

July 5, 2006

GUANGZHOU JOURNAL

First Comes the Car, Then the \$10,000 License Plate

By [JIM YARDLEY](#)

GUANGZHOU, [China](#) — At a government auction inside a dingy gymnasium, a young businessman named Ding walked away a happy winner the other day. Like everyone else, he was bidding on license plates and did not seem to mind that his cost \$6,750.

For the same money, Mr. Ding could almost have afforded two of the Chinese-made roadsters popular in the domestic car market. His bid was almost 20 times what a Chinese farmer earns in a year, and almost 7 times the country's per capita annual income.

And yet, in the auction in this manufacturing capital in southern China, Mr. Ding, who gave only his last name, could not even claim top price. The most expensive plate — AC6688 — fetched \$10,000 on a day when officials sold hundreds of plates for a total of \$366,500.

"I thought it was rather cheap," said Mr. Ding, 30, a gold chain glinting under his open black sport shirt, as he walked off with the paperwork for APY888. "Since I have a nice car, I thought I should get a nice plate."

No country is more bonkers over cars than China, where achieving the new middle-class dream means owning a shiny new vehicle. But the car is not always enough for those who aspire beyond the middle class. A license plate has become almost as much of a status symbol as the car.

The reason is the potent blend of new-money aspirations and Old World superstitions. For centuries, numbers have served as a second language in China. The unluckiest number, 4, or si, which can also mean death in Chinese, is so dreaded that some buildings have no fourth floor. The luckiest number is 8, or ba, which rhymes with fa, the Chinese character for wealth. It is no coincidence that the Summer Olympics in Beijing will open on 8/8/08 at 8 p.m.

License plates are usually issued randomly. But in a country where 100,000 people die annually in traffic accidents, a plate that ends in 4 is considered a very bad omen for a superstitious motorist; it might as well read DEATH. Yet a plate overflowing with 8's portends good fortune.

Not willing to leave owning a lucky plate merely to luck itself, many people have tried to buy them, whether as a

sort of supernatural insurance policy or simply to flaunt wealth. Bribery has risen in several cities as officials have traded favorable plates for stuffed envelopes. Entrepreneurs also have tried to cash in. A man in the city of Hangzhou placed an Internet ad offering to sell his plate , A88888, for about \$140,000.

But with a wide gap between the rich and poor in China, a status plate can also be an object of resentment. In December 2003, a woman in Harbin ran over and killed a peasant who had scratched her Mercedes with his vegetable cart. When the woman initially escaped charges, witnesses assumed she had government ties because her car had an expensive license plate.

The aroma of corruption was enough that officials here in southern China decided to put the plates up for public auction and announced that proceeds would be dedicated to helping accident victims. A handful of other cities have also started auctions, including Ruian in Zhejiang Province, where the Chinese news media reported that one plate recently went for more than \$35,000.

Zhao Shu, chairman of the China Folk Art and Literature Association, said the infatuation with lucky plates was a gross distortion of traditional Chinese culture. "People are feeling empty and superficial," Mr. Zhao said. "They are not learning the traditional culture and they misunderstand it. It shows a very superficial culture. It's bragging by the new rich."

Mr. Zhao, who said the symbolism of numbers could be traced to Confucius as well as Taoism, said the current emphasis on 8 and 4 overlooked the fact that no number was solely lucky or unlucky. He said proper interpretation of numbers was far more nuanced and linked in meaning to the spoken language itself. Good fortune, he added, cannot be purchased with a bundle of 8's.

Yet, if anything, the public infatuation with numbers is growing. Mobile phone stores offer "lucky" numbers, some costing as much as \$2,000. A regional Chinese airline reportedly paid about \$300,000 to have 8888-8888 for a telephone number. Chinese newspapers reported that some parents refused to let their children ride taxis with "unlucky" license plates en route to taking the national college entrance exam.

Mao tried unsuccessfully to stamp out superstition. Now, numerology is just one of the superstitions that can make for a profitable consulting business. Some Chinese companies seek out such advice on product names, or which floor of a building to open an office, or whether the boss has a lucky telephone number.

"People have more money now and they want to spend it to get more luck," said Fang Mingyuan, who works in a Guangzhou agency that has provided such advice.

The auction in Guangzhou, the city's third, was held June 24 on Ersha Island, a sliver of soil in the Pearl River that has become home to some of the city's wealthiest people. About 200 bidders arrived on a broiling day, registered their banking information and were assigned a numbered auction paddle. Outside, the parking lot was stuffed

with BMW's, Volvos, Audis and Jaguars, a few fresh off the showroom floor without license plates.

"Welcome on such a hot day," said the auctioneer, a government official in a shiny black suit. "I wish you a successful afternoon." For good measure, he added: "And I wish you luck on gambling on the World Cup."

There was no shouting, no barking from the auctioneer. A few titters arose whenever a bidding war broke out. Some bidders were merely drivers representing their bosses. "He didn't want a specific plate number, but he said that 20,000 yuan was the maximum," said Liao Ruibin of his boss's willingness to spend the equivalent of \$2,500. "He has a Mercedes."

Mr. Liao spent about \$1,350 of his boss's money for APL238. "He has an expensive car and wants an expensive plate to match."

A woman who spent \$2,900 on APX333 said of the custom plates, "All my friends have them." Meanwhile, Mr. Ding, the salesman who spent \$6,750, said his friends "all have BMW's and Mercedeses. They all have good plates." His car is a new Chrysler and he said he considered his new plate a necessity.

"It's partly about prestige and status," he said.

Not everyone wanted the most expensive plates. Lu Yao, 21, said anytime "you see a nice car with four or five 8's, people know they must be rich." She and her parents paid about \$1,350 for APL128, a number that matched her birthday. Hours earlier, her mother surprised her father with a sport utility vehicle, and the family came directly from the sales lot.

"It's all these superstitions," said Ms. Lu, who attends college in California. "Apparently, my parents believe in it. We're Confucian. We believe in luck and numbers."

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
