

PRESTIGE ON WHEELS: LIFE ASPIRATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSPORTATION PLANNING IN BEIJING

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ABSTRACT

One day in Beijing provides a jarring snapshot of motorization issues in China. Beijing is considered the most motorized city in China, and the consequent air pollution and congestion are stark. However, despite worsening conditions and rising prices, owning a car is often portrayed as a natural expectation, or even requirement, for rising middle class Chinese. Prior studies suggest that the desire for cars is a values-based perception, influenced by desires for social status and materialistic aspirations, rather than an instrumental desire. Through semi-structured interviews, this study explores the life aspirations and values of post-80's generation white collar workers, and how important car ownership is to them. While all interviewees express desire to own a car at some point, the motivations for doing so were quite different. Men felt a significant pressure from women and society to 'provide', which includes having a car. Women all saw having a car as necessary, but not because of prestige or status. Overall, the assumption by these rising middle class Beijingers is that owning a car is an expectation rather than a luxury. Strong value associations with driving already exist, independent of driving experience, suggesting the role of advertising and peer conformity. Almost no 'rational thinking' weighing mobility options occurred, but thinking was highly emotionally coded.

Keywords: China, Beijing, motorization, transportation planning, values, life aspirations, rising middle class, post-80's generation, car ownership

INTRODUCTION

Since Beijing reached its first million vehicles in 1997, the pace of growth in motorized vehicles has exploded. By 2011 counts of Beijing-registered vehicles had surpassed 5

million,¹ with an additional unknown number of unregistered, non-local, and two-wheeled vehicles. Yet the consequences of this massive motorization are already severe, from crushing traffic to worsening air quality. Creutzig and He (2008) estimate that air pollution and congestion now account for a staggering 7-15% of Beijing's annual GDP in costs to health and time, among other factors.² These days the city's second ring road is colloquially known as the '2nd ring parking lot', and more and more pedestrians can be seen donning filter masks to fight off smog.

While the government has supported the growth of the car industry in China as a 'pillar industry' of the national economy,³ there is now a sense that a line has been crossed. Beginning with removing high-emission polluting vehicles from Beijing roads, to the Olympic driving restriction policies by license plate number, now Beijing has come out with even stricter policies. Specifically, fuel is taxed, requirements for a license are strict, new car registrations are capped each month and decided by lottery, and residents are restricted from even entering the lottery until they have paid Beijing taxes for at least five years.⁴

The issue here is that while policies are tightening up to disincentivize and restrict car ownership, at the same time China has emerged as the single largest car market in the world as demand for vehicles continues to swell unabated. In fact, pressure on men in particular to buy a car before getting married is arguably increasing as incomes rise and the 'cost' of cars is more affordable.

To provide some context, the rising demand for cars is considered to be connected with the 'rise of materialism' witnessed in affluent urban China today. As Podoshen et al. (2010) summarize: while urban Chinese young people in the 1980's (children of the Cultural Revolution generation) often searched for life's meaning, contemporary youth in urban China (the post-1980's generation) are more success-oriented and openly seek the good life.^{5 6} As Li (1998) puts it: "Chinese consumers, who used to perceive consumption as a manifestation of decadent bourgeois influences, are now surrounded by an increasing abundance of consumer goods and services, as well as persuasive commercial messages and activities".⁷ China has undergone a massive shift in values, or what Stanley Rosen calls 'The Victory of Materialism':

"value", in a material sense, has become a key indicator of worth...Surveys, academic and media reports, and interviews all concur on the increasing roles that money and a moneyed lifestyle play in urban Chinese aspirations.⁸

In terms of urban planning, this has major implications for the urban metabolism in China, and its increasing ecological impact; specifically in terms of transportation, the focus on 'material value' manifests directly as an obsession with cars. As Yang and Zengras and Wu et

¹ Xinhua (2012). "Beijing car ownership exceeds 5 million". China Daily. 2012-17-2.
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-02/17/content_14628019.htm>

² Creutzig, F. & He, D. (2008), Climate change mitigation and co-benefits of feasible transport, Transportation Research Part D, pp.1.

³ Lin Gan (2002), "Globalization of the Auto Industry in China: dynamics and barriers in greening of the road transportation". Energy Policy, Vol. 31 (6), pp.537-551.

⁴ Policymeasures.com (2012). Beijing New Car Licence Registration System. Available at www.policymeasures.com/measures/detail/beijing-new-car-licence-registration-system

⁵ Luo Xu (2002), Searching for Life's Meaning. Changes and Tensions in the Worldviews of Chinese Youth in the 1980s. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

⁶ Podoshen, J., Lu Li, and Zhang Junfeng (2010). Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption in China. International Journal of Consumer Studies, No. 35, pp.17-25

⁷ Li, C. (1998), China: The Consumer Revolution, Wiley, Singapore.

⁸ Rosen, S. (2004), The Victory of Materialism: Aspirations to Join China's Urban Moneyed Classes and the Commercialization of Education, The China Journal, No. 51, pp.27-51.

al. argue, owning a car is considered a symbolic acquisition on the path of modernity, middle class status, and prestige.^{9 10} The extent of this can be glimpsed in young Beijinger Ma Nuo's infamous quip on national television: "I would rather cry in a BMW than be happy on a bicycle". Social commentator Chen Zhigang further argues that "Her opinion resonates with youth: they have grown up in a society that is quickly accumulating material wealth. They are snobbish. They worship money, cars and houses, because the highly developing economy has made them do so."¹¹

While Chen may be a touch derisive, if his accusation that the rising middle class 'worships cars' holds true, this poses a serious challenge for planning a sustainable Beijing. In fact, it is already surprising that young Beijingers apparently would fantasize about owning a car in this city, when driving conditions (let alone parking!) are so frustrating and unpleasant, and when the costs of maintaining a car are so high. Furthermore, research in Shanghai, currently the city with China's most stringent control of car licenses, shows that when costs for local cars get too high, up to 34% of owners will acquire their vehicles 'elsewhere' and risk reprimand.¹² In other words, where there is a will, there is a way – so the next step should be investigating exactly what the characteristics of this 'will' are.

Using a qualitative approach, this research investigates just how pervasive, and how deep, aspirations to own a car in Beijing's rising middle class are. The key questions addressed are:

- i. How do post-80's aspiring middle class Beijingers want to live their lives? What values motivate these aspirations?
- ii. How does mobility feature in this aspiration: how important is car ownership, and what role does 'symbolic utility' play (versus pragmatic or economic considerations, etc.)?
- iii. How significant is gender in affecting values and aspirations?
- iv. Lastly, how can Beijing planners respond to these aspirations?

'Aspiring middle class' is in this instance defined as those Beijingers employed in white collar jobs, typically with good education and strong upward mobility. Furthermore, 'Beijinger' is used loosely to describe anyone living and working in Beijing city, so not necessarily officially-registered, or cultural 'Beijingers'.

LITERATURE

Affect and social perceptions are widely studied for their role in peoples' decision-making, including in the field of transportation.¹³ Key findings and methodologies from studies in Europe and China are summarized below, indicating the gaps this project seeks to fill. Goodwin and Lyons (2010) summarize 300 'public attitude' studies conducted in the UK over the last 30 years, and conclude with "what may now perhaps be taken as a prevailing view among transport professionals: ... that attitudes to transport must also be rooted in deeper values and aspirations of how people want to lead their lives".¹⁴ In their broad analysis of

⁹ Yang Chen and Christopher Zegras (2010). The Dynamics of Metropolitan Motorization under Rapid Development: the Beijing Case. <<http://intranet.imet.gr/Portals/0/UsefulDocuments/documents/03085.pdf>>

¹⁰ Wu, G., T. Yamamoto, R. Kitamura. (1999). "Vehicle Ownership Model That Incorporates the Causal Structure Underlying Attitudes Toward Vehicle Ownership. *Transportation Research Record*, Vol. 1676 / 1999, pp. 61-67

¹¹ Lin Qi (2010). The Dating Game by Jiangsu TV. *China Daily*. 24/04/2010

¹² Chen, X. & Zhao, J (2012), Car License Auction Policy in Shanghai and its Public Acceptance, UBC Engineering, Master's report, pp.21.

¹³ Carr, K. (2008). Qualitative Research to Assess Interest in Public Transportation for Work Commute. *Journal of Public Transportation*, Vol. 11, No.1.

¹⁴ Goodwin Phil and Glenn Lyons (2010). Public Attitudes to Transport: Interpreting the evidence. *Transportation*

hundreds of qualitative studies, Goodwin and Lyons find the lack of study on deeper values and life aspirations to be the key weakness, and therefore the focus of future research.

Linda Steg's investigative survey (2005) of commuters in the Netherlands is an important study for establishing the emotional associations with driving beyond utilitarian use.¹⁵ Through an inductive study, Steg established that driving is often associated with feelings of power, freedom, and arousal. Subsequently she explored the role of these affective motives in explaining car use. This second study found that affective motivations (i.e. family expectations, social comparison, stress, etc.) explained 28% of variation in car usage. This is a groundbreaking study for providing an empirical basis for the role of emotional associations with decisions to drive. Since Steg's early studies, similar studies have been conducted, such as by psychologists Lopez-Saez and Lois (2009) in Spain,¹⁶ and transportation researchers Beirão and Cabral (2007) in Portugal.¹⁷ A similar study has even been conducted in China, which will be discussed shortly. However, a shortfall of all these studies is that they focus solely on drivers. Findings are therefore not directly applicable to deterring future drivers. Furthermore, each study uses a survey format to measure affective factors – yet surveys are unable to investigate the depth and strength of given factors, which is an important consideration.

Complementing these studies, two psychologists in the UK, Gardner and Abraham (2006), used semi-structured interviews and grounded theory to explore why commuters choose to drive.¹⁸ They discover that decisions to drive versus use transit are emotionally-coded, with positive associations to cars, and negative associations to transit. As such, the actual costs of driving are universally underestimated, while the perception of transit is typically much more negative. The drawbacks of driving are rationalized away, while the benefits of transit are not thoroughly considered. One major value that also emerges is the need for control, which underpins many responses about driving. Gardner and Abraham provide a good example of a qualitative, inductive study in transportation issues. However, like Steg's study, they also focus only on drivers, and do not sample non-drivers. One significant finding, though, is that new drivers have stronger positive associations with driving, indicating that once that step has been made, it is hard to undo.

There is also extensive research on public attitudes towards transportation in China, which typically relies on extensive survey methodologies. For instance Wang et al. (2011) surveyed drivers in Beijing on their attitude towards driving restriction policies during and since the Olympics.¹⁹ Similarly, Yi and Zhang (2010) surveyed drivers in Beijing on their attitudes towards rising fuel prices, finding that car dependency tends to quickly set in, resulting in higher economic flexibility to such price hikes.²⁰ Back in 1999 Wu et al. surveyed attitudes behind vehicle ownership in Xi'an City, finding that 'symbolic utility' (social prestige) was an important factor to car owners.²¹ However, across all of these studies, survey responses

Planning and Technology, 33:1, p16.

¹⁵ Steg, L. (2005) Car use: lust and must. Instrumental, symbolic and affective motives for car use. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, No. 39 (2-3): p. 147-162.

¹⁶ Lois, D. & M. Lopez-Saez (2009). The relationship between instrumental, symbolic and affective factors and predictors of car use: A structural equation modeling approach. *Transportation Research Part A*, No. 43, 730-99

¹⁷ Beirão, G. & J.A. Cabral (2007). Understanding attitudes towards public transport and private car: A qualitative study, *Transport Policy*, Vol. 14, Issue 6, pp. 478-489

¹⁸ Gardner, B. & C. Abraham (2007). What drives car use? A grounded theory analysis of commuters' reasoning for driving, *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behavior*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 187-200

¹⁹ Wang Juan, Sun Yan, Zhao Fangfang (2011). Study on Travel Characteristics of Private Car Owners in Beijing. *Traffic Engineering*, No. 21.

²⁰ Yi Ru & Zhang Shiqiu (2010), Effect of Increase in Price of Oil in Behavior of Private Car Owners in Beijing, *Chinese Journal of Population, Resources and Environment*, Vol. 8, No. 1.

²¹ Wu, G., T. Yamamoto, R. Kitamura. 1999. Vehicle Ownership Model That Incorporates the Causal Structure Underlying Attitudes Toward Vehicle Ownership. *Transportation Research Record*, Vol. 1676 / 1999, pp. 61-67

were used, curtailing in-depth understanding of the factors at play, even though affective factors were found to be significant. Furthermore, these studies all exclusively survey car owners and drivers, which again limits the applicability of results to preventing future drivers. Most recently, more directly values-oriented studies have also emerged in China. For instance, Zhu et al. (2012) examine the perceptions and aspirations of Chinese college students regarding car ownership.²² They use students in an effort to study China's rising middle class, who are most likely to purchase cars in the near future. Through surveys, Zhu et al. explore the importance of "instrumental", "symbolic" and "affective" valuation of cars, and how they relate to aspirations to own a vehicle. They find that psychosocial factors, such as associating cars with freedom, control, and success, are more statistically significant than instrumental factors in respondent likelihood to want a car. While Zhu et al.'s findings are significant, they are investigative and preliminary. Their 5-point Likert scale responses fail to adequately measure the depth and nuance of respondents' aspirations, especially since in their analysis Zhu et al. group responses into binary 'positive' and 'negative' response categories. It could be that survey respondents recognize certain associations, and would like to own a car if possible (65% said they would), but are in fact not actively pursuing this goal, or have other stronger motivations. The qualitative difference here can be extremely significant for crafting policy strategies.

Looking at existing transportation literature, there is a strong foundation and need for future research into values and aspirations behind transportation choices. Studies in Europe and China alike indicate the importance of the 'symbolic' and 'affective' utility of private vehicles. However most studies focus solely on existing drivers, which is of limited use for policy to deter new drivers. Zhu et al.'s study does survey non-drivers, providing strong preliminary results. Yet as an initial study, results lack specificity and subtlety; more in-depth study of the nature and strength of respondent aspirations is still needed.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were set up with young Beijingers (born in the 1980s) on a convenience basis, so where the author and interviewee were already acquainted, an appropriate time or lunch break was available, and the interviewee was comfortable with the study. Each interview took between one and two hours, usually with informal chatting and discussion before and after also. Interviews focus on eight key aspects, which were expanded and honed as more interviews were conducted:

1. *Satisfaction*: Interviewees are asked what aspects of their life they are satisfied with, and which they are not. They typically talk about their work situations, and are prompted to also talk about their overall lifestyle, living situation, etc. Richins and Dawson hypothesize that materialistic people will be less satisfied, as they are constantly working towards having more.²³ Interviewees are not asked specifically materialistic questions, however.

2. *Success*: What is a successful person, what is success to you at work, or in life in general?

²² Zhu, Charles, Zhu Yiliang, Lu Rongzhu, He Ren, Xia Zhaoren (2012), Perceptions and aspirations for car ownership among Chinese students attending two universities in the Yangtze Delta, China, *Journal of Transport Geography*, in press

²³ Richins, Marsha L. and Scott Dawson (1992), A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and Its Measurement: Scale Development and Validation, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19 (December), 307

3. *Goals*: What are they actively striving towards? Where do they spend they time/money now?
4. *Ideals*: Dream job & lifestyle in ten years – do you want to be a manager, or a parent?
5. *Value*: Where does your value come from? This aspect was not initially included, but came up frequently in initial interviews. Specifically, people felt that they could ‘realize their self-value through working hard’, or ‘starting my own company’, which was an unexpected response.
6. *Centrality*: What factors go into making important decisions, i.e. finding a house, transportation, work, etc.?
7. *Happiness*: Do you feel happy now? Where does happiness come from; what is it? This is similar to the question about life satisfaction.
8. *Transportation*: How do you get around Beijing, what are the best/worst things about mobility in the city? Could you envision a car-free future for yourself?

- i. Interview Format and Technique

Questions help gauge what respondent values are based on what they say, what they *don't* say, and how they say it. For instance, if an interviewee responds to almost all of the questions with answers relating to work, doing good work, and pursuing opportunities, it says a lot that relationships, family, stability and enjoying life do not come up at all. Additionally, the eight aspects overlap enough that similar topics are covered from different angles multiple times. This kind of cyclical questioning approach is effective at triangulating what interviewees really think, through covering the same topic from different angles, rather than relying on a response to a certain question alone.²⁴ Furthermore, it is the qualitative differences in response that are studied, not just the articulated response. Two interviewees can respond the same way to one question, but one may be decisive and thought-through, whereas the other responds seemingly out of necessity. This indicates a significant qualitative difference in response, where one respondent is comfortable with the thought process, whereas the other clearly does not think about such things often, if at all. These details are lost in transcription, so this research relies heavily on interviewer notes and post-interview memos to recall how interviewees communicated non-verbally as much as on paper.

It is important to note that through question design and interview technique, biased responding is avoided as much as possible by cultivating a non-judgmental interview space. The questions are notably open-ended, so interviewees respond as they would like, and overt value preferences are avoided. For instance, until a respondent makes their desires regarding car ownership clear, no questions around the pros and cons of cars will be asked. In terms of values, no questions are asked that would imply the respondent's values are ‘bad’. Similarly, interviewees are affirmed as they respond, to avoid any sense of judgment of their values and aspirations. For instance, if an interviewee aspires to own a car, an inappropriate response would be: “cars are expensive and bad for the environment! Why do you want to own one?” A less value-laden question would be “owning a car can be expensive: can you tell me what makes it ‘worth it’ to you?” Being appropriate also extends to respecting cultural boundaries – some interviewees might not be comfortable expressing opinions about politics, personal income, or some other topic. This research avoids typically sensitive issues, particularly politics and real income, but any further issues must be intuited

²⁴ Flick, Uwe (2009). Introduction to Qualitative Research. Sage Publishers Ltd.

and respected within each interview. In interviews conducted so far, monthly income often is not specifically provided, but can sometimes be inferred. No other sensitive issues were encountered though.

ii. Interviewee Characteristics

Interviews were conducted in two phases, the first by phone and the second in person. Phase one included 6 interviewees, 2 men and 4 women between 25 and 27 years old. Phase two was another six interviews, again 4 women and 2 men, between 22 and 32 years old. An additional 6 interviews were conducted in rural China, and several preliminary discussions were conducted, which will not be included in this analysis, but do inform the researcher's knowledge.

Men:

Four men were interviewed, aged 24, 25, 26, and 32. They work in marketing, journalism, lab research, and management, respectively, all with good positions and potential for further upward mobility. The two older men were both married, while the younger remain single. In terms of family background, three of the men come from 'good families' in their hometowns (such as officials, teachers, or business owners), while the journalist's parents continue to farm in their rural village. All the men are highly educated, all with Bachelor's or Master's, even approaching PhD; one had even worked abroad in Japan for some time.

Women:

Eight women were interviewed, aged 22, 24, 25, 25, 26, 26, 27, and 28. All of the women work in marketing or administration, with one freelance interpreter. Most of the women had higher education, at Master's level -- one 25 year old had even done her Master's in the US - although one woman had only finished high school and some further education, and another a technical diploma. The family background for these women was also quite impressive, from successful businessmen, to doctors, teachers, and government officials, which are all 'above average'. Only the two women without Master's degrees came from more 'average' families. Only one woman is already married, while two others look to be married soon.

RESULTS

While each interview was unique, several themes emerged consistently across them all. By dividing the interviews into two phases, it was possible to see these themes emerge, and then be continually reinforced by each interviewee independently. These will be discussed across the eight aspects, divided between men and women where applicable:

a. Satisfaction

Although interviewees identified things they are working towards, or areas of their lives they would like to change, all but one affirmed that they were satisfied with their current situation. Richins and Dawson expect persons with materialistic values (i.e. who are motivated by external factors such as image, perception by others, and prestige) to be generally unsatisfied with their lives, as they always seek to accrue more. While most interviewees *were* seeking to accrue more material possessions, they generally felt satisfied with their lives.

The one exception is a journalist who finds his work meaningful and interesting, but sorely underpaid. This is a significant problem, as he feels he cannot find a wife without a decent salary (and potentially car, but he does not think this is realistic for him). Lacking both a good salary and a wife, he feels dissatisfied!

It is interesting that other single interviewees felt satisfied despite lacking prospects for starting their own family. When pressed, two interviewees responded by saying 'I hope that in working hard and starting my own company, I also encounter a suitable partner to make a family with!' This might indicate that other values, such as being successful at business, being independent, and buying a house, are actually more important goals than having a family, as they are not willing to invest time or effort in finding a partner. At this point it is difficult to draw this conclusion though, as these interviewees are still relatively young.

b. Success

Perceptions of what is successful varied highly across each interview, but two basic categories emerged, although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first is what I call the 'White Collar Lifestyle' aspiration advertised widely in China today: a successful business, personal car, apartment, independence, financial security/self-confidence, and a family tacked on as well. The second main category is the 'Family and Meaning' category, which can be considered more 'traditional', and emphasizes 'success' through a healthy family, interesting work, and having meaning in one's life. Often stability is a more important value in this aspiration also. These two aspirations overlap somewhat, particularly in terms of having and providing for a family – but where they diverge is the priority given to work and independence versus family and meaningfulness.

Specifically, five of the eight women interviewed expressed success in terms of being free from limitations, owning one's own business, owning a house and car, and then also having a family (somewhat as an afterthought). As one put it:

"I don't want to be limited by anyone or anything. Not financial limitations, not limitations from my boss... and transportation is a limitation too, so having a car I won't be limited that way either..."

Another woman saw success as a convenient, stable job and a healthy family; but family was the emphasis, rather than giving priority to work, earning power, or independence. Notably, this interviewee is already married, and hopes to have a baby in the near future.

Of the men, they saw success as somewhat contingent on a wife and a family, and in providing for them. In terms of work, it needs to be meaningful, which means personally interesting and with potential to impact society. Most male respondents were not as driven to be a successful entrepreneur as the women, nor did pursuing a high income and flashy car seem important except out of some sense of responsibility to provide for a wife and child. Even so, Old Liu (the 32-year-old manager) captured an underlying attitude I frequently encountered:

"Having money, a house, and car does not at all mean that you are successful, but they are necessary conditions for success... You can be successful at making a livelihood and being a person, as long as your family is happy you're set; or you can be 'spiritually successful' (*jingshen chenggong*), which is where you're able to really stand up for something..."

The exception is the youngest man, who felt success could only be gauged after one's death, and in the meantime he was committed to improving his social and financial status, and establishing a business of some kind that he could be in charge of. The purpose or activity of this business was not important, only that it was a team and he was the leader (this is a

theme across entrepreneurial men and women). This interviewee was very smart, but suffered from a lack of self-confidence, and his attitude toward success emphasized gaining recognition and status through better income and owning a car as a result.

Lastly, across all interviews and personal experience, Chinese culture places extreme emphasis on the importance of owning a house, especially for men. The thought that one could get married without buying a house, or that I could potentially marry a woman with a house, is utterly derided by interviewees and friends alike. Renting is also not an acceptable compromise, due to pressure from women, family, and men themselves. Hopefully car ownership is not as intractable as this expectation.

c. Goals

Goals are different from concepts of success in showing what interviewees are actually working towards. The goals are consistent with the two aspirations listed above: 3 interviewees are saving up to start their own companies, one woman is hoping to have a baby soon, and while all men are employed, they hope to find 'good jobs' in the future. As a rule, good job refers to a stable, Beijing-based position with 'decent salary' (higher than current), and potential for future development. Old Liu pointed out that 3-4 years ago his responses would have been quite different, as back then he turned his hand to many different trades, but now he felt like his life had calmed down somewhat and he does not have a clear goal aside from 'just living' (*shengcun*). The 24-year-old, on the other hand, felt like society was keeping him restrained in a box, and he wants to burst forth and take the reins himself. Both he and the upwardly-looking women had little notion of how to implement their goals, but felt like they are struggling towards them nonetheless.

Overall, half of the interviewees are working towards 'family and meaning' goals, while half are working towards 'white collar lifestyle'.

d. Ideals

Again, while varied, most interviewees fell into the 'white collar lifestyle' group of ideals, or had more 'family and meaning' related ideals. One woman had totally different aspirations, however, as her ideal was one day to own a lifestyle farm with flowers, horses, and other animals, while also owning her own company. This is likely due to her rural upbringing, where she enjoyed that kind of lifestyle, but now finds herself in the city.

For business-oriented interviewees, common ideals included independence, superseding constraints, grasping opportunities, and realizing one's potential. For these respondents, ideals seldom included ideal relationships, nurturing of others, or concepts of 'having enough'. Yet fairness was consistently important, as one reason starting private companies is emphasized is in order to be treated fairly (and treat others fairly in some cases). For other respondents, ideals included stability, meaningful employment, convenience, and a 'comfortable life'.

e. Value

While not initially part of the interview, several interviewees mentioned that starting their own companies was important for realizing their self-value. The implication is that one's value is derived from being a productive economic being, and so other interviewees were asked about this. Three men said value came from being able to provide for one's family, and giving back to society through their work in some way, while the youngest said life is about accumulation and saving of things (money) to leave when you die.

Two women said “through starting my own company I can realize my own value (self-worth)”, although could not really explain what would be different about not having a company. The other women either looked to family and relationships, or some vague notion of helping people in society, but generally did not have a clear answer, if at all.

Overall it is most interesting that the concept of self-value came up independently in different interviews, in almost exactly the same wording. Certainly the Enlightenment idea that individuals have value in-and-of-themselves does not historically hold much weight in China.

f. Centrality

This refers to how important certain values are in informing actual life decisions. In most cases, interviewees had a strong sense of how they would spend money, what they currently spend time and money on. For the vast majority of interviewees, this ‘investment’ is consistently towards buying a car or house, and also towards starting a company. For those who had already achieved one or more of these, there was no clear direction (for the individual). But this focused pursuit of material improvement was not without internal conflict, as several interviewees were motivated by their ideals and values, and yet felt hampered or unable to invest in them without first achieving ‘basic material conditions’.

This suggests that while some people have different values and aspirations, due to social pressure to find a house and car (in order to provide for a family), material factors are consistently very central in the decision making of middle class Chinese, without exception. At best, interviewees displayed a strong internal conflict of values and interests. This was most stark for the male journalist:

“I like my job, it’s good work and I contribute to society, but it just doesn’t pay enough....To get a wife I need to earn more money, so I might have to look elsewhere....You can earn a lot of money working in media, but it’s not good [meaningful] work. I might do that if it comes to it.”

On the one hand, he feels strongly motivated by his values to improve society through writing reports on corruption, but on the other hand he realizes his salary makes him an unattractive partner to white collar women. The torment and conflict in his voice and delivery was palpable, as he struggles with this issue.

Another example of this kind of conflict comes from Old Liu, who points out that having money, a house, and a car are basic conditions of success, but his tone and language indicated that these things did not seem inherently ‘worth it’ to him. For example, he said “I have had a car since 2008, and it was a lot of fun learning to drive and then driving for about a year. But then it gets really tiring (because of the bad traffic), and you realize that cars are really expensive... It costs me about 1000-1500 RMB a month for my car, it really drinks through gas. So now I rarely drive.” Likewise with his house, he said “I could have bought a house earlier, but the prices here are just so insane it really isn’t worth it. I could have bought a house earlier, but I’m just renting and that’s fine.” This is a huge departure from the younger interviewees, and the common understanding of the ‘basic conditions of success’. Even so, Old Liu was still vehement that he could not envision a future without a car.

g. Happiness

Most interviewees decided that happiness comes from family, but each added their own twist. For three of four men, the additional factor is satisfying work – interesting, meaningful and can impact society – as well as providing a ‘comfortable life’ for their families. Although interestingly, they do not feel this lifestyle is as important for themselves. The last man is much more motivated to do well in life, and did not talk about providing for anyone. For the

women, having a 'comfortable life' was not usually explicitly stated, but was implicitly pervasive in their responses. One woman, however, was only concerned with realizing her full potential, giving her best shot, taking advantage of opportunities around her, and seemed to hope that she would find a family and happiness somewhere amidst these endeavours. When asked how she would be happy if she failed, she felt confident that giving life her best try was enough to make her content, even if she fails.

Overall, most interviewees understandably have not thought extensively about what happiness is and where it comes from. Even so, about half recognize family as important, and strive to actualize their conception of a happy family. In doing so, they all see achieving higher material wealth as necessary, if just as a means to the ends of a happy wife and healthy family.

h. Transportation

All interviewees responded that they wished to buy a car (if they do not own one already), and that owning a house and car is part of their aspiration; however, there are a number of caveats. Most men could see themselves living a car-free future as individuals, but felt responsibility and pressure to provide a car for their wife (or future wife). Notably one man said it was unlikely he would actually get a car, while every other respondent felt it was highly unlikely they would *not* purchase a car, even if they do not drive it much. The oldest man, who has already been driving for many years, pointed out that the drive to drive is very strong at first, and the novelty and excitement extremely enjoyable, but after a few years the frustrating, worsening traffic makes driving much less attractive, and 'you suddenly realize how much your car is costing you' While he rarely drives now, even so, he did not see himself relinquishing his car, but uses transit more when convenient.

The youngest man felt extremely motivated to buy a car, and had even rented a car to drive around Beijing and pick up friends and colleagues, despite the expense. He described the need as convenience, but his language and attitude conveyed how deeply invested he was in the car as a symbol of prestige and status -- and therefore an asset he needed to improve his self-confidence. Given that his income is not yet enough to warrant even renting a car, I was surprised to hear he had done this already -- so it is fair to assume he would pursue buying a car quite fervently.

On the other hand, the single least materialistic interviewee -- a 27-year-old office worker with legal training -- also admitted she would likely buy a car in the future. Her aspiration is to start working at a law practice and become a lawyer for marginalized groups, in the hopes of helping Chinese society. Money is not a major concern for her, she points out:

"I've been living on 2000 RMB a month at this job, and I get along just fine, so I think that money is not so important."²⁵

Having a car did not feature in her recounting of her aspirations, but after the fact she admitted she expected she might also buy a car:

"Mostly I bike to work now, or sometimes catch the bus...but when I think about it, if I am a lawyer with my own firm, I would probably have a car. Taxis are ok sometimes, but they are too unreliable." ... "When I have kids, I think I would have a car, it is just more convenient and maybe safer than biking with them.... The most important things for buying a car would be price, petrol efficiency, and safety I think."

Overall, as the most frugal, social-minded and non-materialistic interviewee, she outlined the perceived needs to have a car very clearly, and almost grudgingly so. She pointed out that

²⁵ Approximately \$320 USD, and monthly rent for a single bedroom in Beijing is typically 500-1500 RMB

mianzi, face, could be factor for her as a lawyer, as she might lose respect arriving in a taxi or on foot, but otherwise the decision would be pragmatic.

One other woman, the interpreter with experience living in the US, pointed out that she had owned a car in California, and upon arriving back in China had chosen not to purchase a car:

“Students returning from abroad get a special deal where they don’t have to pay tax on a car, so my parents really wanted me to buy a car then – but I said I didn’t want to, and I like taking transit just fine.... But one day when I have a family and kids I think I would have a car, I just don’t want one now.”

Partly why transit is an attractive option to this woman though, is because as an interpreter her work hours are unconventional and convenient for taking transit. Those workers stuck in a ‘9 to 5’ job suffer much more taking bus and metro, perhaps idolizing the freedom of driving more.

These interviews show that transportation is a key part of peoples’ aspirations, as convenience, freedom, and independence are closely associated with it. Respondents with a strong sense of entrepreneurial independence felt strongly about buying a car, while those with more family-oriented values felt confident about buying a car, but could see themselves using transit also. The least materialistic male respondent (who also had risen from the most humble roots), felt pressure to buy a car in the future, but felt it was unlikely he would do so; while the least materialistic female respondent also felt she could end up buying a car, many years later, out of a pragmatic need.

Lastly, it was also interesting to note that only one interviewee was interested in car sharing, renting, or buying a second hand vehicle. Overall there was a strong distaste and distrust of second-hand products, particularly cars, as the men felt they would not know enough about how to guarantee a good car. Meanwhile the women were simply completely uninterested in these options, perhaps much akin to the cultural emphasis on having to buy a house rather than rent one. This aspect is one indicator of how pride and face is a part of aspiring to a car, but not conclusively.

ii. Gender Difference

There is a notable gender disparity in the nature of responses. Two men had similar, family- and meaning-related aspirations, and could readily see themselves living a car-free lifestyle if left to their own devices. But both felt a responsibility or pressure to pursue higher salaries and provide a car and house for their families. This may be confined to the current sample, as it is so small, but as the consistency is so striking across two very independent men, it is possible this represents a deeper social phenomenon.

The women, on the other hand, are more entrepreneurial and independence-seeking than anticipated. While family was purported as a value, the interviewees largely were not invested in finding or making a family currently, but rather in being successful businesswomen. For these women, a ‘comfortable’ affluent lifestyle, including a car, is perceived as a reasonable expectation, rather than a distant aspiration, and they notably work hard to earn it.

In terms of transportation, it is interesting that women all saw themselves owning cars and driving in the near future, because it is so ‘convenient’. However, none of the women had driven cars, nor do they have licenses. When asked whether marginal increase in freedom and time savings was worth the high price tag, they offered no substantial response. As in they had not really thought about this tradeoff at all, merely assumed that having a car would be ‘worth it’. Part of this assumption is because car prices have dropped significantly in recent years; even though fuel, parking, license, and insurance costs have increased, these

are not visible barriers to interviewees, in part due to their optimistic outlook. In this sense it is questionable whether these women have a strong grasp of what the reality of car owning might be, but they are highly motivated to get one either way.

By contrast, men have experience driving, recognize how expensive cars are, and could see themselves not owning a car at all in the future. However, they are strongly motivated by perceived pressure to 'provide' for women to purchase a car. Thus while 'convenience' and 'freedom' are factors, the main factor is actually social in nature. It is not a 'prestige' or 'status'-fueled aspiration, but an eventual state that each expects to naturally acquire. This is quite contrary from only a few years ago, when owning a car would be the height of prestige and luxury, yet now more than 35% of Beijing families own one.²⁶ The implication is that while car ownership is not as easy as in the West, the expectation has changed to where every family driving is the rule rather than exception, even though this is a false reality currently, and a disastrous reality for the future.

DISCUSSION

Given how crowded transit is, and lower relative cost of buying a car, it is not surprising that many people aspire to own a vehicle. However, given the rising costs of owning a car, Beijing policy barriers, the awful state of traffic and air quality in the city, and the abundance of transit options, it is still surprising that more people are not as critical as Old Liu is of having a car. It is also worth noting that Beijing is already making phenomenal investments in transit, particularly metro and light rail. What this research has shown so far is that men and women both seem to be highly motivated to buy cars, despite rising barriers, worsening traffic conditions, and the proliferation of cheap metro lines. The two most striking things are firstly the different nature of motivation across men and women, and secondly the surprising lack of pragmatic weighing of options. The way interviewees responded made buying a car seem like a foregone conclusion in almost every case. Tradeoffs did not seem to be considered, and conceptions of 'convenience', 'freedom', 'speed' and 'safety' came out consistently, to the exclusion of practical realities. For instance, when asked about finding parking, paying for license and upkeep fees, interviewees seldom had a strong (or any) conception of these aspects. Yet once they buy their car, they will quickly come to know such drawbacks retroactively, but then it will be too late. Considering an upper-middle income might be around 10,000 RMB a month, Old Liu's estimated 1500 RMB a month for car upkeep is a really significant expense to not be closely considering. This illustrates the effective failure of price disincentive policies, or at least indicates that the disincentives need to be much higher before they register in the minds of non-drivers. Of course, disincentives are recognized by current drivers, as they are the ones paying, but they are also the ones driving already.

A preliminary analysis is that aspiring middle class workers are surrounded by media, peers, idols, and bosses who expound on the benefits of owning a car. The emotional commitment to buy a car is made extremely easy, and attractive! So when the economic means to buy one exists, the 'burden of proof' falls on why *not* to buy one. There is a strong correlation between the 'young and affluent' family class versus a 'traditional family' mentality. The values informing the 'young and affluent' class are freedom from restraint, independence, using one's potential, and taking the initiative – which almost every woman interviewed represented. Thinking about others, giving back to society, considering the big picture, and settling for 'enough' are not prominent concepts for this group, although they do exist. Yet 'prestige' or 'symbolic utility' (face and social status) does not explicitly seem to be a

²⁶ Zhu, Charles, Zhu Yiliang, Lu Rongzhu, He Ren, Xia Zhaoren (2012), "Perceptions and aspirations for car ownership among Chinese students attending two universities in the Yangtze Delta, China", *Journal of Transport Geography*, in press.

motivating factor for these people to buy cars. In their own words, conventional utility (convenience, freedom, safety) is the purported goal, while economic utility does not seem to be considered much at all. However, my perception is that the 'symbolic utility' of ownership does play an important subliminal role in justifying the cost of car ownership, and the values-oriented appeal of cars certainly contributes significantly by helping obscure the costs of driving in people's minds. Yet neither of these factors is explicitly recognized as a factor by the interviewees.

On the other hand, though, several interviewees (three of the men and two of the women) are not personally emotionally sold on cars at all, but consider them a pragmatic necessity or inevitable investment at some later time. This could be many years later though, which differentiates these respondents from emotionally- and values-motivated respondents, who seem much more likely to buy a car next weekend if possible.

The policy implication here is that people's perception of car ownership and driving is that it gives them more freedom, will be worth the (high) cost, and probably also that the government can be expected to continue maintaining and improving car infrastructure. Current economic incentives, such as higher fuel taxes or license charges, and even capping license numbers, do not effectively address these value perceptions. In fact, the only policy recognized by interviewees consistently was the restriction on non-Beijingers entering the lottery, and the registration lottery policy, which are both very recent.

This suggests that, rather than make incremental disincentives, the government should create policies that more drastically change social perception of cars. Cars could be portrayed as: 1) an insecure investment: that parking is both unavailable and expensive, that oil is sure to run out, constant maintenance and upkeep will be costly; 2) more burden than boon: driving is stressful and dangerous, transit is time better spent (reading, with people, etc.), car-oriented living is isolating and lonely; and 3) that cars are *not* worth it: better ways to spend money, risk of car accidents, and so on. Publicizing policies disincentivizing driving will not achieve the same effect as creating human narratives about how much better a non-car lifestyle can be.

Furthermore, results so far suggest that while a few men may be extremely invested as cars as a symbol, mostly it is women that is the social driving force behind cars, even if men are behind the wheel. Women seem to have made up their minds that cars are necessary for a family and children, and so have a strong desire to own a car. Men actually seem less convinced, and are more mindful of costs, but will certainly acquiesce to female expectations. From a human perspective, the fact that male perceptions of female expectations is a major influencing factor is unsurprising. What this tells us, is that women should be the focus of car-related initiatives where possible. For instance, promoting the isolation and stress of a car-oriented lifestyle could be done through stories and images from women's lives, rather than men.

As Wu et al., and others, have found, values are an important factor behind choosing to own a car in China. What has been further discovered is that these values inform decisions that may not be rationally calculated, but are loaded by emotive perceptions. The issue then is engaging with citizens with language and information compatible to value-laden decision making. Advertising and media already engage society at the subconscious, emotive level by creating desires and emotional associations and this has clear impacts for transportation policy now that car ownership is rising. Direct barriers and economic disincentives are useful for reducing car purchasing at the margins, but where there is economic flexibility, value-laden convincing is necessary. Most of these interviewees would not know they are being 'disincentivized' until it is too late, so the relevant incentives need to be much more systematic and potent, and a viable non-car narrative needs to be disseminated.

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