



## Remember the Sicilians

### An Experience Essay on China and Driving

I wake up at 4:30. My heart pounds and my mind races ahead to success. If today goes well, then the world is mine. The infinite creative possibilities of my journey with Xiaohuang dance in front of me. Before long I hear a faint echo of the last words I wrote the evening before “Something will surely go wrong tomorrow.” I admonish myself sharply and say, Don’t get cocky. It’s not over until the fat lady sings. And yet my heart wants nothing to do with hurdles to climb, and so I let it run, only to reign it in again, Cool it, man.

I get to the garage by 8:45. No hiccups at all; in fact, the traffic flowed more smoothly than ever. Possibly a sign that the stars are aligned? Don’t be so goddamn superstitious!

Zizhou, the mechanic, has readied Xiaohuang for a 9am departure. A minute before 9:00, Tan Zong – the kind soul who’s been guiding me through the thicket of the entire registration process – calls me to say he’s already arrived at the inspection centre. I tell him that we haven’t even left yet. “Didn’t we agree to meet at 10:00am? I am sure we did.” I wait for his response. Please don’t let him say that he can’t wait until we arrive. “Ok, I’ll wait for you.” “Have some coffee or tea,” I suggest. “There’s no place to buy anything around here,” comes his reply. “I’ll get there as soon as I can,” I assure him.

I can’t go on my own. I don’t know where to go. I need to follow Wang Yan, the transport manager of the garage. Here comes Wang Yan. “Are we ready to go?” I ask. “Just a little longer,” he replies. “I’m waiting for my customer. We’ve got to go register his new Q7.” “Oh, I see. It’s just that, for whatever reason, Tan Zong has arrived already at the inspection centre.” “Just fives minutes,” says Wang Yan.

I go to Xiaohuang and get dressed. Into windbreaker. Aviator hat and goggles on. It’s a comfortable routine by now. I climb into Xiaohuang.

As before, the driver’s seat exterior rear view mirror hangs down limply. “We’ve really got it replaced,” I say to Zizhou. “Please tighten it one more time.” Zizhou takes out a screw driver, positions the mirror, tightens the screw and the mirror falls off.

No, not now, I think to myself. “Do you have super glue? Lets just glue the mirror into the socket. Never mind that we then can’t adjust it. We can worry about that later,” I suggest. “We don’t have super glue, but we’ve got another glue that hardens quite quickly,” Zizhou replies. Minutes pass until the glue is found, mixed and applied. Zizhou fixes the mirror in place and holds it tight. Is he holding it still enough? After five minutes, he lets go and the mirror falls off again. This is not working. Get a big blow dryer. Mix the glue again. Apply it. Get a helper to hold it still while Zizhou points the blow dryer at the socket. Five minutes. Seven minutes. Lets try. The helper lets go, gently, and the mirror holds. The angle at which it is positioned gives me a clear view of the



exhaust pipe. Never mind. It is 9:35 and we haven't even left. I dial Wang Yan. "Almost ready," Wang Yan whimpers. "I still need to fill up petrol," he excuses himself. How big's the tank of a Q7? That might take forever. "Five more minutes," Wang Yan assures me.

As I wait for him, I ponder what, if anything, to tell Tan Zong. He's told me that he knows the people at the inspection centre. His words have been good before. Without him I'm lost. He must not leave. I compose an SMS, "We're on the 5<sup>th</sup> ring road now." At first I intend to send it once we enter this road, but as the minutes pass, I lie and send the message while still waiting for Wang Yan to return from filling up petrol.

It's 9:50. I'm now waiting in Xiaohuang by the exit, engine ticking over, ready to go. Wang Yan pulls the Q7 next to me. "Just gotta go fill up now." "Wang Yan," I plead with him, "we must go. Now." But to no avail. The Q7 is a new car. It's as dry as a bone. And so Wang Yan pulls out to go to a nearby petrol station to fill up. By 10:05 he returns and we're at last on the way, at which point I send out another SMS to Tan Zong: "Wang Yan still has to fill up petrol. So sorry!" Another lie. Will Mr. Tan wait for us? Heaven forgive me.

The Q7 weaves through the morning traffic. I follow it with ease. The ride should be enjoyable, but I am filled with anxiety. The thirty minute ride is interminable. At the last light before the inspection centre, I hear my phone ring. By the time I pick it up, it's a missed call. The 4<sup>th</sup> one. All from Tan Zong. I call him back and yell across the din, "Just one more minute."

At last we pull into the inspection centre and I see Tan Zong, smiling.

He shunts me to a parking spot. We begin the procedure by filling out a form. They want to see two documents: one is the original Import Permit; the other is the Chassis Number Imprint. This is a curious anachronism. China's Customs and Transport Departments require that the chassis number (17 digits long and based on an international standard) be imprinted from the chassis itself on a piece of paper using red ink. Visual inspection of it is not good enough.. No, it needs to be rubbed off, messily, onto paper. Think of the outdated technique of using a pencil to imprint your credit card's name and number onto a piece of paper in a store, and you get the picture.

When we first wanted to prepare this Chassis Number Imprint some three months ago, Zizhou discovered that the chassis number on Xiaohuang was so faintly engraved that it was nigh impossible to take an imprint from it. What to do? I asked Zizhou if he could engrave the same number in a separate place and then take the imprint of this new location. Sure, that's possible and, we agreed, it's legit. After all, it'd be the same number. Nothing fraudulent about that. Within a day Zizhou had finished the messy job and we had a clearly legible Chassis Number Imprint.

I now handed it, together with the Import Permit, to the officer. He put an official stamp onto the Imprint paper and off we went to the next step which was, guess what?, another emissions test. While we were lined up behind a bunch of taxis, I looked at the test procedure: 24kmh and 50% engine load. We passed just this type of test two weeks earlier in preparation for the full emissions test at the Beijing Automotive Research Centre. In principle, I should have nothing to worry about, but



I couldn't help wonder: Had something that Peter Carmichael had delicately installed and tested broken? Was my luck about to be reversed?

Tan Zong knew the guy in charge of the emissions test and assured me "Don't worry." When Xiaohuang's turn came, he passed the test with flying colours once again. Thank you, my friend.

What's next? Another form to fill out. A RMB200 deposit to pay for I don't know what. "Next the car inspection, and then that's it," Tan Zong puts my mind to rest.

Two officials with tape measures come to where Xiaohuang is parked. They take his measurements, including the seat width. One of the two fellows sneers that such a narrow seat surely doesn't meet China's safety standards. The skinnier of the two retorts, "Just because you couldn't fit in doesn't mean it's not safe. Come off it." How true. Xiaohuang's for me, and no one else.

Tan Zong looks nervous during the inspection, but he relaxes as it proceeds. Done, just about done, I think and begin to relax. Right about then a more senior fellow appears and begins to ask questions. The two junior officials answer his questions and Tan Zong chimes in with assuring smoothness. After several questions, the boss takes off toward another building and Tan Zong bids me to follow him. Inside the building, the boss leads us into a small office and offers us a seat.

"I've never seen a car like this," he declares. "What to do?" he muses. We sit there in silence. My thoughts drift back to this morning's moments of carefree reveries. The weather forecast is great for the weekend. With a bit of luck, I would be taking Xiaohuang out for a first spin. My heart jumped wildly at the thought. Now, five hours later, I need a big dose of luck for the boss to decide in my favour. "What to do?" he repeats again. "I tell you what to do. You need to take this car to the Traffic Bureau and have them take a look. If they say ok, then have them give me a call." "Is there really no other way?" I ask feebly. "I'm afraid not."

My head hangs low when we depart from the building. Outside we bump into Wang Yan who has just managed to get the Q7 through the test. How I envy the owner, and yet I would never exchange my loveable and bright Xiaohuang for the lifeless and black Q7.

Tan Zong has a brief word with Wang Yan, then turns to me, "Wang Yan will take you to the Traffic Bureau, ok?" I nearly fainted, then brace myself, and put my arm around Tan Zong's shoulders, "No, please don't abandon me know. I really need a friend." Tan Zong laughs an embarrassing laugh and agrees, "Ok. Ok."

Tan Zong drives ahead. Even though the sun has found a path through the cloudy sky – normally a sure way to lift my spirit – my eyes are glued to Tan Zong's license plate as he leads the way. I normally revel in the attention that Xiaohuang gets on the road because it gives me a foretaste of the splendour of the journey to come, but not now. In the periphery of my eyes I see camera phones and friendly waves, but I cannot get myself to reciprocate. What I had feared most has come to pass. Xiaohuang, this unique creature, would not be allowed onto China's roads. Why? Because no one has seen someone like him before. Never mind that only a few months ago the first Q7 has arrived in China, or that there was a first for all cars now running on China's roads. But they all look



like cars. Not Xiaohuang. He is the product of an independent mind. And for that he now receives punishment.

I also experience a certain degree of loathing for bureaucracy that is intrinsically designed to reward its minions for saying 'no' rather than to say 'yes'; to punish opportunity and to praise rejection; to frown on risk-taking and to celebrate one-track minds.

By 12:30 we arrive at the Traffic Bureau. It looks like the Death Star to me. We park Xiaohuang in front of it. Within seconds he is thronged by the usual crowd. I pay them no attention. We walk up the Death Star's entrance stairway and to the front desk. "It's about a car inspection," Tan Zong explains. "Will be with you in a minute," comes the official reply. Surprisingly, the man keeps his word. He finishes his business and turns to us, "You must go see Zhao Dejun. On the fourth floor." We find our way to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and ask around. Nobody has seen Zhao Dejun today. At last we find someone who declares that Zhao Dejun is out for lunch. "Back at 14:00," he adds.

So we trudge off to get lunch for ourselves. I try as hard as I can to pay for lunch, but Tan Zong refuses. I tell him he's embarrassing me. After all his help, today and all along since last October, the least he could do is let me pay for lunch. No way, he replies, 尽地主之宜。How concise and elegant Chinese can be. Clumsily translated it sort of means that it's the host's duty to extend hospitality.

After a fruitless struggle with the waitress, Tan Zong succeeds to pay and gets the kitchen to give him in a doggy bag with the bones of the Beijing duck we've just eaten. "What's this for?" I ask. "For my big dog. He's bitten several people before, and I've had to pay thousands in damages. The duck bones will be good for him. At least they'll keep him from eating my customers for a while," Tan Zong muses. Fair enough.

At 14:00, we reappear in Zhao Dejun's office. There is no trace of him. After some searching we find a charitable lady who dials his mobile phone. He'll be back in 45 minutes, comes the reply.

We go back to where Xiaohuang is parked and pull him closer to the Death Star's entrance gate such that Zhao Dejun can take a look at him right upon his return. In the meantime we busy ourselves chasing away onlookers who all but climb into Xiaohuang.

At 14:45 Zhao Dejun arrives. Tan Zong recognises him in his car. He gets out with an assistant and immediately takes a good look at Xiaohuang. He tests all the lights and asks to have a look into the engine bay. He requests his assistant to take pictures from all sides. After a good while, he turns to Tan Zong. "Everything seems to be in order." Might the day end well after all? "But," he continues, "I've never seen a car like this before. I'll have to make a report to the higher authorities." I am shaking with frustration.

"Anyway, let's go upstairs so I can make copies of your documents in order to complete the report," Zhao Dejun explains. Head hanging even lower, I follow him and Tan Zong. After copies are made and some friendly words are exchanged, Zhao Dejun informs us that he'd get me an answer by



the following Monday or Tuesday. We give Zhao Dejun my and Tan Zong's phone number and go downstairs.

So much for taking a ride in Xiaohuang this coming weekend. Success has slipped from my hands within the course of a few hours. What a terrible day. Just when I am thinking this, Tan Zong gets a call. "There's a problem," he says. We turn around and go back up stairs.

"Your car's chassis number is incorrect," is how Zhao Dejun greets us. "What do you mean, it's incorrect?" I ask. "Look for yourself." And he guides me over to a computer terminal. "We've just typed in the number on your Imprint, and the system says it's an incorrect number." I look at the imprint and compare it to my invoice and Import Permit. "S D K L D S R R C 2 0 0 3 1 1 8 2" it says on the invoice, but that's not what I see on the screen; there, in position 9, the "C" is a "0". I look at the Imprint again. There it is a "0" as well. I almost black out, but force myself to regain my composure. "Try a 'C' right here. That's right. In position 9. Replace the '0' with a 'C'," I suggest. "That fore sure won't work," says the operator, "but I'll humour you." Sure enough, the 'C' doesn't work either. The operator tries '0' again, then '1', '2', '3', '4', '5', '6', '7', '8', '9' and 'X'. The X' at last makes it work; the system says 'Correct'.

Tan Zong looks puzzled. Zhao Dejun frowns. "There's no way we can proceed like this. If you don't have a correct chassis number, you cannot get a license plate for this car." "But, but," I stammer, and then, lacking words, shut up. "Look," Zhao Dejun says, "contact your manufacturer. Ask them to tell you why they have used a chassis number that does not follow the chassis number standard. Then let us know."

If I wouldn't be too embarrassed, I'd ask Tan Zong to carry me home, so weak are my legs. "You cocky son of a bitch," I say to myself, as if somehow the morning's hopeful daydreams had brought on this disastrous day as a punishment for over-confidence.

The following twenty four hours, I spend frantically making sense of what is the problem with the chassis number. What becomes clear right away is that Zizhou, the mechanic, made a human error when he newly engraved the chassis number: he simply transcribed it wrongly, turning the correct 'C' into a '0'. When Zizhou learns about this, he's visibly shaken. Over the past three months he's turned into a staunch supporter of my intended journey. Everything he's done he's done with enthusiasm and care. Except for this one thing. I told him not to worried. He looks at me questioningly, waiting for my wrath to descend upon him. When nothing of this sort transpires, his eyes speak a thousand warm words.

That leaves to explain why the Traffic Bureau's computer system declared the correct chassis number to be incorrect. A few hours of internet search reveal the answer. Caterham, Xiaohuang's manufacturer, has followed an international *de jure* standard for chassis number creation called ISO 3779. In accordance with ISO 3779, position 9 (among other positions) of the chassis number is free for manufacturers to choose in whatever way they liked.

But besides 3779, there is a North American *de facto* standard which obliges position 9 to be a check digit which is calculated on the basis of the rest of the digits in the chassis number. Think of



this digit like the 'verification number' on the back of your credit card. While the analogy doesn't hold quite true, according to the North American standard the purpose of position 9 in the chassis number is to verify that the chassis number follows the standard.

To satisfy myself that this is so, I calculate the value of position 9 given the rest of the digits in my chassis number. The calculation yields an 'X'. Bingo! Exactly the value that the Transport Bureau's system had accepted. That means one thing: the Transport Bureau has adopted the North American standard whereas Xiaohuang's chassis number was constructed on the basis of ISO3779. How would I explain all this in Chinese?

By the end of the following day, it has become clear that my runway to freedom has been blocked by three major obstacles. First, a human transcription error was made. This has the consequence that the Customs-verified Chassis Number Imprint document does not match the invoice and Import Permit. Customs needs to be convinced to verify another Imprint (one of the correct chassis number). A human error, yes. But who would believe me, and why?

Second, that very digit that was transcribed wrongly is also the crux of the slight matter of different standards being used: ISO 3779 *de jure* versus North American *de facto*. The Transport Department needs to be convinced that, what? That we're both right. I don't relish the thought.

Third, and most worryingly, the overall question of whether Xiaohuang would be let on the road at all hangs in the balance. Who are the higher authorities that will make the decision? More accurately, who is the one person who will decide Xiaohuang's fate? And what mood will he be in when eventually he needs to decide? For all I know, the decision might end up with Hu Jintao, China's president. And the day he needs to decide will be, in all likelihood, the day America invades Iran or, with a bit of bad luck, Taiwan declares independence.