

WORLD

CHINA'S ROAD SHOW

In the People's Republic, a car is more than a way to get around. It's a statement that you have arrived **BY MICHAEL SCHUMAN/G2 EXPRESSWAY**



WHEELER-DEALER
Lawyer Zhao Xiadi, a member of the Audi S Club, says his car gets him "to know people at your own level"

Photographs by Zachary Bako for TIME

IN CHINA, THE AUTOMOBILE IS liberation. After the claustrophobia of congested Beijing, its rancid pollution and deafening clatter, the open highway is inviting, even irresistible—the whoosh of the battering wind a tonic. Lin Yang, the 35-year-old researcher behind the wheel of our dusty Buick Excelle, has spent a large part of the past five years, and some of her happiest moments, finding escape in the driver's seat. She has motored to the Changbai Mountains near China's far northeastern border with North Korea and, all the way in the opposite direction, to Kashgar, the ancient market town on the southwest frontier with Pakistan. As she hurtles from Beijing down the G2 Expressway, the stresses of her daily existence recede. "I find that life on the road can lead me anywhere," she says. "It's endless possibilities."

Each year, millions of Chinese are taking to the roads—and sharing Lin's experience—for the first time. For Americans, the automobile has been an indispensable feature of life, lore and literature for decades. Driving is considered an inalienable right, the two-car garage a bare necessity and the road trip to grandma's house a routine childhood memory. For the Chinese, however, the love affair with the car is as fresh and exciting as the country's wealth. Twenty years ago, the most the average Chinese could aspire to was a creaky bicycle to peddle along the wide, near empty avenues of China's big cities. Today, with incomes rising and prosperity burgeoning, the automobile has become a sparkling new symbol of equally sparkling new lives—a measure of status, a tool for individual expression and a mark of modernity itself. "To the Chinese, the car has a lot of meaning," says William Bin Li, CEO of Bitauto, a Beijing-based company that offers Internet marketing services to the auto industry in China. "It is proof of success. It is proof of your own value."

That's why the most modest farmer, the up-and-coming college graduate, the middle-aged salaryman—everyone—wants one. The Chinese buy more cars today than anyone else in the world. Sales of passenger vehicles and light trucks in China in 2013 reached nearly 21.9 million—or about a quarter of all sold globally—compared with 15.1 million in the U.S., says research firm LMC Automotive. For the

auto industry, the Chinese are now the world's most desirable customers, transforming their nation into the ultimate global car market. Every imaginable type of vehicle—from Kia's sedans to Ferrari's pricey sports racers to local Chinese brands you've probably never heard of—can be found. In 2013, car shoppers in China kicked the tires of a dizzying 647 different models for sale from 111 brands, according to LMC. U.S. consumers, by contrast, have far fewer choices: 310 models from only 45 brands. The result has been a breathtaking expansion of Chinese automobile ownership. In 2002, China's billion-plus population drove a mere 21.4 million cars. By 2013, the number had increased more than six times to 137 million.

Driving the Dream

ONE OF THOSE PROUD NEW OWNERS IS Zhao Yanan. Only five days before I met him at a spacious Ford dealership on the Beijing outskirts, Zhao, 34, had plunked down nearly \$30,000 for a Focus, his first new car. For much of the world, the popular American sedan is no more than basic transport. To Zhao, the Focus is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Growing up poor in a small town in Hebei province to factory-worker parents, Zhao had fantasized about owning a car, but it was simply beyond his family's means. The automobile remained a tantalizing but out-of-reach route to a better life. Now, though, Zhao is a salesman for a printing company in Beijing, and when he had saved up enough, he rushed out to buy his Focus. The milestone made him wistful about how far he had come. "In China, at Chinese New Year, parents give their children red envelopes with money, but when I was little, we had no money," Zhao says. "I remember getting 5 or 10 yuan [80¢ or \$1.65], but I felt like the richest man in the world. When I bought my car, I felt the same way."

Zhao is living what's being called the Chinese Dream—that long march from poverty to prosperity—and a car represents both how far you've come, and how far you are going. Buying your first car "is very emotional," says Qin Zhi, the CEO of Autohome, a web-based information provider for car shoppers. Chinese "want a car to access modern life, to improve their quality of life."

That's what a car has done for Tony Fu. When I met Fu, 25, he was relaxing at a

China vs. the U.S.

China 647



Number of car models on the market in 2013

U.S. 310

- Best-selling cars in 2013**
- 1 Volkswagen Lavida \$17,100
 - 2 Buick Excelle \$15,900
 - 3 Chevrolet Sail \$9,300



China

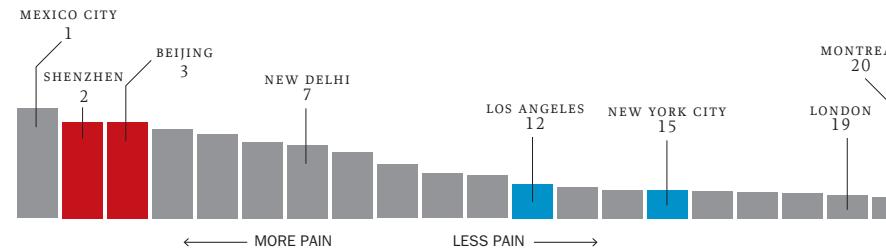


U.S.

- 1 Honda Civic \$19,190
- 2 Honda Accord \$22,755
- 3 Toyota Camry \$22,870

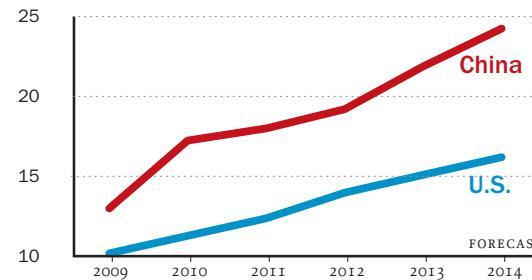
The most painful commutes in the world

Based on a global poll of 8,042 commuters across 20 cities

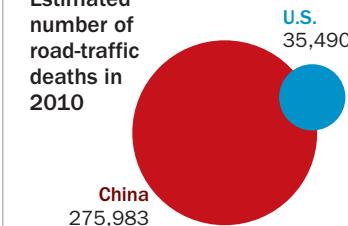


Sales of light vehicles, including cars, small trucks and minivans

In millions



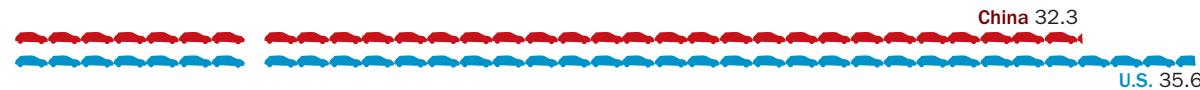
Estimated number of road-traffic deaths in 2010



Passenger vehicles per kilometer*

* Latest figures available

Sources: China Ministry of Public Security; U.S. Department of Transportation; China Ministry of Transport; U.S. Federal Highway Administration; LMC Automotive; World Health Organization; Volkswagen; Toyota; GM; Honda; IBM Commuter Pain Index 2011



hot spring in the Beijing suburbs. Before he purchased a Volkswagen Tiguan SUV in July (with a little aid from a generous aunt), Fu, who works for a state oil company, would rarely bother with such excursions. Public transport was just too slow and inconvenient to make it worthwhile. With his own car, however, Fu has been able to join in one of the city's new car-driven trends: weekends in the burbs. Fu takes his Volkswagen on regular Saturday out-of-town jaunts with friends or visits to far-off relatives. "When I didn't have a car, I just sat at home," Fu says. "A car expanded my activities. I can have a better social life."

CAR GRAPHIC BY HEATHER JONES FOR TIME

Owning a car in China isn't just about enjoying a new lifestyle but also telling everyone about it. "The main reason people buy cars in China is to show they can afford it, to show off," says Bitauto's Li. In a society obsessed with wealth and hierarchy, the automobile has become a primary method of marketing where you fit into China's changing social order. That's one big reason why consumers in recent years have gravitated toward large vehicles, like Fu's SUV, and expensive luxury cars, from Mercedes to Lamborghini. Says Anthony Lau, China research director for market-analysis firm TNS: "In China a car can be used in projecting your own

image, to give an opportunity for other people to know about you."

June Zhang wants you to know about her car. The Mini Cooper she bought in 2012 "shows my personality and way of life," she says. Zhang describes her Mini as "smart, fashionable and energetic"—a perfect representation of her own character, she believes. It also demonstrates how the 32-year-old Beijing public relations executive lives the life of a modern, affluent urbanite. Dressing up for business meetings is easy with her private car—no more cramming into dirty buses—and the backseat serves nicely as a closet for exercise clothes for a spontaneous stop at the

gym. When she meets other Mini drivers, she feels an instant affinity. "I think that if people buy the same car, they have a similar mind-set as I do," she says.

Hot Wheels

ZHAO XIADI SEES HIS CAR AS A VEHICLE into an entire network of friends and contacts. On a brisk, miserably smoggy Sunday morning in Beijing, Zhao and 30 other car lovers of the Audi S Club gather on the shoulder of a roadway to observe a sort of modern Chinese tribal ritual. Each month, the club's members—all owners of high-performance Audis—come together to drive, chat and dine. Once assembled, the motorists take off down the highway in a phalanx of German engineering. One participant, a gadget geek who works for a local TV station, records the event with a video camera for posting on the club's website. Zhao, 28, a lawyer and co-founder of the club's Beijing chapter, directs the motorcade through a walkie-talkie. "A car is like a wife," he says. "It is something that is part of your life that you can't live without."

Such car clubs have become fashionable in China's big cities as a method of finding like-minded people amid the urban sprawl. "We all have common interests, we speak the same language," Zhao says of the club members. Yet there's more than socializing going on here—there's social climbing. Despite Zhao's insistence that the club's purpose isn't to "show off," the primping and posturing that goes on at their gathering says otherwise. Those in China who can afford an Audi—Zhao spent \$85,000 on his two years ago—are newly minted denizens of China's emerging elite, and their pricey cars are just one way of letting everyone know it. A few participants at Zhao's club have brought along their wives and girlfriends, all carefully displayed in Chanel, Louis Vuitton and other emblems of China's nouveau riche. One carries a meticulously manicured minidog clad in a quilted coat. After their drive, the club members end up on the outskirts of Beijing at a recreation center designed especially for wealthy auto enthusiasts. The proprietor, Xue Yuan, has converted his home and nearby warehouse into a car garage and playground for the rich and mobile. While getting your car serviced or upgraded, you can play pool, whack balls at a virtual golf course and nosh on organic food from Xue's family

farm. Zhao says his Audi “is a mark of a certain consuming class. It’s great to know people who are at your own level. In China, it is important to have these networks.”

Huang Zongmin has taken his quest for auto-driven stature to an extreme. The Chengdu-based founder of Sanhe Group, which sells and services cars, has become one of China’s most enthusiastic collectors of vintage automobiles. Huang acquired his first—a Hongqi, or Red Flag, China’s original homemade car—in 1992, and since then has amassed 80 classic vehicles, from Rolls-Royce, Mercedes-Benz and other marquee makes, worth more than \$16 million. He drives them at friendly races and rents them out for weddings or as props for movies and TV shows. But most of all, he just likes showing them. He’s opening an exhibition hall this year that will display 35 of his collection. “It’s the same way in both Chinese and Western society—people buy fancy cars to show them, to show their success,” Huang says. “A lot of my friends say I’m a person with good taste after seeing my car collection. That’s enough for me.”

Chicken Burger to Go

SOMEWHERE IN HEBEI PROVINCE, LIN AND I take a break at a roadside rest stop. Along U.S. highways, these emporiums are chock-a-block with fast-food joints, shops and ice cream parlors. Unfortunately for the hungry and weary Chinese road warrior, the services available haven’t kept pace with the expanding army of needy drivers. The pickings are depressingly slim at the run-down outpost. A convenience store peddles packaged crackers, caffeine-laden Red Bull and vacuum-sealed chunks of roast chicken, of uncertain vintage. Lin tucks into a ready-to-eat canned porridge of rice, peanuts and dates, her staple nourishment on long journeys. She calls the cement-colored mixture “snot.” Unable to disagree, I settle on a less adventurous canister of a local Pringles knockoff.

Soon, though, Chinese drivers will enjoy as much choice as their U.S. counterparts. All sorts of new services are popping up to cater to them. Outside the city of Jinan, the capital of Shandong province in eastern China, we discover, with relief, a rest stop that boasts a sparkling-clean KFC, dishing out chicken burgers, french fries and ice cream. As Chinese begin to drive like Americans, the highways in China are beginning to look more and

more American. Wyndham Hotel Group, famous for its Super 8, Days Inn and other affordable lodging, built a network of 695 hotels in China by the end of 2013 to house the newly mobile. Wyndham, based in Parsippany, N.J., opened its first Super 8 in China in 2004; now it has 531 of them. Chinese can also find a very American quick bite behind the wheel. McDonald’s has tripled the number of its drive-through restaurants in China since 2008 to 242, more than 1 out of every 10 outlets in the country. The increasingly mobile Chinese “is a big part of our future,” says Azmir Jaafar, chief development officer for McDonald’s in China. “They have similar needs to what they want in the U.S.” The cars themselves are often American too. GM sells more vehicles in China than it does in the U.S. Buick is the fifth most popular car brand in China and Chevrolet the seventh. (Volkswagen sits at No. 1.)

China is pursuing a car-centric course in its development much as the U.S. has. As in Houston or Los Angeles, residents of many Chinese metropolises are becoming extremely dependent on their cars to get to the office, school and shopping mall. Though the government has spent scores of billions on big-ticket transport systems, most famously its high-speed railways, public transport within cities, especially midsize townships, remains inadequate or poorly planned, forcing commuters onto the highways and thoroughfares in their Chevys, Hyundais and Toyotas. Officials have also encouraged drivers by constructing lots and lots of roads to accommodate all their new cars. In 2013, China had 104,468 km of highways—3.5 times more than just a decade earlier. Sean Chiao, CEO of planning, design and development for Asia-Pacific at AECOM, which provides technical services for infrastructure projects, says China has followed an “Orange County model” of building transport, in which long freeways for private cars were perceived as symbols of modernity. “The mentality of urbanization is that the car is part of a lifestyle,” says Chiao.

Crosstown Traffic

THAT IS THE WRONG PATH FOR CHINA TO take. Despite the recent surge, car ownership in China is still in its infancy. There’s one car for every 10 people. If the level of ownership in China reaches that of the U.S., where there are about two cars for every



three people, roughly another 700 million automobiles would hit the highways—an unprecedented congestion of cars that could inflict immeasurable punishment on the environment and society. Bitauto’s Li calls such an outcome “a disaster.”

Chinese roads are already a cluttered jumble of chaos and life-threatening hazards. After two days on the G2 Expressway with Lin, it is hard to understand why she, or anyone else, would find driving in China relaxing. Drivers mindlessly park on highway entrance ramps, back up against traffic or simply careen onto the wrong side of the street. We dodge potholes of epic proportions, careless pedestrians, a chicken and a crushed van abandoned in the left lane of the expressway. At night, driving is reminiscent of a video game. With almost no lights installed along the roadside, drivers switch on their brights, blinding oncoming

travelers. The security-obsessed government makes matters worse by incessantly snapping photos from cameras perched above the road. The recurring flashes bring spots to your eyes. Lin hasn’t escaped the dangers. She got stranded by a flat tire in the intimidating Taklamakan Desert and flipped over into a ditch in a collision with a reckless speed demon.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in 2010 China suffered over 275,000 deaths on the road, more than any other country. Even factoring in its large population, the death rate on the road is nearly twice as high in China as in the U.S., according to WHO. The more common trial, though, is emotional more than physical. With so many cars added to the roadways each month, soul-destroying traffic has become a persistent and time-consuming feature of Chinese life; some jams only a giant like

THE RIGHT IMAGE

PR executive June Zhang says her Mini Cooper “shows my personality—smart, fashionable and energetic”

‘WHEN I DIDN’T HAVE A CAR, I SAT AT HOME. A CAR EXPANDED MY ACTIVITIES. I HAVE A BETTER SOCIAL LIFE.’

—TONY FU, 25, AN EMPLOYEE OF A STATE OIL COMPANY

China could produce. In 2010 an influx of coal trucks and untimely road construction on National Highway 110 near Beijing caused a 100-km backup that lasted more than 10 days.

Even such walls of traffic, however, haven’t dissuaded China’s excited new drivers. The average businessman would rather sit comfortably snarled in traffic in his own private car than crush into the crowded, dog-eat-dog subways and buses. Chen Xu, 23, a member of the Audi S Club, admits he finds Beijing traffic irritating, but not enough to leave his car at home. “I tried to take the subway to work,” he says. “At one stop, the doors opened, I got shoved out, and I couldn’t get back on.” Frustrated, he went above ground to hail a taxi and has insisted on driving himself to work each morning ever since.

Beijing officials have tried tackling the traffic by restricting the number of cars on the streets. Prospective car buyers in the city must win a lottery to receive the necessary registration, and automobiles with certain license plates are banned from the roadways on specific days. But such methods have, ironically, increased the demand for cars. Tan Xiangyu, a doctoral candidate in organic chemistry, was pressured by his parents to enter the Beijing new-car lottery, and when he won, they insisted on purchasing him a Volkswagen CC sedan he didn’t really want or need. The registration “is limited, so they thought it was valuable,” Tan says of his parents. Nevertheless, Tan is already thinking about purchasing another. Since Beijing’s regulations would prevent him from driving every day, a second car, with a different license number, becomes a necessity for surviving city life. “One car is not enough,” says Tan.

China’s government will have to do a lot more to avoid a car-crushed future—building better and smarter public transport, and increasing the costs of driving into city centers with special surcharges and tolls. But what officials are really fighting isn’t just a practical need for mobility but the hopes and desires of China’s 1.3 billion people. Tan’s interest in a second car goes well beyond pragmatism. “When I get my own car with my own money, I will be much prouder,” he says. The message is clear: China’s car dreams won’t fade away, whatever lies ahead on the expressway. —WITH REPORTING BY CHENGCHENG JIANG AND JOY LE LI/BEIJING ■