Away from the smooth surfaces of major highways, the inequality of modern China becomes clear. Many rural roads, especially in areas populated by ethnic minorities and near borders, are little more than mud tracks. That has prompted the government to promise 112,000 miles of new rural highways this year alone.

In August, Hou Xin and his wife drove their China-made Jeep Cherokee more than 2,300 miles along the Silk Road, the ancient trade route that linked China to Western civilizations. For much of the journey to the far western province of Xinjiang, they were able to travel on new expressways.

Starting in July, a new train running 2,300 miles from Beijing to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, will shorten a weeklong journey by rail and bus to just 48 hours. Even so, Hou and his wife plan to drive. "It's a great feeling speeding through beautiful scenery," he says. "I feel so free on the road."

The Year of the Dog, the lunar new year celebrated in much of Asia, began Sunday. In China, it triggered the world's largest annual mass migration, sending hundreds of millions of Chinese homeward for the festival. At week's end, they will reboard trains, planes and buses so crammed with humanity that sales of adult diapers have soared because getting to washrooms on crowded passenger trains can be impossible.

The record number of travelers -- more than 2 billion journeys in the 40 days from Jan. 14 to Feb. 22, by government estimates -- underscores the new mobility of Chinese society. This year, it also has drawn attention to highway construction underway in China, which is in the midst of the greatest road-building boom since the United States began linking the Lower 48 with interstate highways in the 1950s.

Today, China is stitching itself together with concrete and asphalt. Its goal: highways that reach all 31 provinces -- from the Himalayas of Tibet in the southwest to the Gobi Desert in the north.

Already, China's expressway network is second only to America's. "No other country can compete with China when it comes to the expansion speed of road building," says Wang Yuanqing, a professor at the Highway College of Chang'an University in Xian.

The vast majority of New Year trips -- 1.86 billion by the Ministry of Communication's estimate -- will be made on the roads. Roughly 700,000 buses will handle the strain.

Thousands of travelers crowded central Beijing's Bawangfen bus station Wednesday. "I couldn't get a train ticket this year," said Fan Xiuzhu, 50, as she kept watch over bags of New Year gifts she was taking home to northeast Liaoyang. "But the expressway has cut my journey from 15 hours to eight, the same time as the train.

"The buses are quite luxurious now, with air conditioning, toilet and video. Not like before, when they were filthy and smoky, with hard seats and people packed in the aisle."

Over the past five years, China has spent more on transportation infrastructure than in the previous five decades of Communist Party rule.
From 2001 to 2005, expressways grew by 15,350 miles, more than doubling the total length to 25,480 miles. The United States has 46,000 miles of interstate. By 2020, China is likely to overtake the United States. India has more road miles, but a third are unpaved.

China's high-speed expressways, with speed limits of 75 miles per hour, grew by 4,163 miles in 2005 alone and will stretch 3,107 miles farther this year. The United States built 41,000 miles of new highway from 1957 to 1969; China plans 30,262 miles this decade.

America’s interstates brought prosperity and change. China's expressways are doing the same. Many of those using the new roads are migrant workers who have left villages and farms for jobs in booming urban China. The government estimates at least 140 million rural Chinese have left the countryside for the city. The New Year festival is one of the few extended public holidays that give them a chance to return to their roots.

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The environmental impact of the road boom is worsened by air pollution – passenger car sales jumped 26% last year. But "even developed countries adopt the ‘develop first and refine later’ strategy," says highway expert Wang. "We are now trying to build environmentally friendly roads."

China is stressing initiatives that minimize the damage of road construction. However, efforts to get drivers to choose more environmentally friendly cars and use low-sulfur fuels are meeting resistance.

"Chinese car buyers are not rational," Li Xinmin of the State Environmental Protection Administration told a conference in July. "They buy vehicles to show others what a large and beautiful car they have."

As highways expand and car sales boom, cross-country road trips that were once unthinkable are exciting China's newly affluent urban class.

"The road network is great now. You can drive anywhere," says Hou Xin, 28, a computer technician and member of one of several auto clubs now multiplying in Beijing.

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Xinjiang, inhabited by Muslim Uighurs, is a place most Chinese "wouldn't dare go before; it's too remote. But now conditions are better," Hou says. "It's like going abroad, to another culture (because people living there) don't understand Mandarin" Chinese.

Gas stations and motels are springing up along the expressways to service the growing traffic volume. Hou's two-week trip cost him $125 a day for gas, a room and tolls. "The toll operators are the only robbers left on the roads," he says.

Hou relishes each escape from polluted Beijing. "The sky is so blue in western China."

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On the roads

1913: China builds first modern highway.

1949: Total road length open to traffic is 50,000 miles.

1988: First expressway -- 11.5 miles long -- built near Shanghai.


2000: Number of private cars on the road is 6.25 million.

2005: Number of private cars on the road increases to 17 million.
2006: Expressways total 25,480 miles.

2020: Expressway mileage likely to reach 53,000 miles; China likely to be world's leading carmaker.

Source: Chinese government

[Illustration]
PHOTO, B/W, AFP/Getty Images; PHOTO, B/W, China Photos via Getty Images

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