

CAR HORNS

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Let's pretend that you live in China. Let's also pretend that, unlike me, you own a car. A Volkswagen Santana, of course. Who do you honk the horn at?

Well, you honk at everyone who's in your way, and who you think is in your way, and who you are passing, and who you think is trying to pass you. Every bicycle needs a honk in case the driver can't see you. Every pedestrian, most definitely, because they're not looking at anything except their feet as they float out in front of you, or the text messages they're sending on their cell phones.

Every car does this, and the roads become a constant cacophony of car horns. The noise is such that everybody tunes it out in order to function, so the horns are pointless. Nobody is listening to the horns. Some of us wear MP3 players cranked up to full volume specifically to block the noise, which is why we're deaf. But honking is a habit the Chinese driver can't break. It's like breathing.

Okay, now here comes a legitimate reason to honk the horn, an emergency, perhaps some fool walking right in front of your car. What do you do? Flick the headlights. Just how stupid is that? If he can't hear your horn, he sure can't hear your headlights. Of course he can't see your headlights, because he's not looking at you. That's what caused the crisis in the first place. Plus, it's daytime. Nobody can see headlights in the daytime when he's facing the other direction.

I offer this little tale for authors who wonder why I prefer understatement. Superlatives are your car horns. Save them until you actually need them.