

On the Occasion of Crossing a Street in Hanoi

In Hanoi traffic moves without discernible order or, at the very least, if it is an “order” it is one governed by spatial laws that are utterly opaque to the Western sensibility. In most cultures, traffic obeys agreed upon rules in which all vehicles, including bicycles, rickshaws, motorcycles, etc. move in the same direction, depending on which side of the street they occupy. For example the laws might stipulate that all vehicles stay on the right side of the street. To differentiate left side from right, a center-line is applied directly onto the paved surface. The merits of this system are obvious and it matters little whether everyone agrees to drive on the right or the left. What is important, crucial in fact, is that *everyone be in agreement*. Because it is this and only this that allows traffic to move smoothly and diminishes the potential for catastrophe. Where I come from we refer to this agreement as “the rules of the road” which we are taught from a very early age so that by the time we hurtle along our highways they are almost second nature.

As rigid as the system may sound it actually offers quite a bit of expressive latitude and, interestingly, one can even identify local and national temperaments by how drivers conduct themselves within these rules. On the international scale, the two extremes are the Germans on one side and the Italians on the other. Of the two, I find the German approach the more difficult (and potentially dangerous). As one might expect, the rules governing driving in Germany are very exact and based on clearly written directives. Apparently these rules – I say apparently because I’ve not studied them, but when I’ve been in Germany with my Berlin dealer, he forbids me to drive, insisting that my ignorance of the laws “will get us killed.” He explained to me that since all German drivers assume strict adherence to the rules, they drive at excessive speeds and with very little allowance for, or anticipation of, other drivers’ mistakes. Furthermore, the drivers are set in the rules and can become so infuriated by another’s infractions that they would just as soon drive through the perpetrator as yield. The rationale is that yielding suggests the fallibility of the rules whereas plowing straight ahead indicates their correctness as well the grave price to be paid for not adhering to them. This is offensive driving in the extreme.

The Italian approach is quite different and here I can speak with a little more authority having spent a year in Rome where I drove a motor scooter. It's probable that the rules of the Italian road are as clearly written as those of the German. The real difference is that few Italians appear to have read them or if they have a lot of the specifics have been forgotten or overlooked. The result is that Italian driving is based on feel and taking full responsibility for everything that is in front and to the sides and almost none for anything behind. In other words, when driving in cities you take care of that which you can easily see and of the drivers with whom one can make eye contact. Driving in Italy, therefore, is not simply a game based on rules, but one responsive to feel. Everything depends on eye contact, a nod of the head, the intent of the driver (which is every chauffeur's responsibility to make clear), and the circumstances surrounding the encounter. There is ebb and flow. There is flexibility and room for mistakes. This is organic driving.¹

In Hanoi there is a tremendous amount of traffic. Fortunately more of it is in the form of bicycles and various types of motorized bikes than cars and trucks. Like roads in other cities around the world, the streets of Hanoi are clearly marked with center-lines, crosswalks delineated and most large intersections have traffic signals and are sometimes overseen by traffic police. The extraordinary thing is that none of this appears to have any effect whatsoever. Vehicles move according to the intuition of the drivers, all of whom seem to be seeking those momentary spaces or gaps that open up and then as quickly close. Here it is not a question of staying to one side of the road or the other but only a matter of seeking the path of least apparent resistance and occupying space in advance of another vehicle whose driver might harbor similar intentions. To my orderly western mind it is a miracle that the streets aren't strewn with the bodies of drivers who made

¹ Boston is the worst place I have ever driven in the United States. It's a variation on the organic method but Bostonians refuse to make eye contact and as a result its whatever-I-can-get-away-with approach often leads to misunderstanding and mishap. **This is rude driving.**

California and the San Francisco Bay Area specifically, use a variation on the organic method but here it's augmented by extreme forms of politeness. For example, if two cars reach an intersection and only one has a stop sign, both drivers might stop – the one who has to and the other who thinks it would be a nice thing to do – and each driver, usually smiling and perhaps muttering, “have a nice day,” encourages the other to go first. This sounds great but is actually very irritating and can be dangerous. **This is (overly) polite driving.**

wrong decisions, but, although accidents do occur, they are more rare than one would expect and when they do happen appear to be fairly minor. This is probably because in Hanoi the traffic is so dense that vehicles can't move very swiftly. But even more importantly speed is inhibited by this pick and choose path-of-least-resistance approach which keeps the streets clogged with vehicles moving in every which direction and disallows bursts of acceleration. The unwary pedestrian, however, is at a disadvantage, and standing at the edge of one of these busy thoroughfares with the intention of crossing to the other side can be the source of great anxiety since it seems an impossible undertaking. In most cases there are no breaks in the flow and, it would appear, one needs the uncanny ability to look in all directions simultaneously in order to avoid serious harm. The trick to success, one I learned by careful observation as well as through patient instruction from the hotel concierge, entails both courage and faith. Counter to all of one's survival instincts, one must step directly and without hesitation of any kind into the paths of the oncoming vehicles. The trick to survival is that once that first step has been taken the others must follow at exactly the same pace and in precisely the same direction as had been established with that first step. This means that there can be no halting or deferring to any of the many vehicles and other pedestrians that are dodging about since any deviation will cause multiple mishaps and almost certain injury. In proceeding in this way, it is as if one has become part of a collective experience in which thousands of independent bodies are reacting instantly and subliminally to one another (and to you) and moving as if motivated by a single shared intelligence.