

## Chinatown's Bus of Horrors

David Loo

Lisa Holliday was looking forward to her trip to New York. She was prepared to do a little shopping, relax a bit, and just enjoy the New York City atmosphere. Lisa decided to save a few bucks and take one of the notorious Chinatown buses. Her thriftiness almost cost her her life.

While traveling on an interstate highway, the Fung Wah bus that was en route from Boston to New York burst into flames mere seconds after the 45 passengers frantically evacuated. "A minute later, and we all could have been dead," said Lisa as she gazed over the smoking mass that was formerly her ride to New York (Daniel).

This is just one of the many incidents that have plagued the Fung Wah bus company. Over the past few years there have had everything from overturned buses and speeding tickets to buses that have spontaneously combusted. But what's the real problem here? Is it merely an extraordinary run of bad luck or is there something amiss in Chinatown?

Passengers usually have a love-hate relationship with the bus company, but what can you really expect for fares as low as \$10? One website had even gone so far as to say "Taking a Fung Wah bus is like playing Russian roulette; thrilling, kind of dumb and good to do drunk" ("My Wash Po Will Destroy Your Fung Wah").

With cheap fares and buses leaving around the clock, it's easy to see why people are still flocking to these cheap methods of transportation. Most people seem to think that all of these horrible accidents couldn't possibly happen to them. In fact, even some of those who have already been in accidents while riding on a Fung Wah bus are still willing to ride these accident-prone vehicles. One passenger on the bus that spontaneously combusted was quoted after the accident saying, "What are the odds of this happening again? Now I'm safe" (Daniel).

Surprisingly, he's not the only one who thinks this way. Yan Perchuk, another passenger from the bus that caught fire, was also quoted saying, "You can't top this, \$15 to New York ... That [fire] could happen to any bus" (Daniel). Apparently, the combination of cheap fares and a convenient departure schedule proves to be too tempting for those willing to take a little risk along with a long bus ride. But one still marvels over the number of reported accidents; are there really that many, or are some of these incidents being blown out of proportion?

If you "Google" "Fung Wah Bus," you'll find an unusual amount of reports on these perturbing accidents. "Riders flee bus fire on NYC run" or "Fung Wah bus crash hurts 33" are some of the more alarming ones (Daniel, Ross). There's no denying that since being founded in 1998 the Fung Wah bus company has had more than its fair share of accidents. Fung Wah was originally an intercity bus company for New York founded just eight years ago. However, after its meager roots as an intercity bus from Brooklyn to Manhattan, the Fung Wah bus company has quickly evolved into a popular and cheaper alternative to other bus companies such as Greyhound.

With all of these accidents, it is little wonder why the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) is looking very closely at these Chinatown buses. The Fung Wah bus company is just one of the many new bus services that will take travelers to almost any major city on the East Coast for a relatively cheap fare. If the Fung Wah bus company won't go there, then Lucky Star will, and if Lucky Star won't, then Dragon Coach will, and if Dragon Coach won't, then New Century will. With each company comes cheaper prices and typically lower safety standards. That money has to come out of somewhere right? (Loose).

In May of 2006, the Fung Wah had to pay \$12,950 for violating federal safety regulations. Although they receive an unusual amount of speeding tickets, the Fung Wah, along

with some of the other Chinatown buses, have received some of the best safety ratings in comparison to Greyhound and others. In terms of vehicle safety, Fung Wah scored 9 while Greyhound scored 16 (the lower the number being the better score). This leads one to ponder why there are so many of these Chinatown bus accidents. If their buses are beating out Greyhound in terms of vehicle safety, then why aren't we hearing stories about Greyhound buses spontaneously combusting in the middle of a Connecticut highway? (Loose).

In FMCSA's driver safety evaluations, Greyhound had a driver safety score of 22 out of 100, once again, the lower the score the better. However, Fung Wah bus drivers scored a 73, with Dragon Coach coming in at 74, and New Century at an astonishing 97. These results show that the main issue here isn't how well the buses are maintained but that these bus drivers do not know how to drive well. In another test the FMCSA evaluated overall safety management. Greyhound managed to pull off a perfect score, 0 out of 100. However, Fung Wah scored much worse with 71 out of 100. New Century came in third with a 92, and Dragon Coach finished up fourth with an amazing 99 out of 100. With scores like these, it's a small miracle that these major accidents aren't more common (Loose).

With fares so low it's easy to see why so many travelers still use these cheap modes of transportation, but the number of accidents is much higher than it should be. Are these accidents really all that common, or are the bus companies having an incredible run of bad luck? I decided to find out how dangerous these Chinatown buses really are. My journey started out in Boston. I ordered the ticket online, printed it out, and headed down to South Station. The bus looked to be in pretty good repair. Recent reports show that the Fung Wah buses are some of the safest buses out there, but the safest bus in the world won't save you from an unsafe driver. The driver seemed cordial enough, but as soon as it turned 4:00, he immediately turned all-business. He

started yelling for everyone to get into their seats so that we could get going, and once everyone was seated, we literally raced out of South Station. The bus driver seemed to have his priorities right, and was determined to make it to New York on time.

Despite common beliefs, my fellow passengers were not mainly people of Asian descent; they were of every shape, size, and color. We squeezed together in seats that lacked any type of safety restraints. With prices so cheap, I imagine that the company would lose money if the buses were not packed.

The driver was an interesting fellow. Throughout the ride he blasted some interesting if not a little unusual old 80s songs that I spent most of my toddler years listening too. Despite the horrendous traffic, we managed to make great time, thanks partially to luck and partially to the fact that our driver was going a good 10-15 miles per hour over the speed limit. The seats had no overhead lights, and as such I was unable to do any reading or anything that would have entertained me for the four-hour bus ride. With nothing to do, I decided to settle down for a nice nap. Big mistake. I had barely closed my eyes when my head was sent hurtling into the window from a sharp turn. A combination of sharp turning, bad roads, and speeding ensured that the only way I would get any sleep on this bus ride was if I were to fly out of my seat and knock myself unconscious.

Furiously rubbing my head to minimize my new bump, I looked around to see how the other passengers were doing. Most of them were struggling to find positions to sleep in, but some were chatting incessantly on their cell phones. After an eternity of sitting in my seat with my legs cramping up, it was finally 8:00. Hallelujah, 8:00; I can finally get off this bus now right? Wrong. Well, at least the bus driver told us our new estimated time of arrival, right? Wrong again. After hours of sitting in a cramped position eagerly awaiting our arrival, I had my hopes

dashed. The bus driver did not even explain why we were late; all he did was point to his watch and say that one fateful word, "Late." We made a U-turn at a gas station in the middle of who-knows-where to head to New York. Wait a minute, a U-turn? Wouldn't that imply that we had passed our original destination? Had our bus driver gotten us lost?

After another half-hour we were still far, far, away from the bus station. We had barely entered city limits and were fighting traffic the whole way in. By the time we finally arrived at the bus station, 8:00 was long gone and it was pushing on 9:30. Despite all the speeding and sharp turns, we were still a good hour and a half late. On my way out of the bus I heard one of my fellow passengers ask the bus driver where the bathroom is. It turns out that our driver barely spoke English. The passenger repeated her question a good four times before I stepped in and translated for her. After pointing her in the right direction, the full weight of the realization came to my mind. Our bus driver did not speak English fluently. The man responsible for all of us, who was supposed to read so many street signs and speed limits, did not know English. I doubt that his inability to speak English was the one and only reason why we got lost, but it was still a little perturbing to find out that the bus driver didn't know how to speak English. What would have happened if ours had been the bus that spontaneously combusted? Would he have been able to get us off the bus in time with just frantic hand gestures?

The fact that Fung Wah buses regularly beat out Greyhound on annual safety checks might not matter if your bus driver can't speak English. Recently, the Fung Wah bus company released a statement saying that they will make sure that all of their bus drivers are fluent in English, and that they stay within the mandatory speed limits. Isn't this something they should have been doing all along?

My experience with the Fung Wah bus has been a mixed bag. Yes, I did save a few

dollars. And yes, I did use that money for shopping in New York. However, that money came at the price of a good hour and a half and gave me a pretty large bump on my head. And is the saved money really worth the potential risks? As for me, well, my return trip was on Greyhound.

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