

By MEIYIN YAP

BEIJING—In a city of 10 million Chinese, taking the public bus requires both mental and physical preparation. If possible, try to avoid the peak hours which are 6:30 a.m. until 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. According to a recent survey in Beijing, traffic jams are common in more than 80 street crossings and sections. With bicycles, buses, tractors, taxis and the occasional horse-cart jockeying for space, one wonders if the word "chaos" was invented in China along with the printing press, gunpowder, paper and the compass. Sometimes, more than 200 vehicles may be backed up for about 1.5 kilometres.

Before attempting to "bus it" in Beijing, make sure that you: (1) are carrying as little as possible since handbags, knapsacks and the like have a nasty habit of getting caught outside the door when it slams shut, (2) have your bus fare handy—often passengers are packed so tightly that your arms are wedged to the sides of your body—definitely no room to reach for one's purse or wallet. Having observed these two points, you are now ready for the bus stop.

Beijing buses have a passenger capacity of 200 but somehow Beijingers manage to cram in over 300 people . . . economizing every little corner of space and even breathing room. There are 3 entrance/exit doors to each bus—they gave up trying to get people to enter and exit through different doors. A ticket collector is stationed at the first door and last door of the bus. Depending on conditions, the ticket counter often serves as a seat for little tots who would otherwise be crushed in the crowd. On some routes, i.e. the infamous 332 that even the most seasoned commuter dreads, a third ticket collector is stationed at the middle door. Aside from selling tickets, the "middle-man" serves as a "crammer"—making sure most parts of the passengers are inside by giving helpful shoves before boarding himself/herself.

As the bus slows down, try and get near a door—jogging lightly to maintain your position as the bus rolls to a stop. Never stand in front of the door. Would-be passengers have been knocked off their feet as people literally jump off the bus. This phenomenon only occurs when passengers begin to board before all the rest have exited. If you're a little rusty on your elbowing technique, try to board from the side of the door as the crowd surges forward. This is an extremely important tactic—most attempts from the front result in being "airborne" as the momentum of the crush lifts you off your feet. Beware of your extraneous body parts if you're one of the last boarders—bus doors have been known to catch more than just bags and jackets in their rubber grasp.

After boarding the bus, the sense of competition slackens noticeably. Your immediate concern is to worm your way up the steps and away from the doors. Everyone seems to tackle this task amicably—discussing how they should squeeze past each other to trade positions. This weight-reducing ritual begins when the passenger looming above you asks, "Xia che ma?" (translated, "Getting off?"). If you aren't getting off, he/she will begin to squeeze down the steps while you try to go up. This maneuver is accompanied by many sympathetic groans as surrounding passengers sway about in the



mutuality that seems to say, "We're all in it together."

Most passengers are conscientious enough to squeeze their way to buy a ticket or impose on a fellow-commuter to purchase it. Given the crowded conditions, some try to avoid buying a ticket by blending with the exiting crowd. Woe to the scrapper that is caught by a sharp-tongued ticket collector! With the characteristic curiosity of the Chinese, the whole busload of passengers will virtually lean forward as one to appreciate the art of the ticket collector's tongue-lashing. Passers-by will stop and at times, the driver will shut off the engine and wait until the fracas is over before continuing the route. This is undoubtedly one of the many causes that gives Beijing buses a 15 minute-behind-schedule reputation. In one incident, an over-zealous ticket collector was left behind chastising the culprit as the bus drove away.

Bussing it in Beijing—for the adventurous or the foolhardy? "This is nothing compared to Shanghai—over there, you really have to know the technique!" exclaims one six-foot tall foreigner as he elbows his diminutive competitors aside at the stop in front of Beijing Hotel. A la Chinese style, he grabs the inside handrail of the door tenaciously while the exiting crowd lifts his off the ground at a 45 degree angle. With lots of pushing and shoving, he disappears into the mass of people on the bus. A black bag caught outside the door seems to wiggle a frantic good-bye as the bus moves off. Its owner has forgotten the first rule.

Bussing it in Beijing: Xia che ma?

remaining space to accommodate the two of you.

When all possible space-swapping has been made, passengers may strike up informal conversations as they await the ordeal of the next stop. Humour plays an important role in order to bear the cramped conditions. Often, passengers will laugh at the ticket collector's shouts over the intercom as he/she tries to direct the flow of passengers. "Come along, everybody squeeze bit more . . . I can almost get the door closed now."—"Comrade, please stick your head over this way or I'll clip it when I shut the door."

The pricing method of bus tickets is based on the distance you travel. The cheapest fare starts at 5 fen (2.5 cents Canadian), which normally covers the first two stops. The prices then go to 7 fen, 10 fen, 15 fen, etc. To ride the length of a route costs 30 fen (15 cents Canadian). For the regular commuter, a bus pass can be obtained at the beginning of the month for 4 yuan (two dollars).

There's no rush to purchase a ticket as soon as you board. When the ticket collector has finished directing the passengers, he/she will switch on the inner-intercom system and utter in a sing-song chant—"Mei piao, mai piao—Xia che tongzhi, qing da kai piao, xue hao xia che zunbei." This standard phrase means, "No ticket, buy ticket—Exiting comrades, please show your ticket, make your exiting preparations." If you aren't close enough to buy your own ticket, the ticket collector may ask a "comrade" to pass the fare over to him/her. This kind of cooperation creates a feeling of



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