

## OVERSEAS



# Avoiding the roads to ruin

In the latest of his series looking at public services around the world, Robin Hambleton takes a second look at China, this week examining transport policy



## Public Service Futures

In my last article in *The MJ* (21 October), I outlined the seismic changes now taking place in China.

A radical shift from a socialist past to a largely market-driven economy is taking place at breathtaking speed.

The holding of a Formula One motor race in Shanghai last month – the first such race in China – speaks volumes.

Just 10 years ago, the idea of western car company slogans translated into Chinese being displayed on the rear spoilers of high-performance racing cars zooming around a Chinese multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art race track would have seemed preposterous.

And suggesting that 10m Chinese would actually tune in to watch the race on television would have been beyond credible.

In September 2004, these 'inconceivable' things happened. Make no mistake, China is being transformed.

Unfortunately, some of the changes are profoundly unwelcome, and I now highlight three challenges for Chinese urban leaders.

Ironically, given that the Chinese Grand Prix will exacerbate the problem by encouraging car worship, challenge number one concerns urban transport.

Two parallel trends spell disaster for Chinese cities – a surge in car ownership coupled with a failure to make a massive investment in public trans-

port and create protected cycle routes. Car sales have increased at a rate of 50% over the last two years, and this rocketing trend is expected to continue. The road networks in Chinese cities simply cannot cope with this spiralling growth in car ownership, with the predictable consequence that horrendous traffic jams are now a part of daily life in Beijing, Shanghai and other major centres.

It is a sad fact that Chinese policies appear to be fostering a trajectory which emulates the mistakes made in many western cities – particularly US cities – where a misguided pattern of public investment has created an unsustainable, traffic-choked environment.

The traffic forecasts make for grim reading. Beijing was the first city in the country to reach 2m vehicles last year, and it is now virtually seized up for much of the day. It is expecting to have 3.5m vehicles by 2008. Projections for other urban centres shadow this pattern.

The human costs of failed transport planning embrace more than the massive waste of time and energy spent by citizens in avoidable traffic jams. Traffic accidents in China are killing 300 people a day.

While car ownership rates are far lower than in the West, more than 100,000 people have died in traffic accidents in China in each of the last two years. Things are not getting better.

Traffic accidents killed some 68,000 people and injured 302,000 across China in the first eight months of 2004. A total of 340,000 traffic accidents occurred between January

and August, a year-on-year rise of 24%. This has to be alarming for all Chinese city mayors and officials.

The second major challenge, and it is partly related to the traffic problem, concerns the environment – particularly air pollution.

Nine out of 10 of the world's most polluted cities are found in China. Estimates from the World Health Organization suggest that by next year, China may become the world's biggest source of air pollution.

The quality of the atmosphere in major cities such as Beijing and Xian is poor. Great canopies of smog are visible on hot and humid days. Traffic congestion is part of the problem but, in many cities, the main cause of pollution is the burning of coal. More than 70% of China's energy needs are met from coal and, at this point, renewable energy is uncompetitive against the heavily-subsidised coal industry.

A third challenge concerns the growing social polarisation within Chinese cities. Striking contrasts between the rich and poor are readily visible. It is clear that the economic restructuring I described last week is creating unprecedented opportunities for new entrepreneurs, but continuing grinding poverty remains the order of the day for many people.

In Beijing, new, gleaming office towers stand cheek-by-jowl with the hutongs – the traditional inner-city neighbourhoods – where local people scrape by on very low incomes.

Described as the boom city of the Pacific Rim, Shanghai exhibits even more striking contrasts. A remarkable upsurge in urban development

is generating a skyline with many spectacular modern buildings. Whether these new mega projects are creating jobs for local people is, however, more doubtful.

Chinese leaders are attempting to respond to these various challenges. For example, Beijing has vowed to create a 'Green Olympics' in 2008. It has detailed plans to power buses and taxis by natural gas energy by 2007, and intends to build a staggering five new subways in the next three years.

It is a safe bet that Beijing will enjoy astronomical public investment in the next four years. The Chinese Government is not about to host a global event which presents the country in a bad light because of lack of investment.

With good urban planning, the modernisation of Beijing for the Olympics should lead to lasting benefits for the capital. And those involved with the London Olympic bid for 2012 can be expected to watch closely to see what lessons can be drawn.

However, the much greater challenge for Chinese leaders and city planners is to address urban development problems that now present themselves across the whole of the country.

New thinking, and much more emphasis on sustainable approaches to urban regeneration, are now needed, if the new urban China is to avoid creating unhealthy cities with the kinds of social divisions that scar many cities in the wealthy west.

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