



Random observations on life of the common Joe in Shun De, Guangdong Province, China – Part 4
Travelogues

Every time I travel to the Far East, I find myself in a quandary. As much as I like to write these short diaries of my travels, I always question whether I will experience something different that is worth writing about and that I have not composed in a previous diary.

Upon my arrival into Hong Kong on Saturday morning, the sky was very grey. It was a dreary day as it rained most of the time. On Sunday morning I went to the local Starbuck's for a coffee and then went on one of my usual long walks. The rain had stopped and the sky had cleared, however one could not see the sky. The pollution index must have been way off the map. Since I stay in Kowloon, I usually have a great view of the city. My line of sight across the bay to Hong Kong City is usually one of the best views day or night, however on this day, I could not see across the bay or any of the hundreds of skyscrapers that dominate the landscape.



The grey sky appeared so thick that you felt like you could reach out and cut it with a knife. Although we talk about a high pollution index in the Toronto area, it doesn't hold a candle to what I experienced here this past week. In fact, this grey sky was prevalent in all my travels in Guangdong Province this past week. The aura created by this thick grey air was depressing. As for the locals, it was just another day in an industrialized China. My understanding from what I can muster from the Chinese news stations is that the pollution index in Shanghai and Beijing is much of the same. If this is the case, then I really don't understand how top world athletes will be able to perform at their top level in any outside sporting event at the 2008 Olympics.



From a meal perspective, the latest incarnation I have experienced is something I refer to as "Swish and Fly." This is the Chinese version of Surf and Turf. In North America, Steak and Lobster is the fare, in China it is Snake and Pigeon in a hot pot concoction

(Soup sort of thing). It is quite tasty, especially the broth that is created from cooking the snake and pigeon. The snake meat becomes very tender and the pigeon, well as we say in North America, taste like Chicken.

As for totally new experience, a local friend in Shun De bought himself a brand new car just before Christmas. The car – a bright blue Mazda 3 equipped with a manual 5 speed transmission is now his pride and joy. It stands out from the crowd of cars because most Asian people prefer white as it reflects heat during the hot summer. He opted for blue because it was nicer and it would be easy to locate in the sea of cars when it is parked in public.

Now just imagine a new driver in a new car (with manual transmission) driving on roads in China where all rules apply to the other guys. In previous diaries I provided details of the driving experiences I have had in China and if you can imagine those and put yourself in the passenger seat next to a guy that is

new at driving, I would describe a roller coaster ride as a tame experience. Joe is a tall and lanky looking individual who is not very coordinated at the best of times. Put him in the driver's seat in a car with a manual transmission, well this is an experience to be avoided at the best of times. Joe driving skills leave a lot to be desired, however when compared to everyone around you, he is just one of the pack. The only difference is that everyone around him is sane enough to buy a car that is equipped with an automatic transmission. A car with an automatic transmission provides at least one less distraction while driving – you don't have to shift from one gear ratio to another. And if you add in the use of a mobile phone while he is trying to navigate this car while shifting, well you are close to encountering some type of minor disaster every ten of fifteen minutes. First of all, Joe has had the car for almost 2 months and he still does not grasp the concept of shifting gears. When he first starts off, assuming that he hasn't stalled it, or we haven't been thrown into traffic because he is bucking forward, he shifts from first to second before he has started to move. He is always slapping the gearshift knob, and I get the feeling he does this because he is trying to figure out what gear he is in. He quickly shifts into 3rd gear, well before he should do it, because the car crawls and groans under load. Just as we are about to feel that the car is driving easily, he again shifts prematurely and we are back to crawling and moaning. Same goes for shifting into 5th gear. When it comes to downshifting, well this is a totally new experience. He does not know what gear he is going into, and most times he has shifted in to low a gear causing the car to jump around like a scared rabbit. You can just imagine how everyone in vehicles around us has to deal with when Joe is on the road. He drives like everyone around us, however they are experienced drivers. Joe changes lanes, creates lanes, sometimes signals, but does not necessarily indicate his real turning intentions, drives too slow, drives too fast, talks too much on the mobile phone that he is trying to hold next to his ear – you know, the hand that is supposed to do the shifting and he appears to be focused on driving, but I am not so sure that he really can see what is happening around him, or the chaos that he is creating.

During the week, Joe managed to miss to intersections because he was driving too fast to properly prepare for the turn (were talking 20 – 30 kph). Even though he recognized that he was too late to turn, he would do it anyway and we would end up on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. This was not scary, however having to go reverse in oncoming traffic certainly was. But as things go in China, drivers do whatever they want and it appears that everyone is



willing to be accommodating. The vehicles on the road just go around Joe as he backs up. No one stops to let him get out of his tricky situation, they only accommodate. Joe does not just back up and then go ahead and find an alternative way to get back to the missed intersection, he just backs up enough to make sure that he can make the turn, regardless of the traffic ahead or behind. We crawl and buck our way onto the street we are trying to get to and proceed on as if nothing happened. What is most amazing is that no one beeps the horn impatiently or stops to threaten anyone. Everyone goes on as if this is the norm – I sorry to say that this is the norm.

Beyond several of these escapades, Joe nearly had two accidents. One was on the skyway where he locked up the emergency brake to stop the car. I really don't know why he didn't use the brake pedal, but he did get us stopped in time, and I mean in time before he could have been responsible for a small car pileup.

I must admit that he did have one small incident with the car on the last night of my stay in Shun De. We were at a company function at a local hotel that is located on a hill. After the dinner Joe, his wife and I got in his car to take me back to my hotel. We were parked on a small slope in the parking lot, and as Joe was fiddling around slapping the gearshift, diddling with his mobile phone and talking with his wife, he had started the car, put it in first gear to go forward but left his foot on the clutch. Because of all the distractions, Joe did not realize that the car was going backwards, and it hit a wall scrapping the back bumper with a long DEEP scratch. His wife got out and looked and then got back in. This is the first time I have witnessed a Chinese dialogue of displeasure. She was pissed and I could tell that it was about his actions and how he caused the accident. This went on for a few minutes until they realized that I was in the car witnessing this event. Everything became calm, and stayed very quiet until they dropped me off at my hotel. I can only assume that they resumed their discussion after they left me.

In the morning I asked Joe if everything was alright and he said that if the car wasn't defective that the incident would not have happened. I did neglect to inform you that in China all new cars are equipped with electronic backup systems that sense if anything is near you and even displays how far away you are from any object. As you get closer the beeping gets louder. Joe said that the backup warning system did not show that the wall was there and that he would have been able to prevent from happening if the car warning had gone off. This is an example of what can happen when one depends on technology for doing things right. What Joe neglected to understand is that the car was not backing out straight, he was rolling down the small slope with the wheels turned, and the sensor located in the license plate area of the car can not accurately read where and how far an object may be. It sensed it when we hit the wall.

After this experience, I have far more confidence in Andrew's and Katie's driving skills (including the use of a manual transmission) on our streets than Joe's in China. I do hope that between now and my next trip he will have gained more experience and that the car will still be in new car condition.