

# Holy People in the Taxi



Photo credit: Terry Chow

The streets of Hong Kong's Wan Chai district are bustling with traffic. Yet people seem to be entirely oblivious to the cars and wander across streets pushing rickety carts piled with colored plastic house-wares, flattened old cardboard boxes and the occasional pile of dead pigs with wobbly flesh. Shirtless men run across the street carrying plastic buckets filled with water and eels attempting escape. They splash murky water as they run. Old ladies over-laden with dozens of colored plastic bags with recent wet-market purchases shuffle around the people crowded in open air shops haggling over the price of animal parts I care not to try to identify.

The shouts of street vendors fill even the quiet space inside the taxi. The taxi cab jerks as it continuously stops for the pedestrians as they stream to and from the bustling street market. It is hard to believe that in less than 5 minutes, if we can just navigate through the wet-market crowd, we will be in Central where the streets glitter and ultra-modern skyscrapers reflect the images of the endless array of chic couture shops that align street level.

The taxi cab driver makes small talk. I try to appear busy with my blackberry but it does not deter him. "Where you from?" he asks. "Live Hong Kong, eight years," I respond.

I have learned to simplify my speech, removing all 'extra' parts of speech, especially prepositions which entirely fail to exist in my taxi cab lingo. I am concise, perhaps a bit terse. In transit, my eight year old has often asked me why my English is so bad, as I break every grammatical rule I have ever drilled into her: "Make right", "Make left" with an occasional *Lido* (here) or *Do* (Road) sprinkled in.

"What country you come from?" he clarifies.

"United States," I hesitantly offer. Fortunately, in Hong Kong, unlike other places I have traveled to, this usually does not inspire tirades, but rather sometimes an occasional footnote that they would like to go, their brother has been or they saw one or another American television show.

"No," he insists, "No U. S. of A. You not look U. S. of A. Not

American," he insists glancing at me in the rearview mirror. I look quizzical.

Don't look American? This is one of the strangest comments I have heard. What does an American look like I wonder? I think of the faces that make up the America I know. They are diverse. They are colored. They are white. They look like any of the jean-clad Asians on the passing street. They look like the occasional Western tourist being shoved along with a crumpled map in hand in the rush hour frenzy. I certainly fit somewhere in that patchwork. When strangers try to guess my nationality, Italian, French and American all certainly make it to the top three. He sees my perplexed expression.

"No Blond. No ponytail," he responds.

"Watches too much *Beverly Hills 90210*. Too much *Bay Watch*," I think to myself.

"Who are your people? Where your people come from?" he asks.

I should just ask him where he thinks I am from, agree and end the conversation.

There is in fact no easy answer. As my great-grandparents fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe and divorced themselves of any connection to the Old World once they arrived in Ellis Island, to say I am Russian would be absurd. They weren't Russians. I am certainly not. They lived in a shtetl, spoke Yiddish and dreamed of the day they could flee from persecution.

Traffic is at a standstill. I could respond Russia though and just end this conversation. I should.

"I am Jewish," I respond.

"The Jesus. The Jesus. The Jesus?" he says as he bobs his head with his hands pressed together.

Again, I can agree and end the conversation here. I notice the small Buddha statue on his dashboard, placed between the eclectic display of gumball machine-type trinkets, miniature taxis and the golden cat with the one arm that bobs up and down as the taxi cab totters on the old cable car tracks.

"No, Jewish...Judaism...Jewish...Israel" I say. He looks perplexed. "The Chosen People. People of the Book. The Promised Land," I offer. By his expression, I see I am getting nowhere.

"*Youtai* (Chinese word for Jewish)," I hesitantly offer.

He abruptly removes his hands from the wheel and turns completely around to look at me.

"So lucky," he sings. "I never before have the Holy People in my taxi. Never before. So lucky, lucky."

"Not THAT lucky," I remonstrate. "Turn around! Please! Put hands back on wheel."

For a second he returns his hands to wheel and looks at the road ahead.

But again, he lets go and turns completely around to look at me.

"So smart. So clever," he says. "The Holy People in my taxi. Make so much big money. Read so many books. Study so much. Lucky."

I assure him again that I am not so lucky. Rules of the road and basic properties of physics are very much still in effect, even in my presence.

Truth be told, I would actually very much like to continue this conversation and wish that we both had the communication skills to do so. So many interesting preconceived notions have come up somewhere between Johnston Road, Wan Chai and Queens Road, Central. He has a definite idea of what Americans look like, which apparently I don't fit nor do most of the people I know, and although he has never met a Jew before he also has a very detailed perception of Jewish characteristics. I am wearing ripped jeans, converse sneakers and obviously only possess the ability to speak about 15 word of his language despite the fact that I have lived here for 8 years, yet I am now in his mind clearly both wealthy and smart.

We are approaching my stop. "*Lido* (here)," I shout as he excitedly chatters in Cantonese into the headset connected to one of the five phones he has attached with rubber bands to his dashboard. He simultaneously chatters over the static to the dispatcher. I assume he is busy spreading the news of his good fortune.

Again, "*Lido!* Stop here," I shout to get his attention. He abruptly stops. With my open wallet in hand, I look at the meter. He places his hand over the numbers and turns around and smiles.

"No charge for you. So lucky, lucky for me. Holy People in my taxi." ✎