

# TERRIFIC TRAFFIC!

- Ferry and Aukje Both

China is like other countries and sometimes the treasurer has to announce ways to make up significant national shortfalls, but there is an easy way in this country: instruct the police to hand out fines. No, they do not have to hide behind trees to catch nearly innocent drivers with lead in their shoes, nor patrol in unmarked cars to make criminals out of ordinary citizens who are unaware of yet another change in the local traffic rules. I mean, driving somewhere for 20 odd years and all of a sudden you have to go 20 km slower, or do you really notice a new stop sign at some corner? Nelson car owners easily recognise this, don't they? Without doubt, we are well behaved drivers with the occasional flaw and a sometimes malfunctioning auto-pilot. What we in NZ are missing is creativity, we just follow the rules.



Driving lessons in China are a joy to watch; whole benches full of people are enjoying the sun, a cigarette and a chat while looking at utes trying to drive forwards and backwards through two hanging lines with metal rings. To make it more interesting, they have to drive over a little ramp with just two wheels, a great trick. The top speed on the track must be about 5 km/hour and the other candidates are sitting in the cab as well, dying to get their turn. In a way, this is exactly what traffic is like in China, carefully looking after your own car, driving slowly and not getting scratches and if there happen to be people around, remember we are talking about the most populated country in

the world, ignore them. Everyone has to look after themselves and the shining automobile is king or, maybe over here, emperor!

As a pedestrian, you might think you are doing the right thing to walk on the footpath, but do not keep your hopes up. Cars are there too because that is where the car parks are. So hardly anyone walks there, instead they use the streets. Zebra crossings are another accident waiting to happen. The general rule is that you could slow down.....



But the miracle of being free from any obligation in Chinese society is shown when drivers come to a round-about; if there is a possible shortcut and, thinking about it, there are several, Chinese drivers go for it. The first few weeks here are torture when taking taxis, the worst offenders, because they are, of course, expected to drive on the wrong side of the road for us New Zealanders, but in their creative craze they often do not. Hence "creativity kills" - that is what should be printed on the cigarette packets in big Chinese characters.

On the positive side, people are incredibly tolerant and do not drive fast like our boy racers. A steady 40 km in fourth gear is how you fail your driving licence in good old Kiwistan but it is normal here, weaving their way through traffic lanes and missing potholes in the road, while honking their horn. Never a dull moment because, if anything is wrong with your car, it is not the klaxon. The result is that no-one even attempts to look around when there is a loud sound near you. Remember the story from Beijing that an ambulance was not allowed any space, in spite of all the audible and visual signs, and came too late to resurrect a heart patient? That is why!





When you enter town there are traffic signs to warn you not to do any of the above, but do they know the principle of making citizen's arrests to help the police? I wish! It would make me feel a lot safer crossing the streets or walking the footpaths in town while handing out a fine - forget about the language barrier here.

But there is hope! For the last few months the police have more strictly controlled the traffic rule that you have to actually stop for a red light.

If you don't, you get demerit points and they add up quickly. This is such a novelty for many that people stamp on their brakes even when the light turns orange; a lot safer for pedestrians but not for the cars behind them!

