

An Intersection of Time

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In the study of navigation, great circles divide the earth into two equal halves and are about 24,854 miles in length along meridians. Great circles represent the shortest distance between two points on Earth, as the bird flies. My flight was less direct and without symmetry; I came by jet.

I am in China, Nanjing, the southern capital, or as it is also called in the summer, one of the furnaces. Unlike the northern capital, Beijing, with over twenty-one million people, the southern capital is slightly more relaxed, you might say, with eight-and-a-half million, or thereabouts.

I stand at the broad intersection of Zhongshan and Guangzhou Roads, waiting for the light to change. Then I will make my way, walking on worn paving stones and sidewalks, passing alleyways, shifting right and left to stay on course. I will pass magazine stands plastered with tabloids wrapped in cellophane: *Ray li*, *Grazia*, and *Sports Illustrated China*; move to avoid repairmen who drill concrete, who make openings, crevices, asphalt “fistulas” that seem to appear one day and are gone the next; pass food vendors who attempt to reclaim the air from the malodorous with their sweet smells of *bāo* and *chá yè dàn*; and pass mothers carrying babies, bandaged, just released from Gulou Hospital, the hospital near the southern gate of Nanjing University where I teach. I will pass all of this, and much more, that is, once I cross the street.

In 98-degree heat and the 85 seconds I wait for the light to change, I strategically place myself in the middle of a crowd as they prepare to walk. I am told it is best to

cross the street with other pedestrians; you improve your chances of reaching the other side in their company. They don't seem to mind; I guess there is comfort in numbers. A recorded woman's voice is heard from a gray speaker attached to the post above my head: “*Xiàn zài shì hóng dēng*” (Now the light is red), but then, try as hard as I might, I lose the rest of her sentence. She seems to offer good advice about crossing, but I may be the only one at the intersection who is listening. Perhaps they don't or can't because of the competition for air space, the prolonged blare of horns, the thrashing sounds of motors, metallica, and metallico. Or maybe her voice is there to warn the blind and impaired and those like me who may be looking for some reassurance in a human voice, even if I do not understand all of her words.

I must cross four vehicular lanes and two more reserved for bikes to reach the other side. It is not the four lanes flooded with cars that worries me (although, I keep a watchful eye); it is the two broad lanes reserved for bicyclists and bikers, the ubiquitous e-bikes with lithium and lead batteries, mopeds and scooters that sneak up on you, that terrorize in silence, and their more aggressive motorized versions: gas motorcycles, 250cc choppers—the maximum cc allowed on many streets in China. The electric, battery, and combustibles join forces to present a clear and present danger to me and my pedestrian friends. Granted, they may not be your Harley “Hog,” but their sheer number make up for what they lack in size. Old, young, man, woman, they ride, wearing cotton masks to filter air or faceguards, which appear to be a lighter version of what a welder



might wear for protection. And still, they are helmetless and seemingly without expression, otherworldly. Like terracotta warriors on wheels, they dart with precision, weave in and out of narrow spaces, gutters, sidewalks, and any other means devisable for beating the traffic, maintaining place, edging and skirting others. Inexplicably, to me, they suddenly redefine the intersection and drive diagonally into the cross hairs of oncoming automobiles and buses. They are unconcerned; they are not afraid; and they have little to no regard for others on wheels, and “walkabouts” like me, well, we are a nuisance.

The two-wheeled bicycles and three-wheeled carts called *sanlunche* are equally persistent and numerous, but less threatening to those of us on feet; they seem unfazed by motorized vehicles. These bicyclists are in command of their chosen green mode of transportation, upright

and steady. Still, they ride in the wake of engine exhaust and New Age vehicles. I doubt they ride their pedal bikes because of environmental concerns or some deep-seated romantic longing for the nineteenth century. It strikes me that they might ride their simple bikes because they have no choice. And though they pedal with dignity, it must be hard to keep up, to keep pace, to move forward. I do not know what to make of it, the strain of navigation, the physical daily struggle it must take to get to work, or even to play, here, in megalopolis China.

Standing here, right now, at this intersection, I am also reminded of my privilege, and the ease and comfort of small town life, USA.

And I know I am far, very far from the first of our kind to be troubled at city crosswalks and maddening intersections. We all have been here, vulnerable and at risk. And so



there’s little surprise that researchers at Chinese schools of traffic and transportation, of automation, of mechanical and vehicular engineering publish studies on “traffic flow diffusion” with titles such as: “Bicycle and Pedestrian Arrival and Departure Characteristics at Signalized Intersections”; and this one, the “Study of Traffic Conflict Between Right-turn Vehicles and Non-motorized Traffic.” These earnest researchers use statistical methods to investigate traffic; they calibrate “bicycle saturation flow” and “pedestrian velocity,” and they conclude things like the “bicycle capacity has a negative linear correlation with the width of the approach.” I concur. It does, you bet it does. The intersection appears, to me, to be working its way to a definition of chaos, and I am doubtful that statistical methods and research alone will solve the problem and make sense of this confusion.

City management inspectors (police), I guess, in blue shirts and uniforms stand near the intersections, chatting with more of their kind, smoking cigarettes, and seemingly oblivious to the pending chaos that is taking or breaking shape here. What do they know that I don’t?

The light is about to change. So I step forward, off the curb, but I’m forced back because of one of those “right-turning vehicles.” Now, in conflict, I feel like “Ratso” Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy*; I want to silence horns, slap the hood of that car, as well as a database of vehicular research, and yell, “I’m walking here, I’m walking here!”

There may be method to this madness, but in the meantime, as pedestrians, we wait.

When I was a boy, my dad took me to Ace Speedway, Alamance County, North



Carolina. Today, Ace Speedway is considered a premiere racing facility, a paved oval, 4/10ths of a mile, with 12-degree banks. It is viewed as one of the best NASCAR short tracks in the USA. Back then, it was a dirt track, 1/3 of a mile of hard Carolina red clay. The race was loud and intense while cars shaved layer after layer of dust off the track, kicking it thick into the air. I sat between my mother and father on rickety wooden bleachers. She, seemingly tortured by the event with her hands cupped over her ears the whole night, and he, taking in the race as if it were orchestral, watching the race as if it were a miracle, that something beautiful was taking place before his eyes. How could that be? How could he find music in all that noise? How could he find beauty in the spectacle of drivers dangerously trapped

in a circle, desperate to get ahead of one another? Clearly, he knew something that I didn't.

“*Nǚshì men, xiānshēng men*” (ladies and gentlemen), a recorded woman’s voice announced each of the stops on the bullet train from Nanjing to Shanghai.

Once there, I saw the [Acrobatic Circus perform ERA: Intersection of Time](#), a remarkable production of light design and live music, gymnastics, juggling, and aerial arts. The last act, the grand finale, is called “Ball of Death.” The event takes place in a large globular metal cage, a great circle, a sort of three-dimensional ancient Greek theater acting space with fourteen latitudinal and three longitudinal lines of reinforcing metal



bars. With only one entrance, like the alien spaceship ramp in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, this “Ball of Death” swallowed not one or two but three, four, and then five motorcycles. These clean 250ccs entered the cage with centripetal force. All charged up like electrons around an atom, each pursued his own coordinates, each his own great circle, while crisscrossing, and miraculously missing one, the other, and then another. With the addition of each new motorcycle to the cage, the audience became more energized and consumed by the spectacle. We expressed shock and fear, and though we may not have wanted to admit this to ourselves, we were asking for more, more motorcycles, more orbits, more unbound energy—we wanted more—sacrifices. *Nǚshì men, xiānshēng men*, in a life that must compete day after day for

just a little space at the intersection, where better to find release, a catharsis, than in a performance of “Ball of Death.”

At the broad intersection of Zhongshan and Guangzhou Roads, near Nanjing University, there is more, much more. But to ask, “Where (or who) are the sacrifices?” may be a question best left unspoken. Here, they ride on all kinds—Flying Pigeons, Phoenix, Giants, bikes scraped together and custom made, Jin cheng, Ya di, Lifan, and all the imported models that are allowed. Many businesses depend on these bikes as the most effective means for transporting supplies down city streets jammed with traffic. They all ride, it seems, without regulation but clearly with the spirit of Archimedes by their side. They deliver and retrieve, redefine the center of mass, of gravity, loaded down with every conceivable shape and

type of object: building materials, discarded appliances and new ones, overstuffed bags, Styrofoam and plastics, laundry, electronics, Pizza Hut and KFC, and boxes strapped and stacked five high and three wide, they all ride. At the end of the work day, they are, it seems, slightly more relaxed, but no less astonishing. They return often with two, three, and sometimes four people on one bike—an infant tucked behind the front leg shield of a scooter, a child clinging to the back of his father and between the legs of his mother. They ride backwards, side-saddle, text, talk, crochet, play video games, and even sleep as the driver works the city streets. And they do. They work it. They all do. They ride the currents of crowded streets as if they have special vision. They detect the most subtle change in traffic to fill a gap. And as I have come to understand the first principle of navigating, riding, or walking the streets of China, if you are the “first to fill a gap on a particular piece of tarmac, then that gap is rightfully yours.”

Still (and I can hear my father agree) a “piece of tarmac” is a harsh reality, and “gaps” are fleeting. Or to borrow a phrase from the poem, “Hard Roads in Shu,” by Li Po (701–762), the brilliant Chinese Taoist poet, “Such traveling is harder than scaling the blue sky.” As far as I can tell, there is little “road rage” in China, in Nanjing. Instead, unrattled by the masses, there is a quiet persistence, or perhaps, it’s a resignation, a temperament and a sentiment, a spirit of humanity that is deeply felt but contained within. And yet, it is busy, so very busy!

Writing 1300 hundred years ago, Li Po’s “hard roads” were the formidable trails of the Green Clay and Great White Mountains, where the highest crag is “barely a foot above heaven,” and through the dangerous Dagger-

Tower Pass to fear “ravenous tigers” and “venomous reptiles.” “With their teeth and fangs ready / to cut people down like hemp.” “With all this danger upon danger,” he asks, “why do people come here who live at a safe distance?” This is more than a reasonable question, even if you weren’t a Taoist. Why struggle when you do not have to? Why put up with the hardship of navigating unfriendly terrain and feelings of alienation? But, then, again, what is a “safe distance?” What does that mean? Is it something that we can study and know like “traffic flow diffusion?” Is it something we can calibrate or record like “bicycle saturation” and “pedestrian velocity?” If I study the mountain from afar, at a “safe distance,” I will be inclined to study its profile, and I will learn much about its relational composition with the elements around it. If I study the mountain from within, I will move from composition to storyboarding, taking my own pictures to help create a story.

At the intersection of Zhongshan and Guangzhou Roads, most have no choice but to help create the story. And what a story it is, old and new, rich and poor, brilliant and confusing.

Xiàn zài shì hóng dēng. The light is red, and traveling is hard, and while Li Po might choose comfort and safety over the hardship of travel, he does not deny the traveler a chance at “scaling the blue” sky. Indeed, they are doing it here in the gaps of Zhongshan and Guangzhou, and in the acrobatic imagination, a moving human pyramid, a ballet of bikes at the intersection of time.

The light at the intersection of Zhongshan and Guangzhou is now green, and the woman’s voice in the gray box is silent. It is time for me to walk. Or maybe, it is time for me to mount and ride. ❀

image info

