

Inside job Metro train driver



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Paul Johnson tries every job in Shanghai. This month: operating a metro train

Sometimes in life we become so consumed with whether we could, we neglect to consider whether we should. It isn't until I'm sitting at the train console gripping the throttle while squeezing the dead man's switch, and the instructor says, 'You should start by taking it up to 40,' that I begin to think of the 80 trainees seated behind me – each of whom probably harboured hopes of returning to their families in one piece that evening – and I wonder whether this might just be a dangerous idea. I experience a surge of borderline pants-wetting terror I haven't felt since childhood.

The day begins at the Shanghai Metro driver school behind Longyang Station in Pudong. After passing a giant model layout of the subway in the lobby, we're directed past multiple classrooms full of young trainees uniformly clad in crisp pink shirts and dark slacks.

One of the managers, Mr Lin, presents me with my own pink shirt and slacks, and after I change into my uniform we enter the simulator room with an impressive display of over a dozen simulators, CCTVs and monitors peppering the walls, a formidable space that could double as a government crisis centre in a Hollywood thriller.

I take a seat as Mr Lin gives an overview of the control panel and names dozens of buttons with such speed that the Chinese words

never take root in my memory. One name is reinforced in English and makes an immediate impression: The dead man's switch. I make a mental note: Never, ever touch the dead man's switch.

His first instruction: 'Clutch the dead man's switch.'

The simulation's greatest challenge involves pulling back on the throttle to decrease speed in the proper sequence so that the train eases into the station under its own momentum and aligns perfectly on the platform. If you come in too slow, which I almost always did, you'll run out of momentum and stop 20 metres short. If you go too fast you'll overshoot, and even worse, when you go in reverse to get back to the station, load the passengers, then start off again but forget you're still in reverse and rocket backwards at 50 kilometres an hour, the instructors will laugh at you.

At each stop I check a CCTV monitor linked to cameras on the side of the train to make sure the doors are lined up before pushing a black button to open the passenger doors. Although terrible at the stopping part of the job, I display immediate talent at the button-pushing part. I find satisfaction watching the orderly interactions of the virtual passengers and quickly grow enamoured with one

in particular: a striking brunette with upswept hair, a tasteful skirt suit, and impeccable waiting-in-line etiquette. The infatuation appears to be mutual as she somehow manages to board my train at every single station.

After an hour I graduate from the elevated track simulation and am led to a different console focused on tunnels. 30 minutes later I'm promoted to the third and final simulation, immediately

encountering a track on fire, then construction debris blocking my passage, then a woman lying on the tracks. Apparently, this is the apocalypse simulation. As I

slowly approach the passenger on the tracks I hold my breath and whisper a prayer: 'Please, please don't let it be the brunette in the skirt suit.'

I experience a surge of borderline pants-wetting terror

Mr Lin pats me on the back and announces I'm ready to drive a real train, and although I appreciate his confidence, I'm curious what he saw in my record of failing to stop correctly 20 straight times and driving through a fire that convinced him I am ready to drive a real train with real people.

We head to a defunct station near Zhangjiang Hi-Technology Park that functions as a training location, not only for drivers but also for other Shanghai Metro staff. I'm relieved to learn I won't be driving on the actual metro grid, but my relief is short lived when I board the train and encounter the anxious faces of 80 other trainees.

I take the seat in the driver's cab, the instructor leans over me to review the starting sequence, and after radioing for clearance, my heart pounds as I push the throttle up to 40 and we quickly gain speed. When the next station appears in the distance I pull back on the throttle and behind me multiple voices chime in at once, an escalating tone of urgency in their voices. I can only understand one instruction in Chinese at a time, so four at once cancel each other out. I overshoot the station.

Mr Lin smiles and jokes that he won't let me leave until I get the stop right at least once. We try again and again and again and eventually he encourages me to leave without getting the stop right at least once.

As I depart he tells me I can keep the pink Shanghai Metro shirt. He says, 'Please don't wear it while riding the metro.' I laugh but he says it again. He needn't worry. I'm never going to take the chance that desperate passengers will see my shirt and ask me to drive the train as a second-string backup. I would have to tell them: 'I can get your train started, but I can't promise to make it stop.'

