

# Road blocks to Asian growth

“Choking Congestions” livestream focuses on how traffic bottlenecks affect economies across region



**Masses of vehicles** move slowly on a road in a traffic jam during rush hours in Beijing on Sept 30. Beijing is using urban planning to spread out 5.8 million registered vehicles through its ring roads. IMAGINECHINA

By **DAVID HO** in Hong Kong  
for *China Daily Asia Weekly*

The latest China Daily Red Letter Project took viewers to road congestions at its worst in seven Asian metropolises, likely while they were scrolling Facebook while stuck in traffic themselves.

Starting from 7 am (Hong Kong time), the “Choking Congestions” livestream showed what the situation is like to travel during the rush hour on the congested roads of Beijing, Manila, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok, Jakarta, Dhaka and New Delhi.

During the four-and-a-half-hour livestream, we saw the mad scramble that is part of daily life in the region — extra lanes being opened for excessive traffic in Bangkok, a train breakdown in Manila affecting thousands of commuters and how long it took our reporters to emerge from Beijing traffic.

Beyond the on-the-go coverage, we also heard from the people on these roads — a driver revealing it can take him an hour to travel 1 km on Dhaka’s roads, a working mother, who changed jobs to cut down on her four-and-a-half-hour commute, the frustrations of a student with daily commutes to her university in Manila and how others are finding novel ways to fight the congestion problem.

Our viewers also chipped in with

their takes during this interactive experience.

Transportation clearly plays a central role in the social lives of people. Yap Kioe Sheng, a traffic and urbanization expert who joined us in the Hong Kong studio, said it is not uncommon to give people a margin of one hour to be late for appointments in Bangkok.

This culture of tardiness has implications, both socially and economically.

“In many households, there are parents who never see their children much because they leave home early and come back late. A lot of children end up being raised by their grandmothers,” said Yap.

We could put faces to such examples during the project. Like Ria Nurrachman, a mother in Jakarta who ended up switching careers due to the almost five-hour daily round trip for her previous job. She ended up choosing work that allowed her “more energy and family time.”

Then, there is also the toll it takes on the environment.

“We have to think of the environmental impact of a car’s two to three hours on the road,” said Yap.

US think tank Rand Corporation said air pollution takes away 6.5 percent of China’s gross domestic product. This is measured in terms of both the impact on health and the subsequent loss of labor.

“Police officers suffer from pollution problems too. Then, there are

people buying and selling fruits by the road who’re affected. It (the effects of pollution) becomes a class problem in society,” Yap said, after a segment showing a traffic police officer managing the roads in Bangkok.

Besides being a major annoyance in daily life, traffic congestion has also cut into productivity in the region. According to the Asian Development Bank, traffic congestion costs Bangkok 6 percent of its GDP.

One key takeaway from the discussion is the importance of urban planning — an often neglected component in the expansion of many metropolises.

Beijing has been using urban planning in an effort to spread out 5.8 million registered vehicles through its ring roads. Construction of the 700-km-long 7th Ring Road is expected to be completed next year.

The 7th Ring Road, also known as the G95 Capital Region Ring Expressway, will reach beyond the borders of Beijing. Xi Lefu, editor-in-chief of road transport website ChinaRTA.com, said it is an attempt to move industries and functions from the capital’s core to places like Xiongan New Area.

The new economic cluster could play host to the country’s tech industry, similar to Shenzhen’s in the south. There are already plans to build it as both a standalone and as part of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei economic triangle.

Car ownership was a topic touched on quite a few times in the project.

In Thailand, our reporters discussed the lack of a limit on car ownership. A whopping 300,000 vehicles were registered in Bangkok in the first four months of this year, pushing the total number to 9.5 million.

Reducing car ownership is a solution. Xi revealed during the stream that Beijing’s government has been monitoring the issue since 2011.

From 2014 to 2017, Beijing has brought down its annual registration quota of vehicles from 240,000 to 150,000. And the number will be cut further to 100,000 next year.

But that is not a one-size-fits-all solution for other places.

In Dhaka, we learned that women need cars for both transportation and security as many deem public transport an unsafe option.

“We have to make sure the public transport we’re promoting fits the needs of all groups,” suggested Yap, about making public transport an attractive option.

Beijing’s government has also done a lot to improve the public transportation sector in the last few years, including increasing its availability.

“The Beijing subway system has 19 lines in operation, with more under construction,” Xi said.

Delhi seems to be following that lead, as it just gave the nod to a plan for 10,000 buses in the Indian city for next year.

## Sound your horn

**Thomas R. Eggers:** I’ve been in rush hours in Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, Manila. Beijing and Manila don’t move, Tokyo was slow and steady, Taiwan was wild because all the cars are surrounded by the scooters, and at sunset they all look like bumblebees with their helmets.

**Li Yaqi:** It’d be great if we could get a transcript of this conversation that I could share with my students in our class!

**Sneha Susan Verghese:** Traffic traffic everywhere!! Cities bursting at the seams!! Innovative live show from China Daily.

**Ivan Abreu:** Great project. Very important issue. I would love to see a bit more of the city scenes to experience how is the traffic in those places.

**Auranzeb Chowdhry:** There should be (an) international agenda to expand roads in all cities in order to avoid rush (hour) pollution, fuel loss and worthy (valuable) time loss.

## Talking traffic

**China Daily:** What do you do when stuck in traffic?

**Michael Esguerra:** Nothing... keep cool...

**China Daily:** How long is your commute every day?

**Neil Neil:** 2-4 hours from Manila to Manila. Yikes.

**China Daily:** Where in Asia did you have your worst traffic jam?

**Linda Jan:** Manila has the worst traffic jams.

**Lin Yanxiu:** Definitely in Jakarta. There is no doubt that Jakarta is the most congest(ed) city in the world. 8 km (and you) can be choking for 3 hours!!!!!! What a shame!!!!!!

**China Daily:** Which mode of travel makes traffic the worst? Cars, motorcycles or trucks?

**Naomi:** They all play a part in traffic congestion.

**China Daily:** What’s your most unforgettable experience when stuck in traffic?

**Maan D’asis Pamaran:** I was stuck in horrible Metro Manila traffic last week. There was an ambulance behind us. I hope whoever was in it made it to the hospital in time.