

Prologue

Live, Drive, Prosper

Of all the defining moments of my childhood, few were more important than my family's purchase of our first car. The year was 2001. I had just finished elementary school and had tested into a good middle school in a nearby city. To support my education, my parents determined that we would move there and live in small two-bedroom apartment close to campus. But both of my parents had jobs back in our hometown: my mom worked in the local Taxation Department, and my dad was the principal of an elementary school. Our main mode of transportation—a gasoline-powered moped—was not going to cut it for the daily commute. We needed a car.

To an American audience it might seem strange for a middle-class family living in a small town to not own their own vehicle by the dawn of the 21st century. But back in 2001, cars were still a thing of luxury in China. There were only 18 million cars in a country with nearly 1.3 billion people, and most of these were concentrated in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai.¹ In my mind, cars were for the rich, which my family emphatically was not. A car cost at least ¥100,000 (~\$12,000), and my parents only earned about ¥2,000 per month in wages. But after much consideration, they decided to use our savings to buy a domestic “bread van,” *mianbaoche* (面包车), thus nicknamed because the bulky cars resembled loafs of bread on wheels.

One weekend my whole extended family—parents, grandparents, aunt, and uncle—traveled together to the Chang'An (长安) dealership, one of China's “Big Four” state-owned car manufacturers, to view a van in person.² The model we looked at was called the “Star of Chang'An.” It was a sleek silver-grey, with a triangular profile. Its shape imitated the chicness of a sedan while that still being able to comfortably seat seven. Seeing the car, I realized I would never again have to cling on to my mother, as she held onto my father, as he transported us around on the moped. I was in love with this machine.

My parents often reminisce about our family's pre-car past. Following the Maoist tradition of remembering past bitterness and thinking of the sweetness of the present (*Yiku Sitian*; 忆苦思甜),

they recount how brutal it was to ride the moped in the driving rain, and how after buying the van, we stayed warm and dry in all season. My parents sometimes refer to that afternoon at the car dealership as the day we finally “put metal roof over our heads.”

The automobile opened up a new world of possibilities for my family. During national holidays, we started going on road trips, filling the van to the brim with relatives and home-made snacks. Within a few years’ time, we had visited nearly all the major parks and tourist attractions in Zhejiang Province.

But the arrival of the car also brought a peculiar change in my parents’ habits. Every day after dinner, the two of them would get in the van and disappear, sometimes for hours on end. They would always say that they had just driven to a nearby park for a walk. But why did the walks last for hours, even in bad weather? It was only when I overheard a conversation between my father and his best friend during a banquet that I finally learned the truth. The two of them had been moonlighting as “black car” drivers!

According to the stories I extracted from my parents years’ later, after dinner, the two of them would hop in the van and cruise the streets of our town, driving to all of the big restaurants and karaoke joints, looking for prospective customers. Whenever they spotted someone trying to hail a cab, they would pull up next to them, and my mom, riding shotgun, would lean out the window to ask, “Where are you heading? Do you need a ride?” After negotiating an appropriate fare, usually 10-15 yuan for a destination in town and 20-30 yuan to go to a satellite village, the customers would hop in the van, and my father would drive them to the desired location.

As it turned out, my parents’ “black car” service was even more popular than that of licensed taxicabs. Most customers were groups of people going out for dinner or for a night of drinking and singing. Because our van could hold up to six passengers at a time (if everyone crowded together),

smaller groups could travel as one instead of having to hail two separate cabs, which potentially saved both time and money. For this main reason, on an average night, my parents could generate between 80-100 yuan in fares, more than their combined daily wages. And during spells of bad weather, their nightly income could climb higher still. As my father once put it, “it was much easier to identify customers and negotiate good fares when they were shivering by the roadside!”

But by far the most lucrative time was the days leading up to the Spring Festival. Not only was there increased traffic from people traveling to and from the train station, but there were also unique seasonal opportunities. One year a local businessman paid my dad 200 yuan to drive him around for a day while he did his end-of-year debt collection. Two decades ago, it was still a common practice in my hometown that businesses would settle at least some of their past year’s debt just before Chinese New Year’s. Out of respect for the holidays and perhaps out of fear of incurring bad fortune, even those who were reluctant to pay would spare a few pennies. Just like that, by driving the businessman around for an afternoon, my dad earned five days’ worth of wages.

What is most striking is that my parents, who are the very image of good, upstanding Chinese citizens, never thought of what they did as “rule-breaking.” True, they didn’t go around advertising the fact to their colleagues, but this was mostly because they didn’t want to be accused of working an extra job. In their minds, operating a black taxi was providing a vital service to the underserved public. In our hometown there was a serious lack of taxis, and until recently there was almost no public transportation. People turned to black cabs because oftentimes, the only real alternative was walking. And the local government officials understood this. Black taxi drivers were rarely, if ever, bothered by the police.

Looking back, I am deeply impressed by my parents’ entrepreneurial spirit and their willingness to seize opportunities to improve material conditions for our family. In the following years, my parents saved up enough funds to send me to Shanghai for high school and college and then to America for

graduate school. Later they bought a couple of investment properties and participated in China's real estate boom. In hindsight, purchasing the van was my family's first step along a path to prosperity.

Engineering Prosperity

There is a Chinese proverb that pretty much sums up how modern Chinese people thought about infrastructure and development. It goes, "if you want to get rich, first build a road (*Xiangyao fu, xianxiu lu*; 想要富, 先修路)." Unfortunately, history teaches us that the relationship between roads and wealth is not so direct.

National Highway 329 (G329) runs directly through my hometown. First built in 1935, it was intended to serve as an artery that would pump lifeblood to and from the major eastern cities of Hangzhou, Shaoxing, and Zhoushan. At the time, China already had about fifty thousand miles of good earthen motor roads, and a rapidly expanding automotive sector with increasing imports from the US and Japan, so expectations for future traffic and trade were high.³ But soon after G329 was completed, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Mainland China, and the road quickly fell into a state of disrepair. After the founding of PRC in 1949, G329 was repaved with gravel, and put back into use. But since the CCP imposed new barriers to movement and trade and cut China off from global automotive markets, the fledgling highway system never reached its imagined potential. For decades to come, China had plenty of roads but few cars to use them.

Even by the 1960s and 1970s, automotive traffic was such a rarity, that my father and his childhood friends would use G329 as their playground. Every couple of days, they went out to the highway where they enjoyed picking up well-shaped rocks and using them as ammo for their slingshots. This was perfectly safe, as there were almost no cars or people. The only vehicles on the road were large cargo trucks transporting raw materials to factories and the occasional passenger bus that

transported travelers between towns. And the only other people were teams of workers that traveled along the road, sweeping the mounds of loose gravel back towards the center. It was only in the early 1980s that the G329 was finally given an asphalt surface and began to experience more traffic. But even then, private vehicles remained exceptionally rare. When my parents got married in 1986, my dad had to go and fetch my mother on his bicycle, and my mother's dowry had to be transported to her in-laws' house by rowboat.

It was in the mid-1980s that China's automotive sector finally began to develop. After a series of failed joint foreign-domestic ventures, the most infamous of which was the spectacularly dysfunctional Beijing Jeep, Chinese automotive manufacturers finally succeeded in producing the first generation of Chinese consumer automobiles.⁴ In 1984 the Chang'An Automobile Company secured a license from Suzuki to import critical technologies and launch production of the Chang'An Star—the very same model of car my parents eventually purchased.⁵ The Star was China's first domestically manufactured minivan, and it became incredibly popular among a growing class of well-to-do Chinese who could not quite afford more expensive luxury sedans.

It would take yet another decade still before there were privately owned cars in my hometown. The first I ever got to ride in was a *Hongqi* sedan that had been purchased by a distant relative who ran a local construction company. *Hongqi*, literally “Red Flag,” was the first domestic luxury car produced in China. During the Maoist era, it was the exclusive automobile of dignitaries and party elites; in 1972, it was a *Hongqi* that drove Chairman Mao and President Nixon around Beijing. I still remember running my hand along the hood of that regal black sedan (its body was modeled after Lincoln Town Car). From the very tip of the hood there jutted an ornamental sliver of red, in the shape of a waving flag. How marvelous!

In 2000s, my hometown became more and more populated by automobiles. If the American imaginary of automobile is often related to freedom: open highways, roaring engines, free spirit to be

wherever one wants. In China, cars signify prosperity and upward-mobility. A hunky Bentley to announce the king has arrived, white BMW to show off ‘I made it,’ a red Audi to be classy upper middle class, and a sleek Honda to be comfortably *Xiaokang* (小康).

Today, State Highway 329 is a modern concrete highway that stretches 1,200 kilometers from the edge of East China Sea to the heart of middle kingdom, Henan province. And numerous newer and wider roads cut cross the villages, fields, rivers of my hometown like a spider-web.

The Arrival of Car God

With the popularization of automobiles there came also changes to the local culture, such as the arrival of the Car God, *chesben* (车神).

The first time I witnessed the worshipping of the Car God was at my own house. Nainai, my grandmother on father’s side, is a devout Buddhist and our family’s ritualist-in-chief. Twice a year, she comes to our house, riding a tricycle full of meat, vegetables, alcohol, dessert, and yellow paper money. Usually she does a two-part ceremony, one part for worshipping the Buddha and another for remembering the ancestors of Lu family. But one day before the Chinese New Year of 2005, I found my grandmother setting up her ritual objects in the middle of our yard, right in front of my dad’s new Mazda sedan.

When she saw me, Nainai beckoned me over to help her prepare. I helped her set up the objects, in accordance with the general principles of Buddhist religious practice in my hometown. In front of the car (see Figure 0.0.1), we laid out six vegetable dishes. In front of the dishes, Nainai instructed me to place a bouquet of incents, two candles, yellow paper money, the “car god sutra,” and a bowl of water.

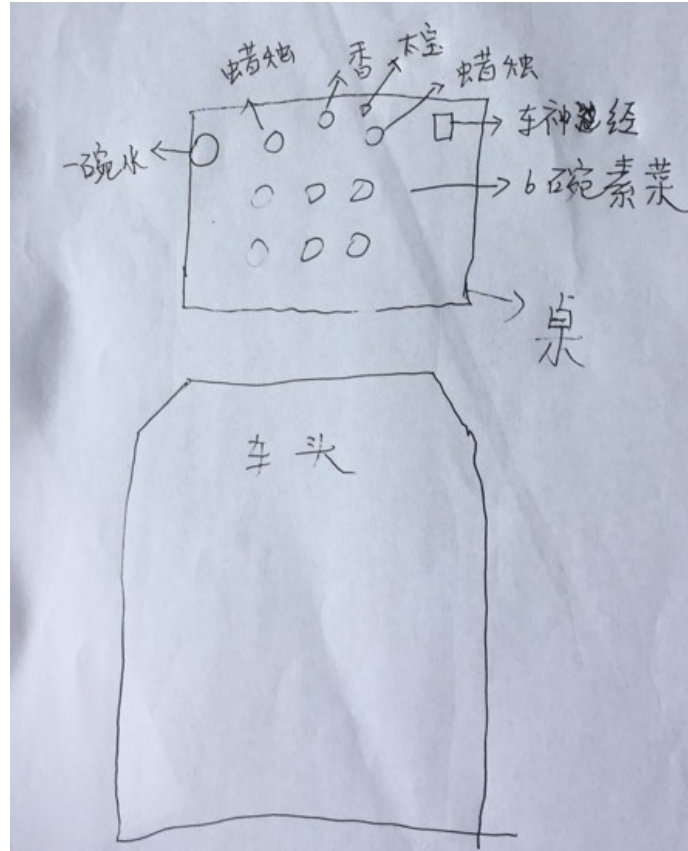


Figure 0.0.1. An explanatory diagram of the car god worshipping ritual.⁶

Normally, during rituals, I was charged with pouring yellow wine in a row of shot glasses for Buddha and our ancestors. But there were no shot glasses set out in front of the car.

“No yellow wine this time?” I asked Nainai.

“Of course not, silly. The Car God can’t drink! It is against the law.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. But in my heart, I admired the ingenuity of Nainai, or whoever so thoughtfully adapted the ritual to ensure that the Car God complied with our local transportation regulations.

After the candles and incents were lit, Nainai picked up the burning incents and held them in front of her, bowing and murmuring, “please Car God bless us with safety, everywhere we go, safety with us always, we pray to you.....” I took over the incents and prayed as well. After all the verbal

messages were conveyed, Nainai started burning paper money and the sutra— a material message and token of gratitude for Car God. After all the colorful papers were reduced to ashes, Nainai then picked up the bowl of water, which she claimed was endowed with magic power, and splashed a bit of water on each car tire. The water was supposed to make the car level and stable (*pingwen*, 平稳).

According to Nainai, the worshipping of car god started in my hometown in the 1980s. People who drove big cargo trucks would make ritual offerings to the car god and pray for safety. As more and more people came to own cars, this practice became widespread, and the economic infrastructure of ritual worship also became more established. Today, one can purchase a pre-drafted “Car God Sutra” (*cheshenjing*, 车神经) from most local Taoist monks (it is one of the standard sutras carried in their shops). Each set now costs around 100 yuan. As Nainai complained, these things keep getting more and more pricy.

In order to save money, since last year, Nainai began reciting and producing her own Car God Sutras. Every day for a couple of hours, she recites a variety of sutras and works on making the ritual objects that our family will use throughout the year. However, because she is completely illiterate, she had to first acquire the text of the sutra from a Taoist monk, and then ask people to teach her the sounds. The sutra conveys wishes of safety and prosperity, and asks Chinese deities to protect us as we use these modern machines. Lines from the sutra read, “...I pray to car god for prosperity in all four seasons...the four heavenly guardians stand in the four directions...all disasters and calamities disappear into nothing...”

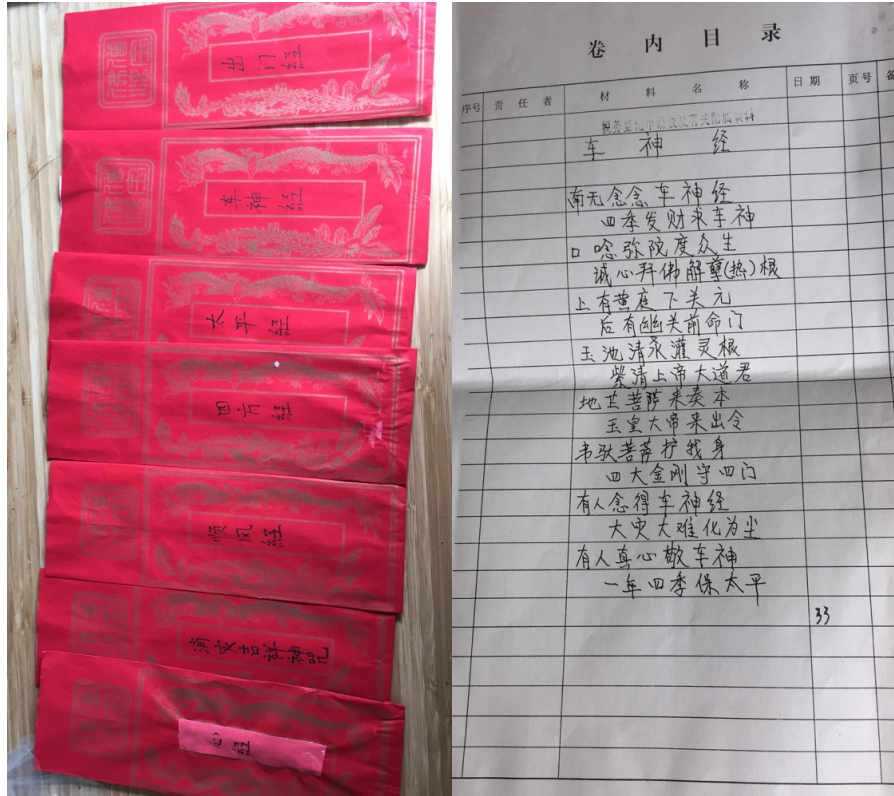


Figure 0.0.2. Left: the exterior of Car God sutra (second one from the top); right: the text of Car God sutra.

“When you get a car in America,” said Nainai, “send me your car plate number and I will take it to the temple.”

Apparently, for those who don’t have the time or knowledge to conduct a complete ceremony at home, they can bring their car information (the plate number, the model and make, the names of drivers) to their local temples where monks will pray on their behalf for a fee.

I chuckled again.

Sensing I doubted the efficacy of this practice, Nainai added, “it works for American cars as well! In the Car God Sutra, it says ‘for every road across all the world!’”

Driving Together

Between the summers of 2017 and 2018, I traveled back to China to continue my dissertation fieldwork. It was the first time since I left the country for my graduate studies, that I had the opportunity to celebrate the Spring Festival at home. I decided to stay for an entire month, to spend some much-needed time with family, and to try my hand at being a Didi driver.

For a long time, I had wanted to know what it is like to be on the other side of the interface. But it wasn't until I left the metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai (where it is nearly impossible to get a car or a license plate) and returned to my hometown, that I finally got the chance.

First, I tried to register a Didi account with my dad's thirteen-year-old Mazda. The car was still in good nick, but the platform immediately rejected the application. The age of the car was over the limit (usually eight-years old). I was glad to see that the company was being strict about the condition of cars. Then I tried to register my mom's new Audi. It was a success. My driver's license also went through the "background check" without a hitch. Within a few hours, I was an official Didi driver.

But I soon encountered another hurdle: strong parental opposition. My parents thought it was too dangerous for me to be a Didi driver. I didn't have a lot of driving experience, and the idea of a young woman chauffeuring strangers around town made them nervous. But after several days of negotiation, we finally came to an agreement: my dad would ride shotgun.

It turned out to be a great arrangement. As a new driver, I spent most of my time hectically operating the app. Although the process sounds straight forward—turn on the app, wait, get a beep for a new trip, locate the customer, pick up the customer, hit "start" when the trip commences, and then "end" once you reach the destination—it still takes a while to develop the necessary motor memory while driving. I think I forgot to hit "start" at least twice, which resulted in significantly reduced fares for my lucky customers. While I was driving, my dad would draw upon his repository of local knowledge to keep the customers entertained.

“I know your village just finished a new road! It’s very nice. Isn’t it?”

“How old is your kid? Which school is he going to now? Ah, I know the principal there.”

My dad is a natural anthropologist.

Although my experience with driving for Didi was rather brief, I confirmed a feeling that I had throughout my research. That is, for customers, the taxicab is a transitory place or even a “non-place” to which no meaning is attached.⁷ But for drivers, the inside of the car is a deeply personal space with histories and memories. A tiny universe of small socialities.

In our little world, we welcomed people from all walks of life. We had a young mother, who hailed our car to take her toddlers to shop for New Year’s supplies; the children were bursting with excitement the whole trip. We also picked up a boy and a girl from a local high school, who hailed a Didi to go to a book store after school. From the nervous way they looked at us and at each other, they seemed to be on a date. Some of our other customers wondered who we were and why we were driving for Didi with a brand-new Audi. These questions were answered with my father’s lengthy and incoherent explanation about my strange research. In the span of a few weeks, I came to know more about the people in my hometown than I had in the previous two decades.

Over the last six years, I have taken over two hundred Didi, Uber, black car, and taxi rides in China. And I have hailed rides all around the world, from the snowy streets of Helsinki, to wide avenues of Mexico City, to the cobbled roads of Cartagena’s old town. I have grown so used to my role as a ride-hailing researcher, that every time I climb into a car, I automatically sit shotgun and begin interrogating the driver.

Going on these trips provided me with a broader sense of what the ride-hailing revolution is about. It made me realize that China's story of driving towards prosperous is being reproduced in many contexts around the world.

A retired pro football player in Helsinki told me that he began driving for Uber as means of last resort, after sustaining a debilitating injury. But soon he found that he really enjoys it. Traveling with strangers and hearing their stories made him feel less trapped in his body.

A middle-aged driver in Boston is saving the money he earns by driving for Uber to go sailing around the world.

A Somalian refugee in D.C. drives for Uber to send his daughter to a good school. He told me that he hopes to eventually get a M.P.P. in public policy, so he can join the elites on the hill.

These interpersonal experiences reminded me of the basic fact that in addition to the economic and technological forces driving the adoption of ride-hailing, there are also deeply human reasons why it became so popular around the world. For so many of those I have spoken with, ride-hailing brings the opportunity to live, drive, and prosper.

¹ Huang 2011.

² Chang²An Automobile Company has a history that traces back to 1862, when Li Hongzhang, an eminent politician and industrialist in the Qing government, set up a military supply factory in Shanghai. During Sino-Japanese war, the factory was moved from Shanghai to Chongqing, a city in southwest China. In 1959, the company began engineering China's first production vehicle, the Changjiang, for the government.

³ Hessler 2010; "Four-Fifths of Chinese Automotive Imports Come from U.S.A." *The China Weekly Review*, Nov 29, 1930.

⁴ Mann 2018.

⁵ Gallagher 2006.

⁶ All figures included in the dissertation, unless otherwise specified, are photographs taken by the author or images collected during online and offline fieldwork.

⁷ Augé 1992.