

Travel: An Important Part of Our Lives

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Travel is something that we all do on a daily basis and generally think little about, but is an important part of our daily lives. Even with the increasing prices of petroleum products in recent years, our methods, modes and frequency of travel have continued.

One aspect of living in Hong Kong or Asia has been the culture difference as it relates to travel.

In the United States, travel has been and continues to be an important part of most Americans' daily lives. For most Americans, commuting by vehicle to their jobs is a daily and important occurrence. We've all experienced the stress of dealing with a vehicle that doesn't work and trying to make alternate arrangements for getting to work or some other venue. For most people, travel or finding a way or means to get around other than walking has been and is important. As children growing up we used different modes of transportation that includes tricycles, big wheels, bicycles, skateboards and, more recently, roller blades. A rite of growing up was obtaining that first big goal in life of getting a drivers license. Many of our adolescent means of transportation were then left behind for the lure, convenience and excitement of the automobile. Walking or using various forms of public transportation soon lessen considerably in our daily lives.

For the Asian people, and particularly the Chinese, travel too is an important aspect within their lives but to a much different

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extent than we are accustomed to. The Chinese base their transportation needs around three major means: walking, bicycles, and public transportation. Very few of the Chinese people own a vehicle for any of a number of reasons. New vehicles are very expensive to own and operate. Vehicle taxes, licenses, insurance and gasoline are very expensive. To license an auto in Hong Kong will cost in excess of \$1,000 U. S. Current gasoline prices are in excess of \$8 U. S. per gallon. In most instances, the Chinese will only purchase new vehicles as buying a used automobile are seen as losing face. Losing face is an important concept in the personal lives of the people on a daily basis. The few young Chinese that can afford a vehicle will purchase a used vehicle, but for the most part purchases are for new vehicles only. In Hong Kong the vehicles range from beaten up pick-ups to very luxurious Japanese and British manufactured automobiles. The British influence is seen in that travel is on the left hand side of the highway or street, and the automobile steering wheel is on



the right side of the vehicle. In Red China, travel is on the right side of the highway, and the steering wheel is on the left side of the vehicle. American vehicles are common in the cities that I have visited in Red China. The people that are able to own vehicles prefer U. S. manufactured vehicles, but for the most part are not always affordable. There are Chinese automobile manufacturers that manufacture autos that are much smaller, cheaper and poorly built when compared to U. S. vehicles. An individual can purchase a new Chinese vehicle for less than \$6,000 U. S. The new middle class that is quickly developing within China is leading the charge to buy American and other luxurious foreign manufactured vehicles. While the Chinese that are economically fortunate to be able to own a vehicle, their driving skills are terrible at best. Fender benders, serious accidents and tremendous traffic jams are a common occurrence. The one peculiar habit that I have observed while riding with the Chinese is that when stopped at a stop light, the driver will invariably put the car into park while waiting for the light to change. Many times the driver will put on the parking brake also. No one has ever given me a reason other than that is the way driving is taught.

Another curious and interesting aspect of owning a vehicle in Hong Kong is that most automobile owners also employ a driver. Labor is abundant and cheap. To save on the stress of driving, employing a driver is rather common. With driving being a harrowing experience, most auto owners employ someone else to drive so that the auto owner can just sit back and relax and enjoy the ride.

For most of the Chinese, personal transportation still is by

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walking or abicycle. Only the affluent or small developing middle class is able to own a vehicle. Using a bicycle or walking has a tremendous affect on the Chinese daily life. One of the reasons I've observed as to why the Chinese only buy a few items when shopping, especially in the markets, is the limiting factor of how much a person can carry when walking. The American way of going to a super-market buying six bags worth of grocery items doesn't happen when you've gotten to the market by walking or riding a bicycle. An interesting off-shoot of this transportation lifestyle is that most all businesses provide locker room or changing facilities as part of employing people. With the heat, humidity and rainfall of the summer season, being able to shower and change clothes is an important part of employment. With such a large number of bicycles used, most of the streets have special bicycle lanes for bicycle travel. Without these lanes, the pedestrian is taking his or her life into their hands when walking. Most Chinese expect the pedestrian to give way to the bicycle when both are on a sidewalk.

For the Chinese that have to travel a distance, public transportation is the mode of travel. Buses, taxis and trains are the public transportation means that the Chinese have at their disposal. Public transportation is very inexpensive. Hong Kong Golf Club is located about 40 kilometers north of the city of Hong Kong outside of the village of Sheen Shui. A taxi to Hong Kong will cost about \$20 U. S. Train fare to Hong Kong will be \$1.50 U. S. for coach, \$2.00 U. S. for traveling first class. Trains go thru the Shen Shui train station every three minutes on the way to Hong Kong. Between Shen Shui and Hong Kong there are nine stops at various villages located on the rail line to Hong Kong with the trip taking about 35 minutes. Trains travel from 5:30 a.m. until 1 a.m. and are very safe and for the most part very modern and clean. One can see law enforcement people at all stations and on the trains themselves. Crime is not a problem due to the fact that owning any type of weapon in Hong Kong is illegal. Penalties for criminal acts are extremely severe which seems to provide a dramatic deterrent to people doing criminal acts. Performing a criminal act in Hong Kong or Red China is a good means to never seeing the light of day again. The third major means of public transportation is

the bus system. From small mini buses that carry 25 people to large British style double-decker buses that carry about 125 people, buses are prevalent and very inexpensive. Normal fare for a bus is approximately 40 cents. Bus stops abound on all city and residential street with most apartment and housing complexes having their own stop.

As a typical American who has spent his life commuting to work in his own vehicle, diligently running it through the car wash weekly to keep it clean and shiny, you might think I experience a great loss in not driving on a daily basis to work or any place that I need to get to for whatever reason. At home in the States I even keep a special little number under wraps in the form of a Black Mustang GT for that fun Sunday drive. But actually I have come to enjoy the convenience, economy and relaxation of someone else doing the driving.

And of course there is the comfort of the one mode of transport no superintendent can do without. Each morning I climb into my personal golf cart, put my Packer coffee mug in that convenient cup holder and commence touring the golf courses, the routine of home 8,000 miles around the world.

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