

Chinese Tourists Enjoy a Speed Rush on the Autobahn (July 22, 2004)

Abstract

A German reporter follows five Chinese tourists who come to Germany to drive Mercedes-Benz cars on the Autobahn without speed limits. For the author, the image of these five tourists “accelerating in a decelerated country” serves as the point of departure for various reflections on Germany and China. He associates Germany with the past and China with the future, contrasts the technological modernism of the Far East with the picturesque traditionalism of the German landscape, and ponders the effects of globalization.

Source

In the Kingdom of Silence

For the Chinese it's a dream trip: driving the Autobahn in Germany. As fast as possible, in a big Mercedes. They drive through a country that looks old.

There it is, the sign. Guofeng Wang has been waiting for it for 30 kilometers. Actually he's been waiting for it since his arrival yesterday, or rather, since he received the travel documents that were sent to him in China – perhaps he's been waiting for it as long as he's been driving. And now it flies by on the side of the road, so small and incidental that one almost overlooks it, the white sign with the four diagonal stripes, this German sight: the end of the speed limit.

Guofeng Wang, 58, born and raised in Shanghai, where he became a wealthy man, hits the gas. The car lurches a little, the speedometer climbs to 120 [kilometers per hour] . . . maximum speed in China . . . 130 . . . the rain on the *Autobahn* vaporizes, the [Mercedes] star is reflected in the hood . . . 140 . . . 150 . . . outside the Spessart [mountain range] splits to the left and right of the road, cloud wisps hang in the dark fir trees . . . 160 . . . 170 . . . in the valleys a red-white checkerboard of the single-family homes. Germany looks very German on this morning, the car smells very much like a car, and the female voice from the navigation system says: “Prepare to follow the road.”

Wang is now doing 180.

Two dark Mercedes sedans are speeding from Frankfurt to Würzburg. Behind tinted windows sit five gentlemen from Beijing and Shanghai, all with digital cameras in front of their bellies and cell phones in their belt clips. After every cigarette break they take turns driving, Guofeng Wang, Quin Li, Pingsheng Ding, Xin Lui, and Kan Chen – not filthy rich, but very upper middle class. Each paid 2,000 Euro to the German-Chinese travel agency Caissa for a vacation that is considered a dream trip in China: driving the *Autobahn* in Germany. Frankfurt, Würzburg, Munich, Baden-Baden, Frankfurt in six days. Germany, fast, fast, with brief stops at sites that are postcard clichés. The men are travelling through a myth that is difficult for them to comprehend because of its strange mixture of the medieval and the supermodern. *Deutschland* – the tour guide Jun Ding calls it “Doi Tse Land” –, Doi Tse Land, which is, on the one hand, the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, which the five men read as schoolchildren. And then there are the fast, expensive cars that they can now buy in China as well. But above all, Doi Tse Land is this faint-hearted country in which the Transrapid was invented but not built. It now runs in Shanghai.

Guofeng Wang and his four companions accelerate in a decelerated country. For they are in the passing

lane not only on this *Autobahn* at this very moment; it is also where they are globally. Five men from a country that is presently experiencing its first economic miracle are traveling through a country that believes it has seen its last economic miracle. Five men from a land of optimism are traveling through a land of pessimism.

Guofeng Wang has to hit the brakes now. A motor home has veered into his lane in front of him. There are a great many motor homes on the road in Doi Tse Lan.

At the Frankfurt airport, a day ago, they had pulled their wheeled suitcases to the rental car counter, the first destination on this trip. The yearned-for name “Mercedes” went over the counters several times; finally the key with the star came back. When the lady behind the counter asked what it was they were most looking forward to, they had nodded shyly, smiled, and said only a single word:

“Speed.”

Five men were children once again. Five men in an indifferent sartorial mix of dark blue suit jackets, black pleated pants, and Hawaiian shirts – a stylistic mixture that suggests that a society is still searching for its new outfit after years of wearing uniforms. To sign the agreements, Guofeng Wang eventually put on thick brown glasses – party meeting glasses. A relic of the old China.

Outside the cars stood gleaming black in the sunshine, two E-Class cars. A blond hostess set the air conditioning to 22° [Celsius] and the navigation system to English; then she explained the gear shift, with the sixth gear being of particular interest. The men took their first pictures, and each had a turn in the driver’s seat, Qing Li, who owns a Mazda 6 in Shanghai, Pingsheng Ding, who drives an old VW Santana, and Guofeng Wang, who bought his first car two years ago, a GM Sail on an Opel Corsa chassis. Then Xin Liu and Kan Chen, the two youngest, neither of whom owns a car yet, also slid gingerly into the driver’s seat, Chen, a short, slight man, 32 years of age, carefully backed one of the cars out of the parking spot for two meters and back in again. Once he accidentally pushed the horn. There was a lot of nervous laughter.

Finally, tour guide Ding explained the right-before-left rule once more time, the men stomped out their cigarettes and climbed in. The doors went “plop-plop,” the cars started driving with a lurch and got in line on the *Autobahn* a little while later. On a German *Autobahn*! Three-laned! With the famous blue-white signs! It was exactly like the advertising brochure they had already been given at the travel bureau in China: the front page bore the slogan “Driving in the land of the car, without a speed limit!,” below it a Mercedes stood in front of Neuschwanstein Castle, then came 30 pages with 70 pictures, none of which showed any tourist attractions, only yellow and blue road signs. Entrance ramps, exit ramps, *Autobahn* interchange, as though there was no Germany beyond the guard rails. On the last page 39 important words for the trip; the first was “police control.” Other tips in the prospectus: hotel employees in Germany are unusually unfriendly. In restaurants you also have to pay for tea. And: no smacking or slurping.

Thus prepared, the small convoy drove off into the German adventure under a dramatic, stormy sky, on the horizon crouched the silhouette of Frankfurt am Main, which shipping company manager Qing Li would later describe as pretty puny compared to the Shanghai skyline.

After three kilometers the Chinese exceeded 120 for the first time, after four kilometers they switched into the left lane for the first time at 140, after six kilometers they were crowded out for the first time by a BMW, and after nine kilometers they sat in their first German traffic jam.

Würzburg. The navigation system guides the group from the *Autobahn* up to Marienburg Castle, where the five exit from their air-conditioned travel capsule and walk up to the castle, their hands folded behind their backs. A shower has washed the city; it is now gleaming in the sun with its church towers, sundials,

weathercocks. A bell is tolling somewhere.

Guofeng Wang looks down to the Main and the “ideal world” type scenery, at the narrow alleyways and the pigeons on the red roofs. His eyebrows sit high on his forehead, imparting an expression of surprise to his face. Suddenly he says that this is what he loves about Doi Tse Lan: “Blue sky, white clouds, fresh air. Silence.”

In China, these things are presently signs of both luxury and backwardness. China is already the second largest oil consumer on earth; the coastal cities gleam with the neon light of wastefulness. By now the government has to ration electricity, because consumption is growing more rapidly than power plants can be built. Fresh air and silence still exist in the countryside, but no longer in Shanghai, where 14.5 million people are working on the Chinese economic miracle, 29,000 inhabitants per square mile. In Hamburg there are 2,250. For Guofeng Wang, Germany is a tranquil, empty land.

A trip: in past decades, a trip, from a European perspective, was a curious gaze at less developed countries – sometimes an arrogant, sometimes a pitying gaze, but always with the certain knowledge that after two weeks one could return to one’s highly developed homeland. It was always the West that bent down over the others with an air of superiority. Now Guofeng Wang stands above Würzburg and looks down onto a world of cobblestones and thick walls overgrown with ivy. No chimney, no chip factory, no skyscraper, nothing. And from up here you don’t see the benefits of the welfare state.

Tour guide Ding makes a sweeping motion with his arm, tracing with his hand the hills on the horizon and explains to his guests the German *Kleinstaaterei* [particularism] with its prince electors and kings. “In principle that is also why the Germans founded the EU and introduced the Euro,” he then says. “So that they can keep up with America, Japan, and perhaps also with China.”

Solemn nods.

Suddenly globalization is more than just a word in the inaugural speech of the federal president. The worlds are shifting; just now Guofeng Wang is taking a snapshot with his Olympus camera. Is it the future or the past that he is photographing? Are the representatives of a new high culture visiting the remnants of an old high culture? After all, you can read everywhere in Doi Tse Lan: the nineteenth was the European century, the twentieth the American century – and the twenty-first will be the Asian century.

But is that really true, Mr. Wang?

[...]

The streets are crowded on this day. Again, motor homes. Station wagons. Bicycles on car roofs. Doi Tse Lan is on vacation. Oh yes, the Germans do have 30 days of vacation! Every year? Guofeng Wang has fifteen. Last year he didn’t take a single one, the year before that, the same. “Too much work,” he says. He works Mondays through Saturdays. No doubt, the FDP would surely like to have this man from the People’s Republic as a speaker at its party meeting.

On the horizon, pointed like pencils, the towers of Rothenburg ob der Tauber come into view. “Prepare to keep right,” says the navigation system . . . 100 . . . 90 . . . 80 . . . yellow sign at the entrance to the town, like in the brochure, and once again old Europe. Chinese tour groups meet Japanese tour groups, Japanese tour groups meet American tour groups, the clattering of hooves from tourist carriages resounds through the alleys. Kan Chen photographs horse droppings. A BMW that is souped-up to the point of being unrecognizable distracts from the other attractions. In the stores are nutcrackers and beer mugs, the shop windows reflect Qing Li’s puzzled face. He hesitates briefly and then asks whether there are still people living in Rothenburg.

Thus they zoom through the days. From Würzburg to Rothenburg, and from Rothenburg to Dinkelsbühl, a town that looks like it was preserved centuries ago, neon signs prohibited. At the town hall, the mayor presents his “Chinese friends,” as he calls them, with certificates attesting that his guests have driven along the Romantic Road. In an almost pleading tone he then asks them to tell “all their colleagues in China” about Dinkelsbühl. There are already more Asian than American tourists in his town, many Japanese, but the Chinese are the future. They have only been allowed to travel to Germany for private purposes for two years. Estimates put the number of Chinese travelers throughout the whole at 130 million per year in 2020. Dinkelsbühl does not want to be left out. The mayor quickly gives the vanguard of the 130 million a picture book to take along.

Then they continue zooming south, towards the wall of the Alps on the horizon at 240 kilometers per hour, in sweeping curves through the green Allgäu, which looks as though a tourism manager had placed a tiny church on each hill. The group visits Neuschwanstein, the Munich Hofbräuhaus, and then drives into the Black Forest. Amidst pensioners who carry their Knirps umbrellas like truncheons, the five push to Lake Titi. Guofeng Wang buys a cuckoo clock and a wristwatch for 400 Euro, Pingsheng Ding a cuckoo clock for 200 Euro. Their days begin at eight in the morning with breakfast in the hotel and end at ten at night, at the latest, in their rooms. In six days they eat Chinese five times, slurp and smack a little and are constantly checking the images on their digital cameras. Nobody strays from the group.

[...]

In Metzingen in the northern Black Forest, in the middle of the German provinces, the world is now noisy. One more night in Germany, one more chance to buy a prestigious piece of the Western world. The true center of Metzingen consists of a parking garage and a concrete block on whose façade is written HUGO BOSS, an outlet store. Next door, Levi's, Nike, and Esprit offer factory seconds. Russian, Japanese, Chinese comes out of the dressing rooms. Women with Swabian accents push metal clothes racks full of suits across the concrete floor. Men are carrying shopping bags, as big as those at Ikea. Women with labels on their sleeves are turning around in front of mirrors. The five are now speaking quickly, their Chinese turns hard, almost whip-like. Tour guide Ding has given them ninety minutes. They rub cloth between thumb and index finger. They leaf through dress shirts in crinkly packaging. China is becoming a brand country, new social strata are seeking new symbols. Guofeng Wang, the man who used to wear Mao blue, puts his party glasses on again and studies the labels. Qing Li says Boss is an attractive term in China right now: “Boss like boss, you understand?”

[...]

In the end, Li pulls a credit card from his Versace wallet and pays 244 Euro for five Polo shorts and two pairs of Nike sneakers. This put him almost exactly at the average that is so lucrative for the destination country Germany: Chinese tourists spend 240 Euro per day here, European tourists only 100. And he confirms a saying that in the future China will be the world's production site, America the granary, and Europe, if all goes well, the boutique.

The last day. Once more the sky arches high and blue above Doi Tse Lan. On the right side of the A5 the Black Forest is basking in sunshine, and two dark Mercedes sedans are rolling “again toward Frankfurt at great speed,” which is also what the brochure had said. The speedometer shows 150 . . . 160 . . . 170 . . . the news comes on the radio. The announcer reports on the debate over whether Germans should work forty hours a week in the future. Guofeng Wang, who sits in the back seat, tired after 1,400 kilometers, would also like to achieve that: work only forty hours per week. Outside the wind rustles the fields of grain. Wang says that he wants to come back to Doi Tse Lan soon. With his wife. He wants her to get to know the blue sky, the white clouds, the fresh air, the silence.

Source: Henning Sußebach, “Im Reich der Stille”, *Die Zeit*, no. 31, June 22, 2004.

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