

Gaojia-The People's Hero

By Chris Choa



In March, we celebrated Lei Feng Day, commemorating the modest PLA soldier whose posthumously published diaries during the 1960s celebrated devotion to unglamorous duties. In that spirit, we might focus on another less celebrated local

personality: Gaojia.

Gaojia isn't human, rather a piece of infrastructure, Shanghai's 77-kilometer elevated highway system. It is, however, a complicated and somewhat contradictory part of everyone's daily life.

On one hand, it is a potent symbol of Shanghai's can-do, gung-ho spirit. Gaojia scoops up 30 percent of downtown traffic using only five percent of the city's road area. In any other developed city, pushing a similar highway system through a densely populated area would take generations; in Shanghai, it took less than three years.

On the other hand, Gaojia may also be considered a symbol of misplaced-priorities, vilified for gutting traditional neighborhoods and taking critical infrastructure funding away from much-needed mass transit.

Those of us who have been here long enough know that pre-B.G. (Before Gaojia), the ride to Hongqiao airport was interminable. After the elevated expressway was built – presto, problem solved. Of course, there is the paradox of induced traffic: as road capacity increases so does traffic. It is only a matter of time before we get back to gridlock.

In the meantime, let's celebrate Shanghai's greatest unsung infrastructure hero:

Egalitarian or Elite?

In Code 46, a recent sci-fi film, Shanghai's slick-bellied, cool, blue-lit highways have a starring role. If you've traveled on the Gaojia you'll know that many sections tower serenely above the city, offering motorists a glorious view, panning across the unfolding and refolding history of the city's urban development.

For a perfect example, travel eastbound on the Yan'an to the Huangpu River. The sweeping cinerama-style descent to the Bund makes you feel like you are about to land in your own private jet.

But elite seats on the Gaojia are sometimes invitation only. The police monitor traffic conditions on the elevated deck and often close off access from below, leaving motorists sputtering at the onramp entrance. Or worse still, relegated to the slithering ignominy of the lower streets, feeling that something finer, faster and more glamorous exists topside. Especially irksome when you know the police have closed off the Gaojia for some super-VIP.

Note: get some black government plates and a flashing dashboard beacon.

Sexiest Highway Curve

I have to reveal a secret pleasure. Normally, the overhead deck is a rigid predictable straightaway, or a controlled Confucian curve, as exciting as the last two hours of a Peking opera. Underneath certain sections, however, when you are traveling along ground level at just the right speed, maybe even daydreaming a bit, the overhead deck performs a fabulous and sensuous wiggle. It is like catching a glimpse of J-Lo's backside at a nightclub. Consider it a kind of urban foreplay in concrete.

Note: a better-than-Viagra stretch is Eastbound, approaching the intersection of Henan South Road.

Green Edges

Shanghaiers are divided into two distinct tribes – those who are for the linear arrays of potted bushes lined up along the edges of the elevated highway, and those who are against. So whose side are you on? In this high-stakes lifestyle selection, I proudly favor the green edges; the naysayers are sore sports at best; at worst, they lack imagination. I like gazing at the green horizon from my taxi window. But I'm amazed how it survives with all the exhaust. My kids have other ideas. They fantasize about pushing my potted friends over the edge; they can't, the pots are bolted down.

Note: Best Green Edge support vehicle: the watering truck, with honorable mention going to the special hose.



Photo by Hugo Hu

Heroic Master Post

Think of it as Shanghai's answer to the obelisk in Paris' Place de la Concorde, or maybe Rome's Trajan Column (all of them heroic symbols, now engulfed by traffic). At the very center of a dizzying, 3D, high-speed, structural puzzle at the crossing of the Yan'an and the North-South Elevated, this Gaojia master post holds up no less than six distinct levels of elevated motorway, plus pedestrian bridges. Like its French and Roman counterparts, the Shanghai master post also is ornately decorated, only this time with a vigorous chrome and gold dragon motif.

All of these columns have stories to tell; the Concorde obelisk, a gift to Charles X from the viceroy of Egypt, marks the exact spot where Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, Danton, Robespierre, and 2,800 others were beheaded during the French Revolution. Trajan's Column depicts the roman emperor's vast and heroic military achievements.

I like to think that the Shanghai version expresses a kind of Chinese existentialism - a single entity, squeezing into an incredibly difficult space, carrying an impossible load, all in the name of progress.

Note: Catch it with a strobe flash as you zoom by at night.

