

Time for a road trip? It's cheaper to fly

Written by Global Times

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One of the widely recognized aspects of China's modernization process in recent years has been the fast development of the highway system. Twenty years ago, there were virtually no highway in China. Now China has 65,000 kilometers of highway and will exceeds that of the US in two or three years.

But I have a love-hate relationship with China's highway system after taking to the road many times. To drivers, China's highway system is probably the world's most expensive with "here toll, there toll, everywhere toll toll."

For example, transporting a large container from Guangdong Province to the Beijing-Tianjin area involves paying toll fees of somewhere between 4,000 to 6,000 yuan (\$600-900), depending on tonnage. This actually makes transporting the same container from Chicago to Beijing-Tianjin area via sea freight shipment even cheaper. When moving things around the country is more expensive than moving things halfway around the globe, you know there got to be something wrong.

One doesn't have to drive on highways for long to notice that the system is obviously inefficient. Many highways in China don't see much traffic during the day.

While Chinese can feel proud that our country is the king of the highways, it is quite another feeling to consider that the steel, concrete and labor that go into highway construction will have to be ultimately paid by the vehicles that go through, and there just aren't enough of them. That means a high toll rate is inevitable.

Now I understand highways are expensive to build and the investment has to be recouped via toll collection. OK, you pay for what you get. But how much of the collected toll revenue goes toward paying back highway construction loans is very much in doubt. Has the whole thing become a scheme for meaningless job creation?

In China, collecting toll fees is a very well paid job, and in some cases pays better than a full professorship. I assume receiving cash and handing out a ticket doesn't need much education, right? It certainly can't be more stressful than migrant workers pouring concrete on the road under the sun.

And then there are those obvious wastes and excesses at the toll booths. China not only has the longest mileages of highway in the world, it also has the world's most beautiful and most expensive toll booths. Every time I drive by a toll booth and see a nice office building nearby for the so-called management staff, I can't help thinking of the AC/DC song "Highway to Hell!"

China's highway system is also Balkanized in a way that adversely affects inter-province

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commerce. Since the administration power of highway systems lies at the provincial level, each province builds its own road and its own toll booths. This has created bizarre situations at highway provincial borders where two respective toll booths belonging to each province lie literally within a few hundred meters of each other, each collecting its own money. The ensuing traffic jams don't matter as long as the cash registers ring.

Traffic jams caused by toll booth delays are notorious in China. According to traffic law, when the line of waiting traffic is over 200 meters long and when all lanes at the toll booth are not fully open, drivers have the right to pass free. I have certainly run into such situations many times, and I have never enjoyed such a free ride.

And then there are the real free riders, whose costs have to be ultimately paid by ordinary citizens. For people in military vehicles, ambulance, fire-engines, and other men and women putting their life on the line to protect us citizens, I have no grudge against them saving a few yuan on the road. But for those high-ranking government official free riders who proclaim they are citizens' civil servants, I say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident ..."

A radio host in the US once said, "Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across most of the country from coast to coast without seeing anything."

The statement is bitterly sarcastic. But it is indeed true that it is possible to travel across the country in the US without paying anything. Will this ever be possible in China?