

# Bus Wars

BY JEROME BYRON HORD

*Without a doubt, the New York City Department of Transportation and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration terminated “Chinatown” Bus Service company Fung Wah to gain price control over the market. Adding insult to injury, corporate bus giants Greyhound and Peter Pan team up and quietly debuts “Yo! Bus” to plug the vacuum, wrapping a whole bunch of clichés into one package, and charging you and me more for it.*

Upon hearing the news in 2012 that before the year was up, most of the budget Chinatown bus lines connecting New York, Boston and Philadelphia would be shut down for safety concerns, I was devastated. Okay sure, some of these allegations seemed legit. Anyone who has spent the four and a half grueling hours (I’ve seen it take ten) traveling back and forth from Boston’s South Station to New York Chinatown has most definitely seen some wild shit go down. Besides the complete lack of driver supervision and the occasional breakdown, the Chinatown bus simply attracted some of East Coast’s weirdest. Personal space simply doesn’t exist on the Chinatown bus, meaning your shoulder inevitably becomes a pillow for the stranger sitting beside you. And then there are the smells and sounds. Believe me, I get it, the Chinatown bus could be a total bummer. But hey, it was ten bucks for a one-way ticket and as a broke college student living in New York City, it was all I needed.

The now defunct Fung Wah began in 1988 by a restaurateur with a mission. Pei Lin Liang wanted to move commuting workers from Brooklyn to Manhattan as quickly and cheaply as possible. Chinese immigrant parents wanting to visit their children in Boston took notice, and soon the curbside bus line was established. Other Chinatown bus companies like Lucky Star were founded in

the late nineties, and in a fairly short time the Chinatown bus lines had secured a competitive edge on the low-end market. A number of larger companies began to imitate the curbside model of the Fung Wah and Lucky Star by opening subsidiary bus companies (à la Bolt Bus), but this move did little to intercept the flow of loyal Chinatown bus riders. Then, a few years ago, the charming myths—which centered around the possibility of riding with live chickens—turned into vicious rumors, focused on death by decapitation. The seed of Chinatown bus hysteria was planted.

In April 2013, US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood created a new division of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) called “Operation Quick Strike,” an imitation SWAT team comprised of bus inspectors that would revoke bus licenses on the spot. In short order, Lucky Star was suspended by Operation Quick Strike inspectors. FMCSA reported a “broken emergency exit,” which in actuality was out of alignment and easily snapped back into place by one of the onsite officers. Other reports issued by FMCSA found it “damning” that Lucky Star broke down as often as it did—whopping once per every 38,750 miles on the road! (By the way, a flat tire constitutes a bus breakdown.)

Not long after, Fung Wah met its demise at the hands of the FMCSA too. This time, over allegations of frame cracks found in multiple buses. As it turns out, frame cracks have no effect on the structural integrity of buses. But it didn’t matter. Even more painful is the fact that only a month after Fung Wah was forced off the road, the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance began rewriting its own guidelines aimed at “alleviating any misdiagnosed violations” derived from frame cracks.

So, with the major Chinatown bus players out of the picture, what on earth were commuters to do? The corporate coaches were too expensive and worse, they didn’t offer the relaxed booking policies the Chinatown buses offered. But all of a sudden, without notice, the deus ex machina of New England interstate

coaching fell from above. Like a holy fist bump from God, the clouds parted and a new service appeared to reinstate the cheap, fun, and fast that we had lost with Fung Wah. Or so I thought. Yo! Bus was born.

At first sight, it's apparent shit is going way wrong. The website offers five tickets per day, ranging from twenty-two to thirty dollars depending on time, being offered apparently on behalf of a troupe of multi-ethnic teenaged best friends. Then there's the bus, which is washed, and shimmering vermilion red, and has the words "Yo!" scrawled in huge white letters followed by Chinese characters. As their website describes, "Yo!' is derived from the pronunciation of the Chinese word that means 'to protect.' It also serves as a nod to the Philadelphia community, where 'yo!' as an enthusiastic greeting was born." Seriously?

Thankfully the bus still boards in Chinatown, on Pike Street close to Canal. However, after you're on, it's only about 15 seconds before you start to suspect something sinister is afoot. Just like an episode of Law & Order: SVU, small clues begin to surface. You ask yourself questions like, "Where are the Chinese staff and crew?" or, "Why are there little grey dogs embroidered on these seats?" And, just like the clumsy perp who inevitably

slips on his words during an interrogation standoff with Detective Benson, the microphone blares on: "THANK YOU FOR RIDING WITH US ON GREYHOU—I mean, Yo bus.."

Shocking! (I guess.) But, we all saw it coming. Whether the Chinatown bus crackdown was as much of a backroom-backhand to competitiveness as it appears, it is clear that the politically connected corporate carriers have benefited tremendously from the recent shutdowns. The Yo! Bus is but one example of a blatant rip-off by large bus giants who are dependent on the image of the Chinese bus model. And this gets to the crux of the issue. New Yorkers are accustomed to the inevitability of the corporate hustle—but this is a new, and rather offensive, low. You can take Cooper Union, the Folk Art Museum, our long established neighborhood bars and replace them with shiny things that make us go "Ooooh"— But please have a little respect for the cultural DNA that defines us. Don't destroy it in order to make a pisspoor imitation and sell it to back to us for triple. Give us a little more credit.

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