

A GOOD MORNING

By Simon Johnston

Henry Wing On cracked a self-satisfied grin as he exited the 7/11. Chinese people never like to pay full price for anything and he had just scored a real bargain - his first all-zone unlimited travel pass for seniors. It had cost \$52. Better than half price.

The pass fit snugly into a clear plastic sleeve (which was included in the purchase price). He popped it into his breast pocket and crossed the road to join a line-up at the bus stop. He couldn't wait for the eleventh trip because that would be the start of free travel!

Earlier that morning he had announced this to his daughter. Without looking up from her iPhone she had said: "I got you a new cap – it's a Nike." She took a sip of tea, nibbled on a pork bun he had warmed up for her and exited their apartment. Her thumbs tapped on the little screen like beaks of demented chickens. He wondered if they let her use that thing at the bank during office hours.

Henry liked riding the bus because Translink's practices aligned with Chinese values. His new "Concession Pass" showed respect for seniors. He also liked the reserved seating up front. But best of all he could now ride the bus to the ferry terminal and walk on any vessel for free from Mondays to Thursdays. Indeed this city was a slice of heaven if only there weren't so many white people around.

There were four in the line-up ahead of him: two Chinese students, a *mor-law-cha* and a *Gwei-paw*. Two yellow, one brown and one white woman whose sunglasses frames he judged were Gucci knock-offs. The hinges were yellow plastic painted to look like gold. He could tell having worked at an oculist shop in Shunde all his life. That's another thing. Chinese people know quality.

He looked her up and down. White people do not age as well as Asians, he thought and this woman was definitely a senior. Her face was wrinkled and her mouth turned down. She wore a short-sleeved jacket over a red T-shirt. Her knee length shorts

exposed white legs and thick ankles. On her feet were sandals. Why they liked to expose so much skin in the summer he could not understand and shook his head from side to side. Just then she looked in his direction.

He stopped abruptly. His heart raced. Had he been caught? Or was she glancing past him to see if the bus was in sight? Just in case, he should say something. But what? "Sorry" had too many Rs and always came out as "solly" which was meaningless. So he looked away.

"Good Morning!" popped into his head. Why hadn't he said "Good Morning?" He had learned those words at Beginner's English - a free course at the library that his daughter had signed him up for when he arrived six months ago. Those were the easiest words to say unlike the others on the flip charts. English was very difficult. So hard to pronounce! And there were many tones for the same word. For example, "bow" said one way means to lower your head reverently. A tonal change and it could mean a weapon that fires an arrow, or the front of a ship or the first word of "bow-wow" the sound of a dog barking. Henry liked clarity as much as he liked clear lenses. That's why "Good Morning" would have been appropriate. Those words meant what they meant. Yes, he would say them now. He looked in her direction, took off his Nike cap and -

Just then, the number 401 arrived and hissed to a stop. The doors banged open. Passengers alit and crossed in front of him, separating him from *Gwei-paw*. She stepped on the bus, dropped coins in the collector and turned left. Exact change. No monthly pass? Why not, Henry wondered, flashing his shiny new ticket at the driver who nodded his thanks. Henry nodded back and stepped left.

The bus was crowded that morning. A student with ear buds surrendered his aisle seat to the *Gwei-paw*. She sat down immediately. Beside her a large Pilipino woman surrendered her seat to Henry. He knew she was Pilipino because he recognized the Tagalog she was speaking into her mobile phone. Henry squeezed past the *Gwei-paw's* knees and remained standing at his seat. He wanted to let it cool off. It was not a good thing to let the hot air from someone else's bum come into contact with your own.

Eventually, he sat down and stared out the window deliberately ignoring the *Gwei-paw* beside him. He did not want her to think he had any designs on her.

The bus made several stops before Henry felt comfortable turning his head from the window to stare straight ahead. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the *Gwei-paw* had a canvas tote resting on her lap. He strained to get a better look. Books! Aha, this woman was going to the library. He wondered why she didn't take the number 91 that would have turned south on Minoru then east on Granville to the Cultural Centre where the library was located. That's the one he would have taken if he hadn't had a hankering for a coffee and donut. The number 401 stopped right in front of Tim's. His idea was to have a snack then walk through the mall to the library.

The bus took its final turn and groaned to a halt at Brighthouse. The woman got off and Henry followed. She made her way at a reasonable pace heading directly for Tim's! Henry had no choice but to follow her. She went in and joined the queue. Again he had no choice but to stand behind her. She took off her sunglasses to browse the overhead menus. Her eyes were blue, just as he had suspected. And again, she caught him staring at her.

Damn! Say something, he thought. But "*Jo-sun*" the Chinese words for 'good morning' got jumbled with the English ones in his head. All he could manage was "Jood," which sounded like a burp just as she turned away, distracted by a barista who called out "Can I help the next person in line?" Did she hear the ridiculous sound he had made?

Another barista called out and Henry ordered his usual double double and a honey cruller. The place was crowded that morning and as luck would have it, he had to sit near the *Gwei-paw* again but at a separate table adjacent to hers. He gobbled his donut and slurped his coffee. It scalded his tongue. Finished, he got up, tossed his cup and napkin in the trash and dashed off through the mall towards the library. He was in a hurry to put as much distance as possible between himself and the *Gwei-paw* because he did not want her to think he was stalking her. Of course when he got there, the library was not yet open. So he sat on the steps with some other patrons and waited.

Shortly before 9:30am when a librarian unlocked the sliding glass doors, Henry saw the *Gwei-paw* walking towards the library. Aha, thought Henry, she knows the library's hours and had waited at Tim's. That was something he had intended to do. In fact, that is what he would do every week - except that this week he came on a Friday instead of a Thursday because he needed an extra day to finish reading "Pinocchio" in English. He had read it in Mandarin but wanted to try it in English, which had proved a little more ambitious than he had imagined. As she approached, Henry had the words on the tip of his tongue. He would get them out this time. Why not? For heaven's sake, this was Canada. He was in a public space. There were lots of witnesses in case she went crazy and accused him of attacking her.

She was within a few strides when Henry stood up, doffed his Nike cap and, looking directly at the spot in her sunglasses where her pupils were located, he said loudly: "Good Morning!"

The woman stopped. She stared at him. Slowly she reached up and peeled her dark glasses off her face. Those glorious blue eyes met his. "*Jo - Sun,*" she said in Cantonese.

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