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# Zen and the Art of Motorcycling China

Visiting China in 1991, I left with vivid images of a thousand bicycles flooding Chinese roads. Never in my wildest dreams would I imagine traversing those same roads with hundreds of Harley-Davidsons. Twenty years later China now has more than 40,000 miles of highway (and 2.3-million miles of paved public roads). Within a few years China will surpass the United States and have the most extensive highway system in the world. Currently, motorcycles are restricted from elevated highways and some inner ring roads. In fact, 80 cities across China have some sort of motorcycle licensing, riding, or ownership restrictions. Some cities completely ban motorized two-wheel vehicles. It's reasoned that restricting motorcycles rather than cars decreases traffic on the congested urban streets.



Shanghai H.O.G. Chapter Head Road Captain James Rice (center) with, to his left, H.O.G. President Alan Laurance and John Yang of Eagle Rider rentals.



Harleys make front-page news in China.

SIX DAYS, 1,600 MILES

## RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Honored with the opportunity to participate in the 3rd annual Chinese Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) event, I flew nonstop from Los Angeles to Shanghai. It's a 14-hour flight that is about as pleasant as a dentist appointment. The upside is there's no drilling, but I do suggest sedatives regardless. Arriving at the fabulous J.W. Marriott hotel in downtown Shanghai, a beautiful young concierge assisted me in contacting the Shanghai Harley-Davidson dealership. She cooed, "Oooo! Harley-Davidson. Real men ride Harleys..." I already felt at home. I met up with James Rice, Head Road Captain for the Shanghai H.O.G. Chapter. An American who has lived and worked in China for 22 years, James has become an unofficial ambassador for Harley-Davidson here. An avid rider, he single-handedly engaged members in his weekly rides earning him his Head Road Captain status. He even brings Chinese members to ride in California several times a year. Harley currently has seven dealerships and H.O.G Chapters in China with about 375 registered members. The largest being the Beijing Chapter, followed by Shanghai. We discussed the next seven-day itinerary and rules of the road. "Americans are used to the Right of Way," James stated. "In China, it's First Right:

whomever is first has the right of way, which means everyone is vying for the same space at all times." China's 100-million scooters/125cc motorbikes obey no traffic laws whatsoever. They weave helmetless through opposing traffic ignoring all signals and signs, carting around families, packed with goods...at night.

**RULE #1**  
**There are no rules**

**RULE #2**  
**Size, attitude, and position are the keys to survival**

I needed a shakedown run. We took to the bedlam that is Shanghai and hit the streets. Motorcycles are low on the evolutionary size scale; cars, trucks, and buses rule so that leaves us with attitude and position. This is why riding a big, rumbling Harley-Davidson is perfect in China. At any given moment, there are three objects within your field of vision, moving on an intercept trajectory. As the Audi drifts into your lane from the left, you accelerate between two over-loaded trucks while a scooter moving in from your right field of view accelerates to avoid the pedestrian directly in front of you. Horn honking is the soundtrack to this real life video game and *you're* the target. This is not for the timid or faint of heart. Riding here is exhilarating.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Gary Koz Mraz



Shanghai Koz

Shanghai Harley-Davidson staff members

**PART 1**

**ON HARLEY-DAVIDSONS**



Moving on an intercept trajectory

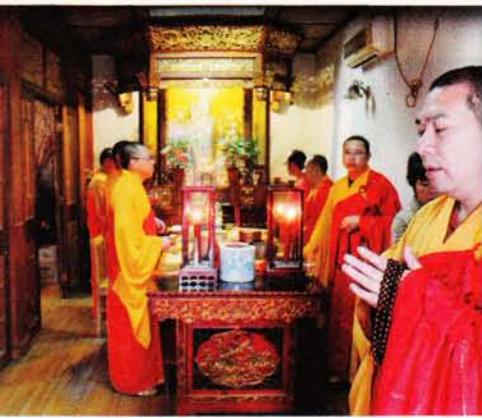


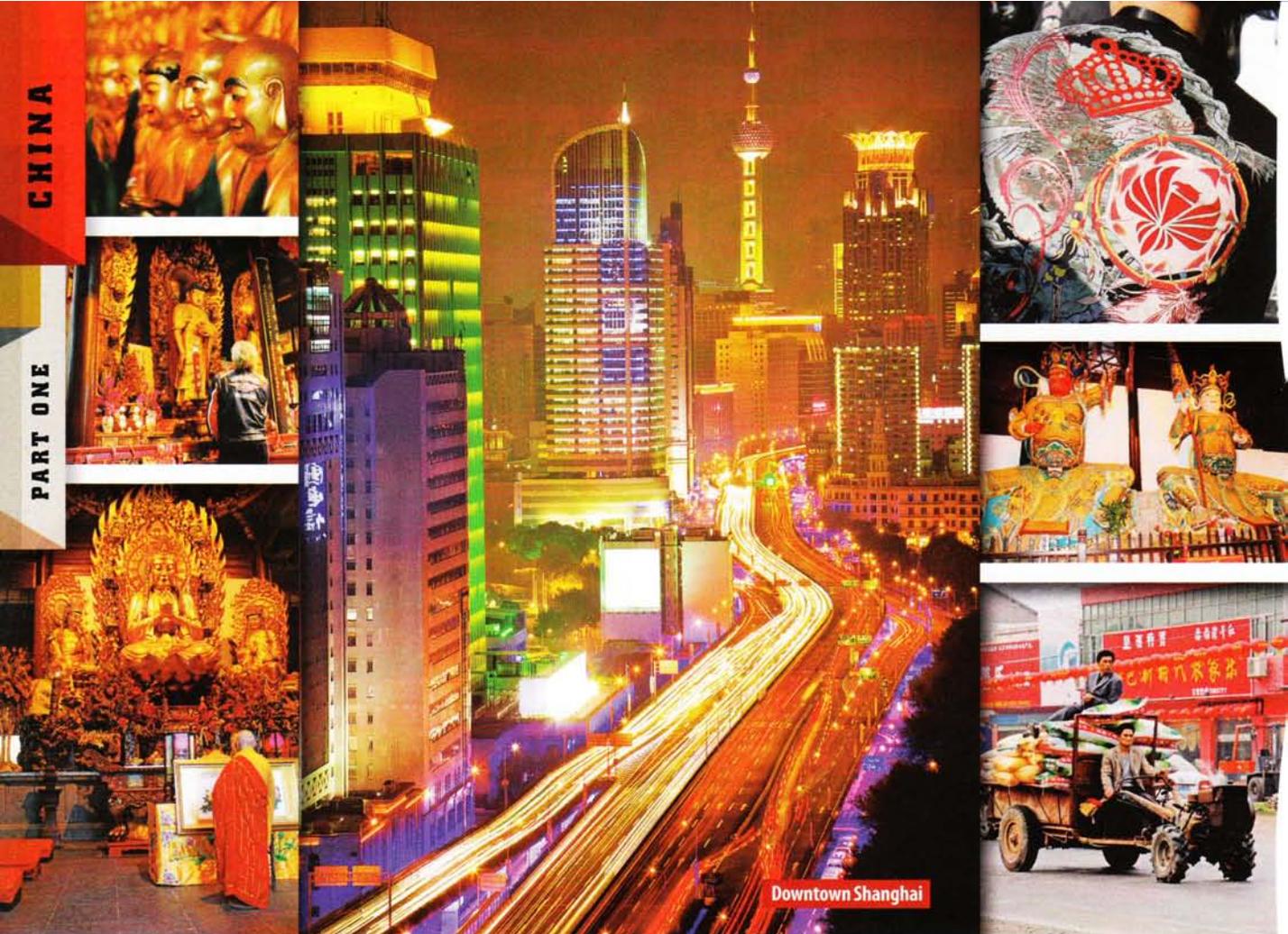
China has 100-million active motorcyclists, (almost a third of the U.S. population) and 99 percent of them are commuting to and from work. The concept of motorcycle allies, poker runs, or even leisure riding in general is a completely foreign concept. In fact, riding a large displacement Harley-Davidson at all is a foreign concept. But motorcycling in China will surely become big business. Much of China's Silk Road, linking Shanghai to Kyrgyzstan has been transformed into a modern highway. Route 312 is 3,000 miles of mother road waiting to cradle the purr of an Electra Glide's big bore roar. However, many legal issues and local restrictions need be overcome, such as the 11-year, "Scrap Law." Currently, all motorcycles are to be scrapped before they're 12 years old and it's a very good tactic to eliminate smog-spewing two-stroke 125cc scooters. Almost all the scooters I saw in the major cities are

now electric. A commendable step towards improving air quality, but the thought of scrapping a modern 11-year-old Harley Electra Glide is mind numbing.

James Rice, Craig Franz (Owner of Westminster (California) Harley-Davidson), and several Shanghai H.O.G.s spent the day with me navigating everything from side streets to city center. James' knowledge of Shanghai is extraordinary and is often requested to give visiting notables tours around town. He escorted Republican Presidential candidate Jon Huntsman while in Shanghai and refreshed actor Bill Paxton's riding skills while filming the upcoming feature film *Shanghai Calling*, scheduled for release in early 2012. Bill Paxton's character in the movie is actually based on James, but the life of James Rice is a whole other story.

We visited Lohua Temple, the largest Buddhist temple





Downtown Shanghai

in Shanghai, founded in 247 AD. The present Pagoda dates from 977, during the Song Dynasty. It's not open to visitors due to its age and fragility and can only be admired from a distance. Made of wood and brick, the delicate octagonal structure has seven stories, each topped with upturned "flying eaves" from which tiny bells are suspended. It was once the tallest structure in Shanghai. The rest of the temple centers around four main halls dating from around 1900. They are: the Maitreya Hall, the Hall of the Heavenly King, the Grand Hall, and the

Three Sage Hall. Each houses the three treasures of the temple including the Dazang sutras, the gold seals, and the Buddhist statues.

That evening, overlooking China's most modern city from high atop the Marriott, I contemplated my next day's departure to the H.O.G. rally in Qingdao. Far below, a six-lane elevated expressway gridlocked with Mercedes Benz's and Audis grinds through the heart of downtown. In a city of 23-million people, the hazy Shanghai skyline is punctuated with massive modern skyscrapers puzzled together with

high-rises as far as the eye can see. In fact, there are more skyscrapers in Shanghai alone than all of America. Shanghai is China's New York City; home of their stock exchange. A single apartment in the heart of downtown costs 1-million US dollars. This is a completely different world than I visited 20 years ago, and I can't imagine what lies ahead.

## DAY ONE SHANGHAI TO YANCHENG

A dozen of the Shanghai H.O.G.s met downtown, and we departed

“ THE LONGEST JOURNEY BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP. ”  
LAO TZU



PHOTO BY REN JIE

**TIP:** Shanghai J.W Marriot manager Michael Malik (a Shanghai H.O.G. member) is extending special rates to H.O.G. members visiting Shanghai.



city center. Once in rural Shandong province, the chaos actually intensified. Since we can't ride the elevated expressways or highways, it's all narrow secondary two-lane roads cutting through small villages and towns and is complete lawlessness. Beyond the arbitrary pulling into oncoming traffic or driving on the wrong side of the road,

the miasma of cars, scooters, bicycles, and bizarre overloaded machines made Shanghai seem like a synchronized swim team. Plus, it was raining. I had to step up my game considerably because these riders live here and they do this all the time. Craig is a former police officer. He absolutely loved this riding style, beaming, "It's like being in pursuit

all day." We travelled through tiny rural areas that have never seen or heard the sound of Harley's big V-twin, and they absolutely loved it. A crowd of smiling, inquisitive faces surrounded us wherever we stopped. The roar of a dozen loud Harleys literally shut down daily activity. An intoxicating concoction of newfound celebrity and brashness of *The Wild One*, we dominated everywhere we went. I don't know where else a dozen Harleys could roll in and get the respect of a king, yet ride like a cowboy. Yes, there were harrowing moments but Jim Rice is a master of attitude and position and kept the group moving safely. These riders all work together seamlessly as a team, wearing full-face

Hauling houses with motorcycles

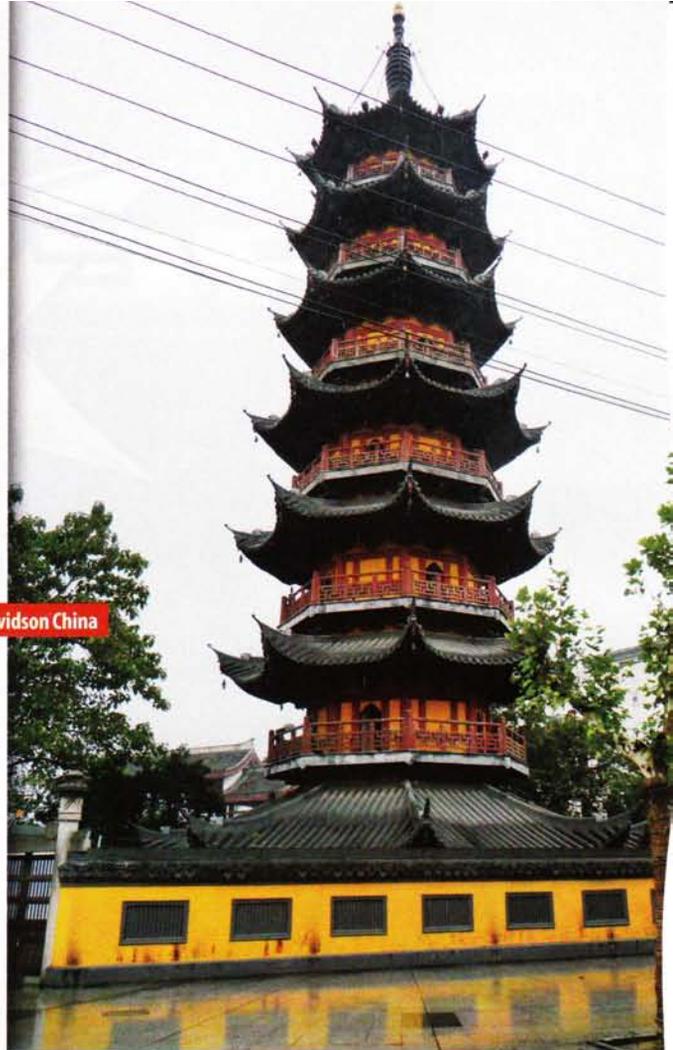


Bizarre contraptions



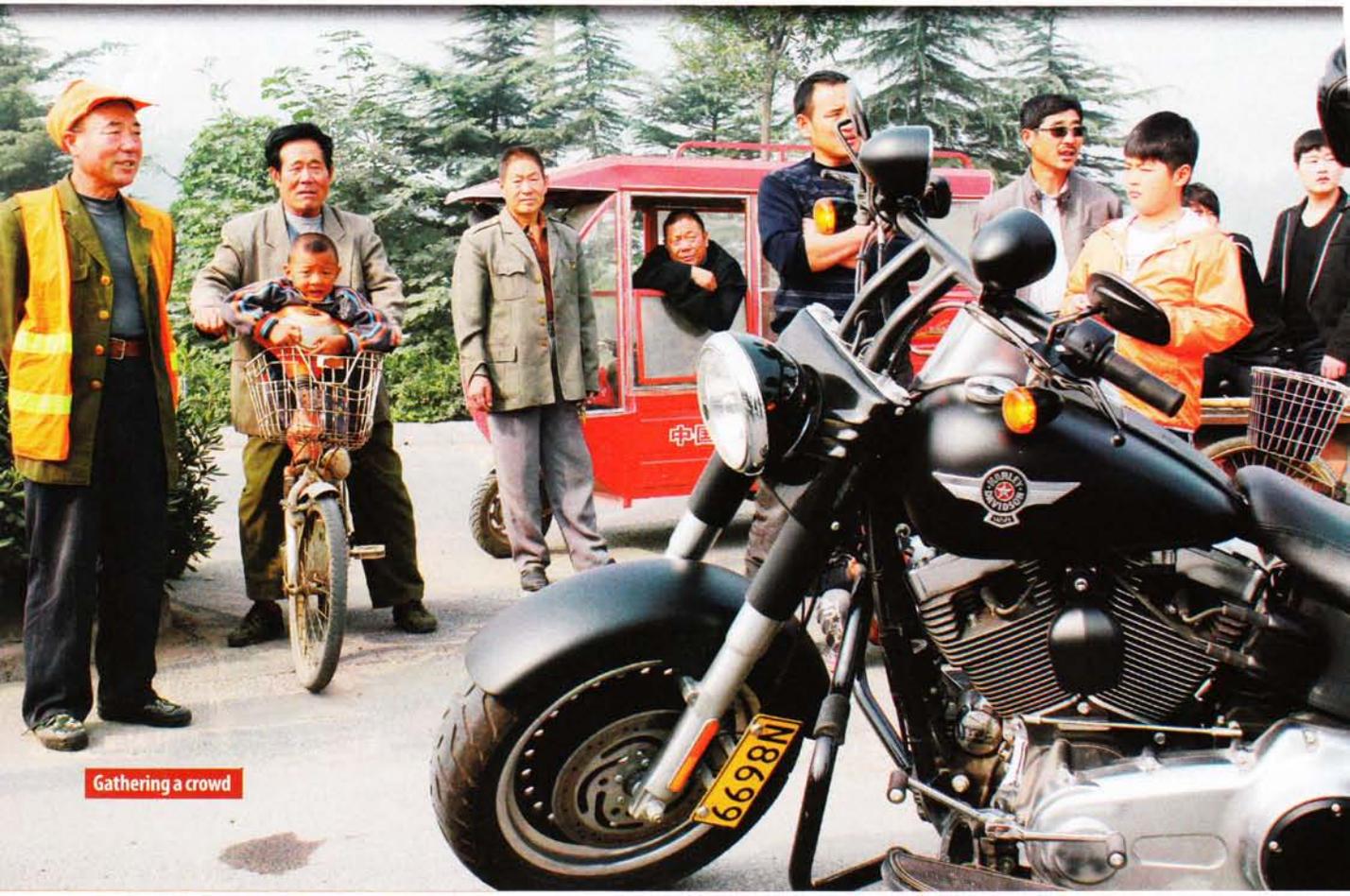


Sean Jiang, Managing Director Harley-Davidson China



helmets, protective riding gear, and handle their motorcycles with impressive skill. Stopping for lunch in Nantong, my first meal was comprised of traditional Chinese white rice, tea, whole cooked fish, vegetables, and a previously live chicken picked by a fellow rider.

The game of dodge ball began again, but after several hours of riding, what had earlier seemed like sheer madness became an orchestrated ballet of rhythm and motion. My breathing relaxed, pulse slowed, and instead of fixating on random moving targets and anticipating my every move, I saw the entire surreal scene unfolding like a lotus blossom before me. It became a beautiful, effortless ebb and flow of man, machine, and motion. I had found Zen and the art of motorcycling China.



Gathering a crowd



“ WHAT THE SUPERIOR MAN SEEKS IS IN HIM;  
WHAT THE SMALL MAN SEEKS IS IN OTHERS ”  
CONFUCIUS

## DAY TWO YANCHENG TO QINGDAO

The ballet begins again and the deeper we went into China, the more bizarre driving etiquette became. Massive buses barrel down the wrong side of the road. Overloaded trucks spill loads, and bicycle carts head directly into high-speed traffic, but hey, that's China and today is sunny. The air became cooler and less acrid. This day's ride included two ferry crossings: one the Yangtze River, the second Jiaozhou Bay to Qingdao. We dined in the village of Guanyun but today's menu included deer tendons, chicken feet, fried frog

tongues (don't eat the ligaments though) to marrow sipped right from the bone with a straw. Pick your own sea snake or turtle to be barbecued and served up fresh; we weren't in Kansas anymore, kids.

Finally out in rural China, new roads wound through tree-lined panoramas surrounded by lush green fields of soybeans and corn. Able to spend some time in Sixth-gear, I surveyed the landscape. Brick buildings that look hundreds of years old are juxtaposed against brand-new two story homes. Farmers drying out their corn crops against the background of new

**TIP:** Wear a full-face helmet and foam-rimmed eyewear not only for safety but to help keep the dust out of your eyes.





We were not buying fish for the aquarium.



Riding between two worlds

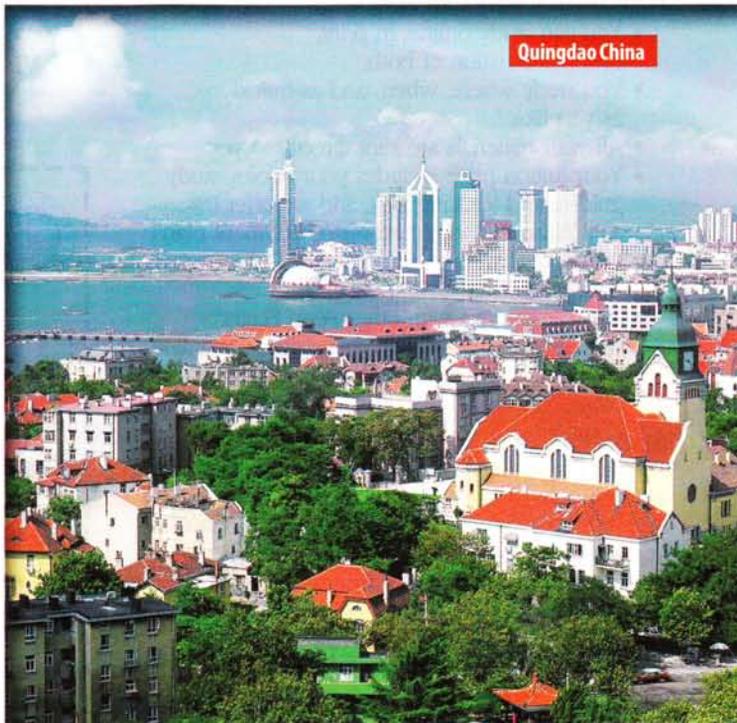
construction; new homes, new roads, new towns and cities sprout like mushrooms. Traveling through tepid pockets of air, scents ranged from peach blossoms to sewer stench—that is the dichotomy that is China. We stopped for a smoke (everybody smokes in China), and I found a gravesite near the road. It was property that's probably been in a family for hundreds of years that now has paved roads bringing modern motorcycles rumbling through. A Chinese man bicycling by stopped to gawk at the Harleys. We were Yin & Yang: he, like me, was riding the specter between two worlds.

### DAY THREE NATIONAL CHINESE H.O.G CHAPTER EVENT, QINGDAO

Qingdao is a city of 7-million and epicenter for the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Harley Owners Group event. A beautiful city by the sea renowned for its Tsingtao beer, it has become a big vacation destination for the Chinese. It's a major port city boasting

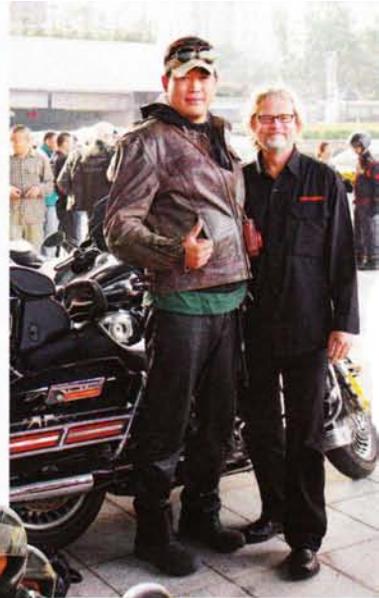
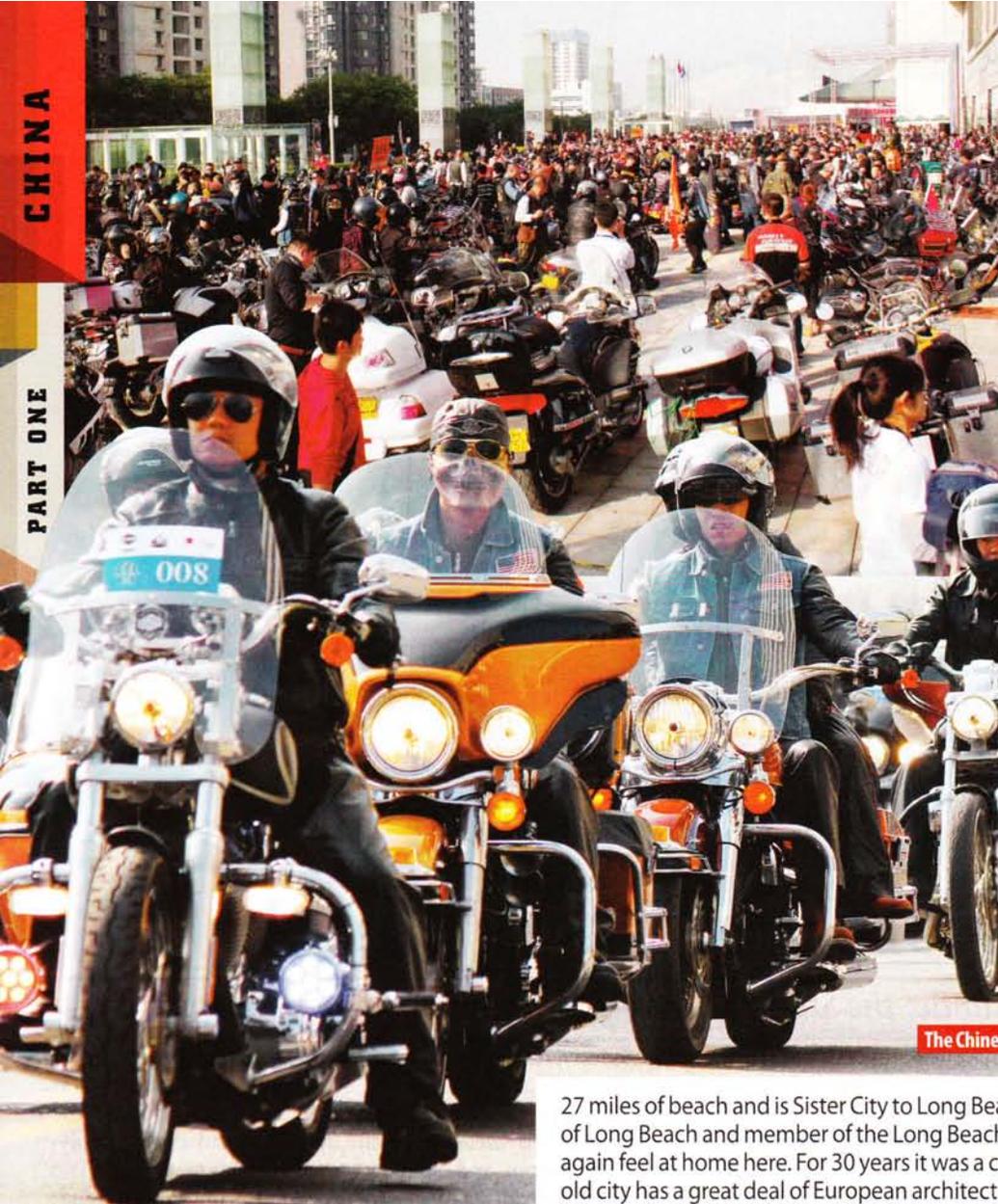


Roadside headstone



Qingdao China

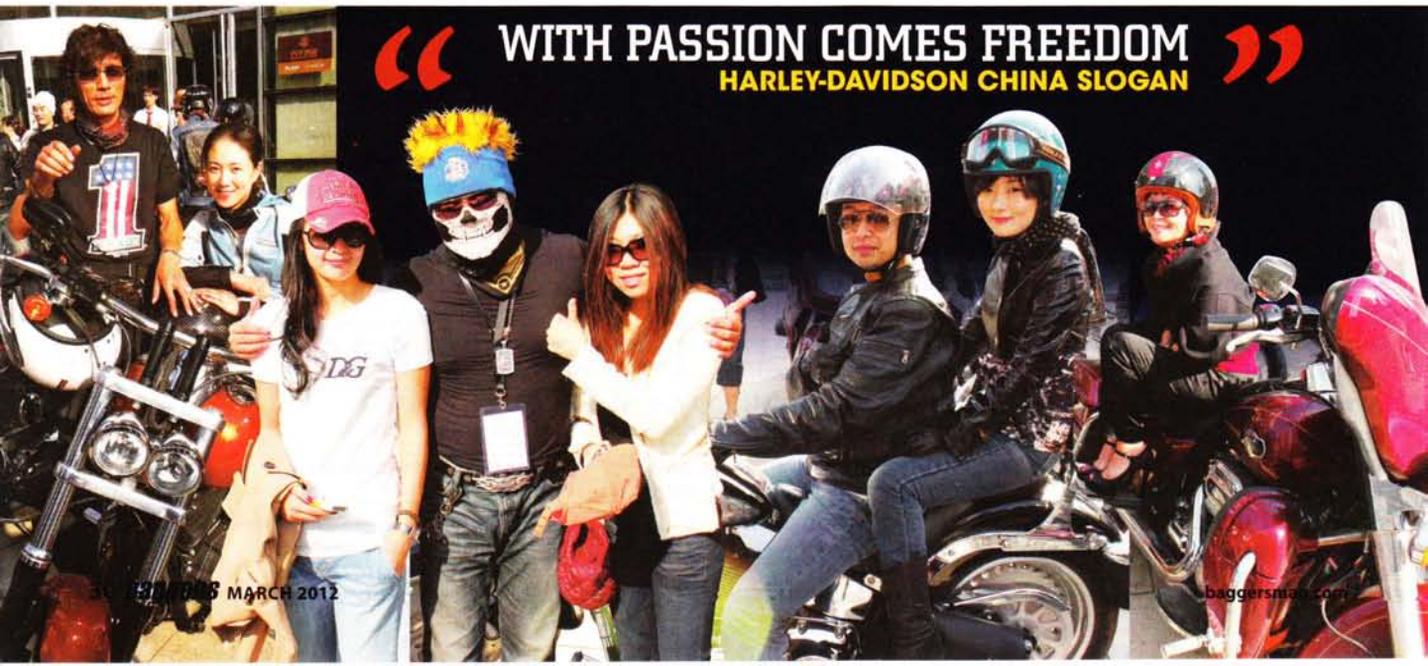
先考黄志祥府君  
丁巳年十二月十九日生 一九九二年八月二日  
先妣刘米珍孀人  
丁卯年七月十六日生 二〇〇二年二月十日  
二〇〇九年黄门子孙敬



The Chinese have no problem riding big Harleys.

27 miles of beach and is Sister City to Long Beach, California. A resident of Long Beach and member of the Long Beach Qingdao Association, I again feel at home here. For 30 years it was a colony of Germany and its old city has a great deal of European architecture. A major cruiseship dock is currently in planning stages and it's easy to see why Qingdao is fast becoming a global tourist destination.

All seven Chinese Harley dealerships, an estimated 300 riders, and



“ WITH PASSION COMES FREEDOM ”  
HARLEY-DAVIDSON CHINA SLOGAN



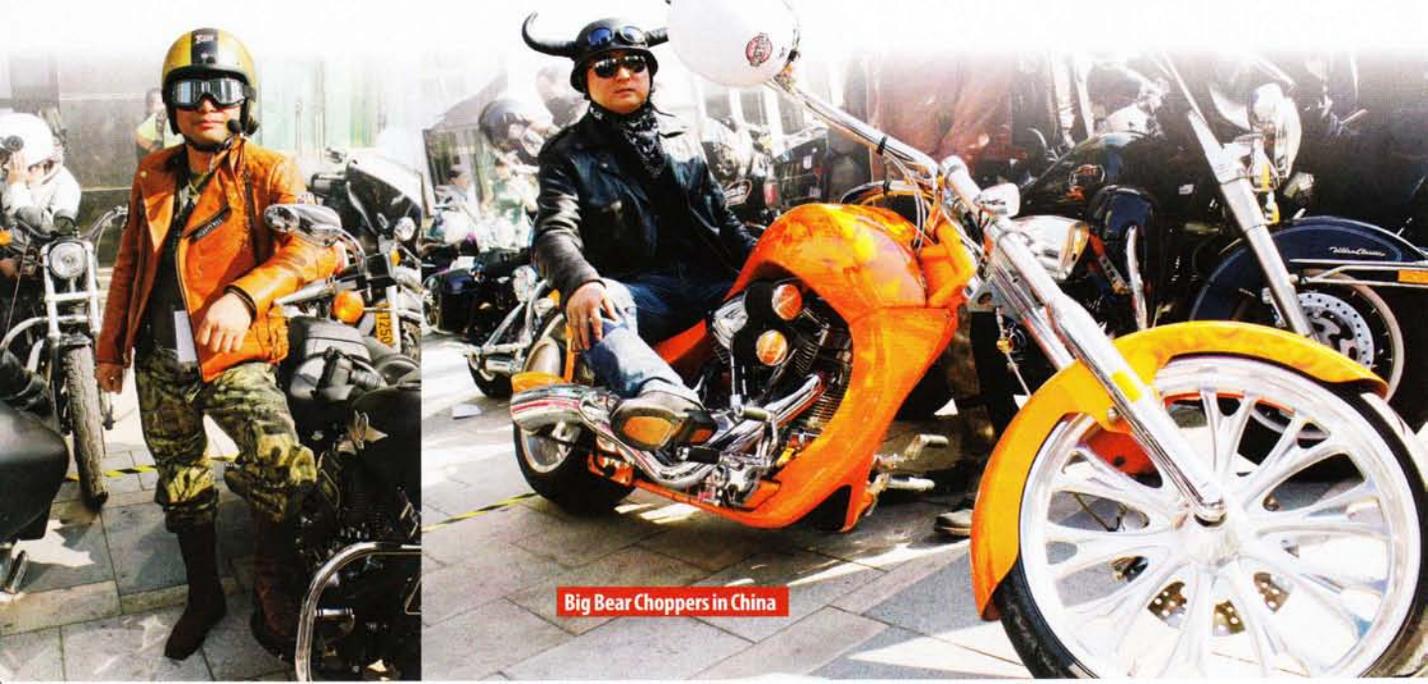
hundreds of others participated in the two-day event. The evening's opening ceremonies included a reception followed by dinner. The next morning hundreds of riders gathered in front of the hotel for pre-ride instructions and each chapter was invited onstage. Motorcycles from Big Bear Choppers, custom one-offs, and a sea of Harleys graced the grounds. The excitement was electric. All of this is relatively new to Chinese culture. Since Chinese riders have a "First Right" riding etiquette, organized rides seem a bit disorganized with riders converging in and out of traffic and racing ahead.

I was fortunate to spend some time with Sean Jiang, Managing Director of Harley-Davidson China (HDC). Sean explained that he and HDC are piloting the publication of a "White Paper" for submission to the government and general public. In China, White Papers are used as a means of presenting government policy prior to the introduction of legislation. Publication of a White Paper serves to test the climate of public opinion regarding policy issues and enables the government to gauge its probable impact. "Its purpose is to first outline and describe

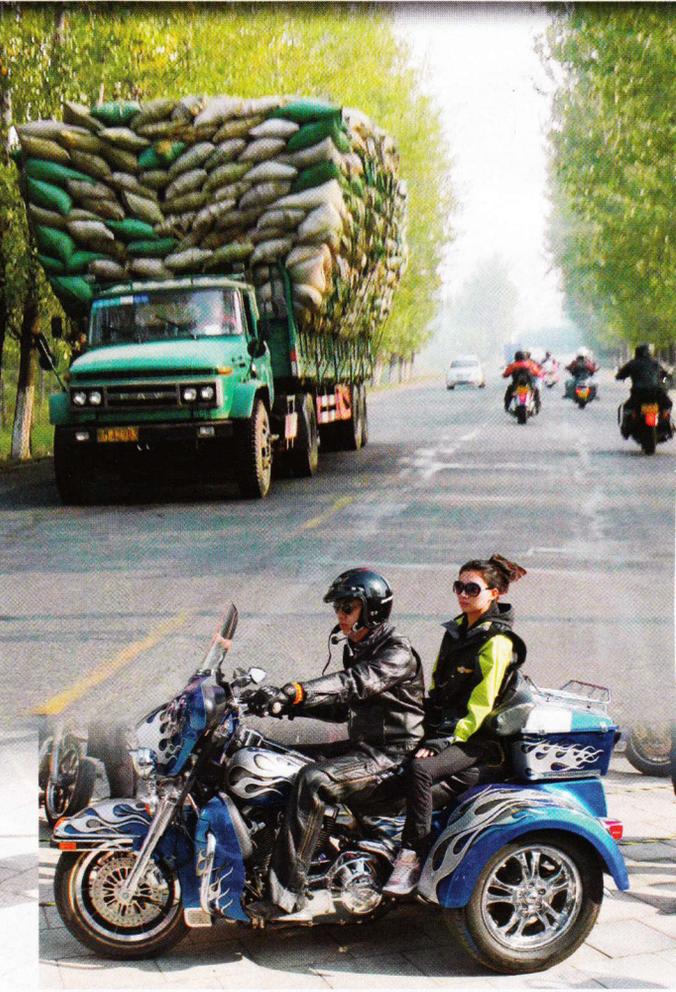
current conditions and practices. Secondly, offer suggestions for best practices and policies; and finally, offer proposals advising how to mitigate current restrictions and address large-displacement motorcycles in China," Sean stated.

In reality, current motorcycle standards are not designed to consider large-displacement motorcycles and need to be revamped or amended. The cost of a Harley-Davidson can be upwards of two times that in the U.S. because of all the import duties and taxes. The 11-year scrap rule and expressway riding restrictions are other major issues. Beijing only has 30,000 large-displacement-motorcycle license plates available and the only way to acquire one is when a prior owner relinquishes it. At a cost of about \$4,000 US, China has the most expensive motorcycle license plate in the world. "Everything considered, Chinese customers are actually the most passionate because they have to jump through hoops in order to own and ride a Harley in China," Sean stated. The Chinese can purchase large cc Hondas, Yamahas, or BMWs, but they *want* Harley-Davidsons.

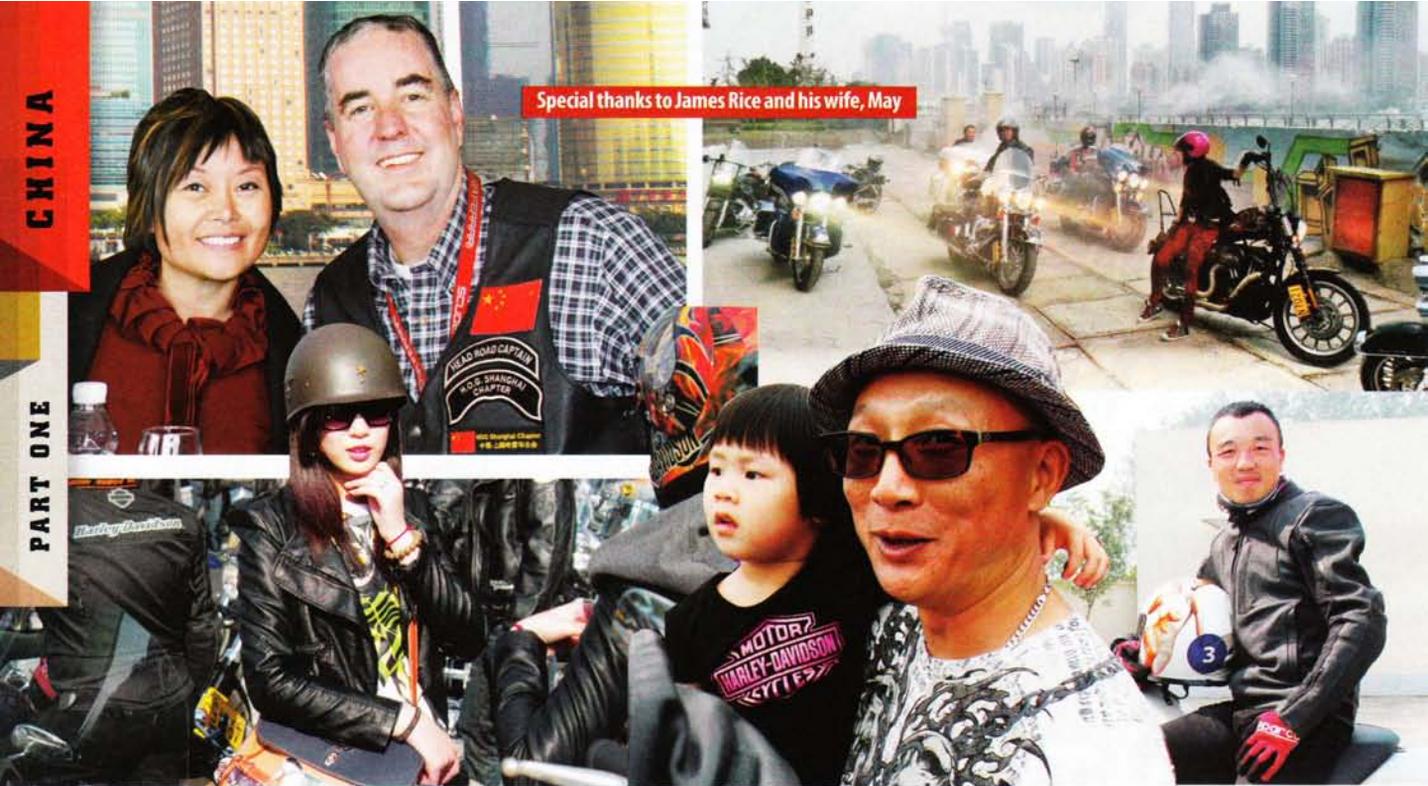
Sean recounted his first exposure to a large



Big Bear Choppers in China



Special thanks to James Rice and his wife, May



motorcycle ride. While in Washington D.C., he witnessed a 9/11 motorcycle event with thousands of riders. "The solidarity, sense of respect and honor for the lost, yet hope for the future was overwhelming. It impressed me very deeply," Sean stated. "When the opportunity arose to become Managing Director of H-D China, I didn't have a second thought." Ironically, I had brought "Remember 9/11" memorial coins from this year's Long Beach 9/11

motorcycle event as a gift. His charming smile turned serious as he carefully examined each coin. "The events of 9/11 changed everyone," he murmured in a hushed tone. Sean Jiang has challenges ahead but knows change is imminent and less restriction on imports means more sales in China and more exports of Harley-Davidsons to the world's largest population. If he can help ease restrictions, grow the dealer network, and rally support of the H.O.G

chapters, Sean Jiang will embody the slogan, With Passion Comes Freedom, and be the man that brought Harley-Davidson to China.

Ultimately, the event was a huge success: meeting the other chapter members, perusing their motorcycles, and riding to the rally. It felt as though I was participating in something historic. When 50,000 riders converge for the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual HDC Qingdao Bike week, I will be there. ●



Ride with me next issue for Zen Part 2

## RIDING ON THE DRAGON'S BACK: Deeper into Rural China



Sean Jiang with yours truly.