

Taxing Times

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR DEALING WITH THE CAB CRISIS

by George Ding

BEIJING — Liu Bin stood outside the gate of No. 4 High School, waiting to take the test that would change his life. His mother was with him, anxiously clutching the homemade lunch she'd made for her son.

"I'm so nervous for him," she said.

But Liu remained calm. He had crammed for this test for the better part of a year.

Just then, an administrator emerged from the school and opened the gates. Liu took the lunch from his mother and flooded in with the hundreds of others who were waiting by the gate.

Two weeks later, a thin envelope arrived in the mail. Liu opened it and gave a shout of joy. He ran to the living room and hugged his mother. It was official: Liu Bin was going to be a cab driver.

Liu Bin, 41, is just one of the thousands who took the first annual *dikao* (的考), the new standardized test that Beijing cabbies must pass before they are allowed behind the wheel. Modeled on the *gaokao*, it is just one of the ambitious reforms that Beijing officials have instituted to improve the city's taxi cab service.

"Beijing is the capital of China and one of the greatest cities in the world," said municipal spokesman Zhang Xueran in a press conference last Thursday. "As such, getting a cab at rush hour shouldn't resemble fighting for the last life preserver in the film *Titanic*."

Other reforms include raising the flag-fall rate from RMB 10 to RMB 15, changing the Olympic lanes left over from 2008 into taxi-only express lanes, and imposing an RMB 50 "vomit fee" on passengers, which will make picking up fares in Sanlitun and Wudaokou more worthwhile.

The city has also outlawed passing a hailing passenger when a driver's "empty cab" light is on and negotiating off-meter prices. But perhaps the most controversial change is the *dikao*. During the grueling two-day exam, applicants are tested on their knowledge of Beijing roads, motor vehicle law and Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Supporters argue that this exam will weed out reckless drivers who dart across four lanes of traffic without signaling and regard traffic lights as flashing road ornaments.

Indeed, Liu has spent the last ten months memorizing the names of all the roads and bridges in central Beijing.

"I know the location of every hotel, mall and *jianbing* stand within the Fifth Ring Road," he said. "Not to mention the public lavatories."

The *dikao* is rumored to be even more difficult than *The Knowledge*, the test that London cab drivers have to take before earning their license. Beijing applicants are asked to recite the shortest route from one place in the city to another, explain why spitting out the window is unhygienic, and refrain from cursing for 60 minutes in rush hour traffic.

But not everyone is happy with the new exam. Critics of the *dikao* say that it will cause cab companies and driving schools to "teach to the test," and not adequately prepare drivers for real-world conditions on the road.

"This test will surely stifle creativity in taxi drivers," said an analyst at a local traffic think-tank. "Using the shoulder as a makeshift lane making illegal U-turns will become a thing of the past."

Others argue that the test is inherently biased because of its lower score threshold for Beijing residents.

"Beijingers who score a 700 on the test can become full-time cab drivers while someone from Hebei has to score higher than 730 for the same privilege," the analyst explained.

Still others complain that rich people can just send their kids to overseas driving schools.

But spokesman Zhang assured citizens that "everything would work out."

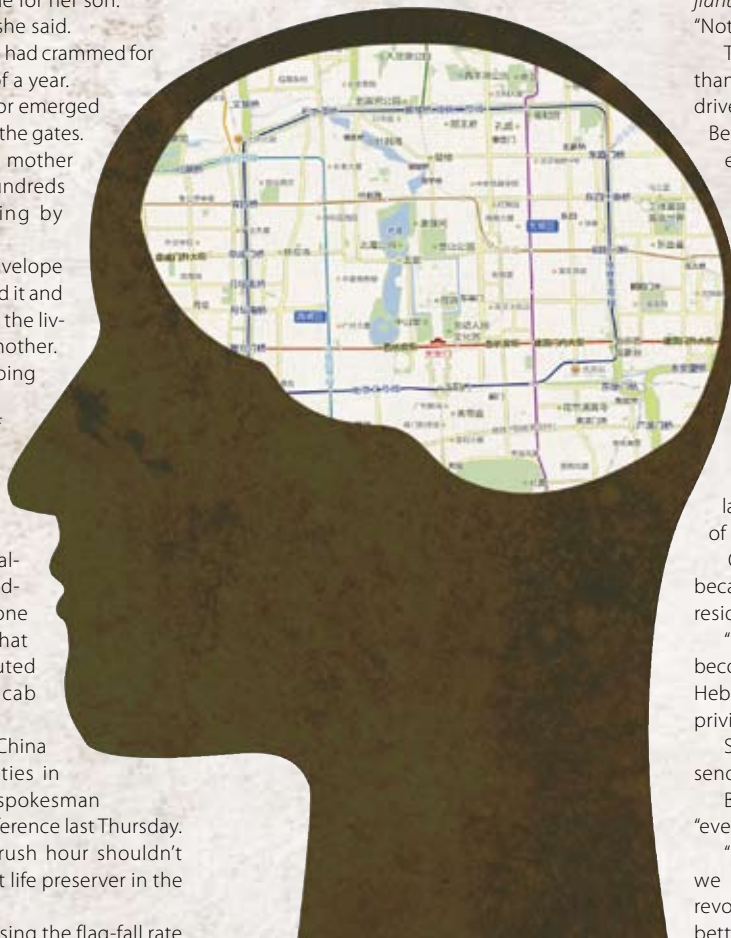
"Change is always hard at first," he said. "But we believe that over time these reforms will revolutionize the Beijing taxi experience, for the better."

Of course, this is not the first time Beijing cab drivers have had to pass a test to do their job.

Before the 2008 Olympics, drivers were required to attend English classes and memorize English phrases.

For his part, Liu Bin was excited to take on his new job. He had gone into debt to rent a vehicle from the taxi company. In 30 days, he'd owe the company another RMB 5,170 installment.

"If I'm going to pay all of that back, I'd better hit the road," he said with a smile, before driving off to begin his long and thankless job.



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"No more will cabbies drive you around the city for half an hour before telling you they don't actually know where Gulou is," Zhang said.