk, paper, gunpowder, the seismoscope; they had sailed to Africa in the fifteenth century; they had built the Great Wall; in the past decade they had expanded their economy at a rate never before seen in the developing world. They could return a rental car with exactly three-eighths of a tank of gas, but filling it was apparently beyond the realm of possibility. Finally, I dropped the subject. There was no way to argue with somebody as friendly as Mr. Liu.

He seemed especially cheerful when I returned the Jetta with the ruined bumper. In the past, I had brought back cars with new dents; this was inevitable in a city with more than two million cars, most of them handled by rookies. But I had never done any serious damage, and Mr. Liu's eyes grew wide when he saw the Jetta. "Waaah!" he said. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't." I described Wei Ziqi's lack of experience with hooded cars, and Mr. Liu looked confused; the more I expanded on this topic, the blunter his expression became. At last, I abandoned the front end — I offered to pay for the bumper.

"*Mei went!*" Mr. Liu said, smiling. "No problem! We have insurance! You just need to write an accident report. Do you have your chop?"

I told Mr. Liu that my chop — an official stamp registered to one's work unit, in my case *The New Yorker* — was at home.

"No problem! Just bring it next time." He opened a drawer and pulled out a stack of papers; each was blank except for a red stamp. Mr. Liu rifled through the pile, selected one, and laid it in front of me. The chop read, "U.S.-China Tractor Association."

"What's this?" I said.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "They had an accident, but they didn't have their chop, so they used somebody else's. Then they brought this page to replace it. Now you can write your report on their page, and next time bring a piece of paper with your chop, so the next person can use it. Understand?"

I didn't — he had to explain this arrangement three times. It dawned on me that the wrecked bumper, which had never been my fault, and in a sense wasn't Wei Ziqi's fault, either, because of the unexpected front end, would now be blamed on the U.S.-China Tractor Association. "But you shouldn't say it happened in the countryside," Mr. Liu said. "That's too complicated. Just say you had an accident in our parking lot."

He wrote out a sample report and Leslie copied it, because her written Chinese was much better than mine. I signed my name across the tractor chop. The next time I rented a car, Mr. Liu told me that the insurance had covered everything. He never hassled me about bringing in the paper with my chop, and I decided to leave it at that — I was an old customer, as Mr. Liu liked to say.

When you live in China as a foreigner, there are two critical moments of recognition. The first occurs immediately upon arrival, when you are confronted with your own ignorance. Language, customs, history — all of it has to be learned, and the task seems insurmountable. Then, just as you begin to catch on, you realize that everybody else feels pretty much the same way. The place changes

too fast; nobody in China has the luxury of being confident in his knowledge. Who shows a peasant how to find a factory job? How does a former Maoist learn to start a business? Who has the slightest clue how to run a car rental agency? Everything is figured out on the fly; the people are masters of improvisation. This second moment of recognition is even more frightening than the first. Awareness of your own ignorance is a lonely feeling, but there's little consolation in sharing it with 1.3 billion neighbors.

On the road, it's particularly horrifying. China still doesn't have many drivers — there are only twenty-eight automobiles per every thousand people, which is about the same rate that the United States had in 1915. But a 2004 World Health Organization report found that China, while having only 3 percent of the world's vehicles, accounted for 21 percent of its traffic fatalities. Last year, 89,000 people died in accidents. It's a nation of new drivers, and the transition has been so rapid that many road patterns come directly from pedestrian life — people drive the way they walk. They like to move in packs, and they tailgate whenever possible. They rarely use turn signals. If they miss an exit on a highway, they simply pull onto the shoulder, shift into reverse, and get it right the second time. After years of long queues, Chinese people have learned to be ruthless about cutting in line, an instinct that is disastrous in traffic jams. Toll booths are hazardous for the same reason. Drivers rarely check their rearview mirrors, perhaps because they never use such an instrument when they travel on foot or by bicycle. Windshield wipers are considered a distraction, and so are headlights.

In fact, the use of headlights was banned in Beijing until the mid-eighties, when Chinese officials began going overseas in increasing numbers. These trips were encouraged by governments in Europe and the United States, in the hope that glimpses of democracy would encourage China's leaders to rethink their policies. In 1983, Chen Xitong, the mayor of Beijing, made one such visit to New York. During his meetings with Mayor Ed Koch, Chen made a crucial observation: Manhattan drivers turn on their lights at night. When Chen returned to China, he decreed that Beijing motorists do the same. It's unclear what political conclusions Chen drew from his encounters with American democracy — the man ended up in prison for corruption — but at least he did his part for traffic

safety. Nevertheless, there's enough debate about headlight use to merit a question on the written driving exam:

278. During the evening, a driver should
- (a) turn on the brights.
 - (b) turn on the normal lights.
 - (c) turn off the lights.

Recently, I picked up a study booklet for the exam. It consisted of 429 multiple-choice questions and 256 true-false queries, any of which might appear on the test. Often, these questions successfully captured the spirit of the road ("True or False: In a taxi, it's fine to carry a small amount of explosive material"), but I wasn't convinced that they helped people learn to drive correctly. After carefully studying the booklet, though, I realized that it was descriptive rather than prescriptive. It didn't teach people how to drive; it taught you how people drove:

77. When overtaking another car, a driver should pass

- (a) on the left.
- (b) on the right.
- (c) wherever, depending on the situation.

354. If you are driving toward a big puddle and there are pedestrians next to the water, you should

- (a) accelerate.
- (b) slow down and make sure that the water does not splash them.
- (c) continue at the same speed straight through the puddle.

80. If, while preparing to pass a car, you notice that it is turning left, making a U-turn, or passing another vehicle, you should

- (a) pass on the right.
- (b) not pass.
- (c) honk, accelerate, and pass on the left.

Lots of answers involved honking. In Chinese automobiles, the horn is essentially neurological — it channels the driver's reflexes. People honk constantly, and at first all horns sound the same, but over time you learn to distinguish variations and interpret them correctly. In this sense, honking is as complicated as the language. Spoken Chinese is tonal, which means that a single syllable can have different meanings depending on whether it is flat, rising, falling and rising, or falling sharply. Similarly, a Chinese horn is capa-

through three stages: the parking range, the driving range, and the road.

One afternoon, I watched six students embark on their first day. An instructor called Coach Tang began by raising the hood of a red Santana. He pointed out the engine, the radiator, the battery. He showed them how to unscrew the gas cap. The door was next — the students practiced opening and closing it. Then he identified the panel instruments and the pedals. The students circled the Santana warily, fiddling with parts, like the blind men and the elephant. Finally, after an hour, they were allowed to enter the vehicle. Each of them sat in the driver's seat, where they shifted repeatedly from first to fifth gear, with the engine off. Watching this made me wince, and after a while I said to Coach Tang, "Isn't that bad for the car?"

"No," he said. "It's fine."

"I think it might be bad if the motor's off," I said.

"It's completely fine," Coach Tang said. "We do it all the time." In China, instructors of any type are traditionally respected without question, and I decided to keep my mouth shut. But it wasn't always easy. For the next step, the students learned to use the clutch by setting the parking brake, starting the engine, shifting into first gear, and then releasing the clutch while adding gas. The motor whined against the force of the brake; the torque dipped the front end up and down. By the end of the day, you could have fried an egg on the Santana's hood, and my palms began to sweat every time another driver gunned the engine.

Nobody was allowed to operate the vehicle until the second day of class. There were four men and two women, and all of them were younger than forty. Each had paid more than \$300 for the course — a lot of money in a city where the monthly minimum wage was roughly \$65. Only one person came from a household that currently owned an automobile. The others told me that someday they might buy one, and the university students — there were four of them — believed that a driver's license would look good on a résumé. "It's something you should be able to do, like swimming," a student named Wang Yanheng told me. "In the future, so many people in China are going to have cars." He was a senior, majoring in information technology. The one person from a home with automobiles (three) was a nineteen-year-old sociology major whose

father owned a plastics factory. When I asked what the factory produced, the woman ran a finger along the rubber lining of the Santana's window. "This is one of the things we make," she said.

The students spent ten days on the parking range, and during that time they performed exactly three movements: a ninety-degree turn into a parking spot, the same maneuver in reverse, and parallel parking. Every day, for as many as six hours, they practiced these turns over and over. Like any good martial arts master, Coach Tang was strict. "You must have forgotten your brain today!" he yelled, when a student brushed against a pole. "Don't hold the gearshift loosely like that!" he shouted at another. "If you do, your father will curse you!" Sometimes he slapped a student's hand.

The next step was the driving range, where the skill set became more demanding. Drivers were required to stop within twenty-five centimeters of a painted line, and they guided the car through an obstacle course of tight turns. The final skill was the "single-plank bridge" — a concrete riser, a foot high and only slightly wider than a tire. Students had to aim the car perfectly, so that two wheels perched atop the riser — first the left tires, then the right. If a single wheel slipped, they failed the exam. The students spent most of their ten days practicing the single-plank bridge, and I asked a coach why it was so important. "Because it's very difficult," he said. "Right, I understand that," I said. "But when is it useful on the road?"

"Well, if you're crossing a bridge with a hole, and there's only one place where the tires can go, then it's important to be able to do this."

The Chinese have fantastic driving imaginations — the written exam was full of situations like this. They seemed ridiculously unlikely, but the level of detail was such that I suspected it must have happened to somebody, somewhere:

#79. If your car breaks down atop the tracks of a railroad crossing, you should

(a) abandon it there.

(b) find some way to move it immediately.

(c) leave it there temporarily until you can get somebody to repair it.

The course ended with a week and a half on the road, and I accompanied another class on its final day. With the coach in the

passenger seat, students took turns driving along a two-lane rural road. There were certain movements they had to perform: shift to fifth, downshift to first, make a U-turn, stop at the imitation traffic light. They had been instructed to honk whenever they pulled out, or made a turn, or encountered a honk when ever they pulled honked at cars, tractors, and donkey carts. They honked at every single pedestrian. Sometimes they passed another car from the driving school, and then both vehicles would honk happily, as if greeting an old friend. At noon, the class had lunch at a local restaurant, where everybody drank beer, including the coach, and then they continued driving. One student told me that a day earlier they got so drunk that they had to cancel the afternoon class.

Throughout the course, there had been no variables, no emphasis on responding to situations. Instead, students learned and rehearsed a small number of set pieces, which they would later combine and apply to actual city driving. It reminded me of how Chinese schoolchildren learn to write: they begin with specific strokes, copying them over and over, and then they combine these into characters, which are also written repeatedly. In China, repetition is the cornerstone of education, and virtually every new skill is approached in this manner. It's one reason that the Chinese have been far more successful at building assembly-line factories than at

It also explains many of the problems with driving in China. On the final day of class, a student begged me to let him drive my rental car back to the road range, for more practice. In a moment of extremely poor judgment, I agreed, and those turned out to be the most terrifying seven miles I had ever experienced in China. Twice I had to yell to keep him from passing on blind turns; another time, I grabbed the wheel to prevent him from veering into a car. He never checked the rearview mirror; he honked at everything that moved. The absolute lack of turn signals was the least of our problems. He came within inches of hitting a parked tractor, and he almost nailed a cement wall. When we finally made it to the range, I could have fallen on my knees and kissed the single-plank bridge.

Foreiguers in Beijing often said to me, "I can't believe you're driving in this country." To which I responded, "I can't believe you get into cabs and buses driven by graduates of Chinese driving

courses." On the road, everybody was lost — *one generation perdue* — but it felt better to be the one behind the wheel.

I had nothing to do with the third accident. I couldn't even drive — I had broken my left kneecap, and the Jetta that we had rented was standard transmission. Despite having served as a blindfolded acolyte of a local driving master, Leslie still didn't feel comfortable behind the wheel, and one afternoon she asked me to accompany her on some errands. I sat in the back, my broken leg propped up, giving advice every time she stalled. ("More gas!") It was snowing, traffic was miserable, we spent two hours hustling in and out of shops. After the last stop, Leslie turned the key and the Jetta lurched straight ahead into a brick wall.

I said, "Use the clutch."

There had been a distinct crunching sound, but we didn't check the car; by now, we were desperate to get home. Near the Lama Temple, as we waited to make the last left turn of the day, we were hit by another car. The driver backed into our side and then pulled away. There wasn't time to fumble with my crutches, so I hopped out on my good leg. Fortunately, traffic was backed up, and I caught him in about seven hops. I pounded on the window. "You hit my car!"

The driver looked up, surprised: a one-legged foreigner, hopping mad and smacking the glass. He stepped out and apologized, saying that he hadn't felt the impact. Together, we inspected the Jetta — fresh dent above the left rear wheel. The man said, "I'll give you a hundred." That was about thirteen dollars.

In China, after a minor accident people usually settle the matter on the spot, in cash. This routine has become a standard part of life — once, I saw two small children playing a game in which they repeatedly rammed their bikes and shouted, "*Pai qian! Pai qian!*" — "Compensate! Compensate!"

Leslie used her cell phone to call the rental company. Mr. Liu didn't sound the least bit surprised to hear that we'd had another accident. All he said was "Ask for two hundred."

"That's too much," the other driver said. "This is really minor."

"It's not our decision."

"Well, then, we'll have to call the police," he said, but it was clear that he didn't want to do this. A dozen bystanders had gathered

around the cars, which were parked in the middle of the snowy street. With Chinese accidents, the crowd is more like a jury than an audience, and a middle-aged woman bent over to inspect the dent. She stood up and announced, "A hundred is enough."

"What do you have to do with it?" Leslie snapped. "You can't even drive!"

That must have been correct, because the woman shut up. But the driver refused to pay two hundred. "Should we accept one-fifty?" Leslie asked me, in English. Lao-tzu said it best: A man standing on crutches in the snow will not bargain long over a dent to a crappy Jetta rental. Later that day, Leslie returned the car and the one-fifty in cash. Mr. Liu noticed that another light cover had been broken when she hit the brick wall. He said, happily, "What did you kill this time?" When I hit the dog, the same cover was \$12; this time, he asked for only \$3. It must have been a special price because we did so well at the Lama Temple.

The fourth accident was entirely my fault. It was my last day in China, my last Jetta — the next morning I had a one-way ticket to Honolulu. On my way to return the car, I got stuck in a terrible traffic jam, and wailing horns filled the air — these were the honks that mean, "Let me out of here!" In front, a taxi driver saw an opening and lurched ahead; I lurched after him; he stopped short; I didn't.

We got out. I took a look and winced: dents on both sides. "A hundred," I said.

"Are you kidding?" the man yelled. "This is at least two hundred!"

Suddenly, I felt extremely tired. Ten years in China, six years of driving, more honks than the Tower of Babel — "Let me out of here!" The man jabbered angrily, talking about how long it takes to fix a dented bumper, but I couldn't think of any response. "A hundred," I said again.

A crowd gathered, and the cabbie began to play to the jury — it was a bad dent; he worked long days; repairs took time. A tiny old woman stepped forward and touched his arm. "Take the money," she said softly. The cabbie looked down at her — she couldn't have been more than five feet tall — and fell silent. He didn't say a word when I handed him the bill.

In the rental-company lot, Mr. Liu ran a finger along the dent. "No problem!" he said.

"Look, I'm happy to pay for it," I said.

"You're an old customer," he said. "Forget it." We shook hands and I left him at the front desk, smoking a cigarette beneath the eternal sign:

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION RATING: 90%

EFFICIENCY RATING: 97%

APPROPRIATE SERVICE DICTION RATING: 98%

SERVICE ATTITUDE RATING: 99%.