

# The odd couple:

## Free transit from Tallinn to Chengdu



Tallinn and Chengdu cooperated on introducing fare-free bus lines to ease critical congestion problems and boost public transport use. **Karsten Marhold** tells the story of an unlikely couple of cities that managed to set up a successful cooperation

In late 2012, Allan Alaküla, Head of the EU Office of Estonia's capital Tallinn, skimmed through Chinese media in search of possibilities to increase his city's international activities in the urban mobility area. He quickly found a candidate: Chengdu, the fourth-largest metropolitan area in China with over 14 million inhabitants and capital of Sichuan province. It raised the interest of Mr Alaküla and his colleagues when they learned that Chengdu was in the process of heavily expanding its transport system, including the bus network and metro.

Tallinn has already had partnerships with Beijing and Hangzhou, however these were, however, cultural city-twinning programs not designed for technical cooperation. "We are a member of Polis and other European city networks, and decided to additionally strengthen international cooperation beyond Europe," says Alaküla. As a consequence, Tallinn started looking for other cities in China for a focused in-depth cooperation on urban mobility. It was clear that setting up cooperation between a city



*Chengdu seemed like a fitting candidate because it is still a relatively up-and-coming city on the Chinese urban mobility scene*



Chengdu buses

Left: Tallinn;  
Below: Chengdu



Chengdu metro



with 400,000-plus inhabitants and a Chinese megacity like Chengdu will prove to be challenging.

Yet, Chengdu seemed like a fitting candidate in the first place because it is still relatively up-and-coming on the Chinese urban mobility scene. Located in the West of the country, its region has only recently received increased attention from the Chinese central government, who had for a long time focused on the capital Beijing and the East of the country with its Special Economic Zones. But recently, Chengdu and nearby Chongqing have moved into the spotlight, triggering massive growth in the urban area and the transport system.

#### **BUSES ARE STILL THE GO-TO MODE**

Yet the gap between East and West still shows prominently when looking at public transport in Chengdu. While the Shanghai Metro, for comparison, has been in operation since 1993 and is now one of the largest metro systems in the world with 538km and 15 lines in operation, Chengdu metro's first line only opened in 2010. A second line followed in 2012, bringing the total length of the network

to 41km. The tenfold difference illustrates why Chengdu's public transport is still heavily relying on its bus network to cater for the transportation needs of its rapidly growing population.

Zheng Yang, deputy director of the Chengdu public bus company, gives an account of the bus system that impresses with its rate of growth and size. "In 2014, 11,000 buses were in operation, up from 3000 in 2003. For several years, Chengdu Public Bus Group has been buying 1000 vehicles each year", he says. In 2015, Yang explains, the fleet is expected to reach its target size with 12,000 vehicles. "From then on, Chengdu will focus on the development of

Right: Tianfu Tong contactless payment cards are the first move towards an integrated fare system

the metro and tram networks in the city.” Chengdu has also recently opened its first bus rapid transit (BRT) line, which is integrated into the newly upgraded second ring road around the city. As far as fuels are concerned, Chengdu’s public buses are up to most modern standards – 90 per cent of the fleet runs on CNG, while 10 per cent of buses are electric, meaning no less than 1200 vehicles.

Yang says Chengdu has ambitious plans for the development of public transit. “Today, we have 26 per cent modal share for buses, and 5 per cent for the metro,” he explains. “In the coming years, we want to reach 45 per cent for all public transit combined.” As of 2014, Chengdu public transit moves 5.2 million passengers every day. Zhang also explains that as it is the case in many Chinese cities, the main challenge to transport in the city is private cars, although Chengdu is not yet facing regular air pollution or traffic deadlock as catastrophic as in Beijing or Shanghai. This helped the city to be voted into high positions in liveability rankings for China recently.

### REACHING OUT TO THE CAPITAL OF FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In the recent past, and since the launch of the metro network, Chengdu had started looking into improving its pricing model and fare options for public transit. With the Tianfu Tong contactless payment card, first steps have been made towards an integrated fare system – for now, metro rides and bus tickets can be charged onto the same card, but transfers are covered for bus and metro trips only separately. The card is also accepted by taxis, still one of the main modes of getting around in the city. Zhang confirms that introducing a truly integrated



fare system to allow for seamless trips between metro and bus is on the city’s agenda for the near future.

But Chengdu also wanted to go a step further and look at reducing fares or options for offering free public transport as a congestion-easing measure and there was no better place to look by way of an example of how to do it than Tallinn. The capital of Estonia is currently the largest city in the world that is applying a zero-fare transport policy since its citizens voted for its introduction in a referendum in 2012. Since 1 January 2013 Tallinn residents travel fare-free on bus, tram and trolley bus lines in the city centre. The city and its transport department have proudly adopted this unique experiment, and are not shy about promoting Tallinn as the “Capital of free public transport.”

Chengdu was looking into free public transportation options as a result of a combination of serious challenges that threatened mobility in 2013. As Alaküla explains, “major upgrading works started on the second ring road around the city and created serious car traffic restrictions for people living between the second and third ring road. The city needed a measure to avoid a deadlock in this area due to congestion.” Most importantly, Chengdu introduced a ban restricting cars from driving on one day of the week according to the final digit on their license plate, effectively forbidding a large number of drivers to use their car for their daily commute.

### 44 FREE BUS LINES AND FREE MORNING COMMUTES

The city then developed a creative congestion-relief measure in cooperation with Tallinn. “After a delegation from Tallinn had visited Chengdu and met

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with technical staff, the transport management department decided to make 44 bus lines between the second and third ring road free of charge while the restrictions were in place,” explains Alaküla. For more than nine months, citizens were able to travel freely on routes that were strategically chosen to provide efficient access to the city center and Central Business District. “Although this was a temporary measure and somewhat of an experiment, the city took it very seriously.” Chengdu was keen on understanding the effects of free public transportation for relieving congestion, on the one hand, and on boosting public transport use, on the other.

First results of the city’s experience with offering free bus lines were presented by a Chengdu officials at the “Capital of Free Public Transport” conference Tallinn hosted in 2013, and the results were encouraging. While public transport use increased by 2 per cent during the time the measures were in place, traffic deadlock could be avoided. As a consequence of the generally positive experience, Chengdu decided to make travel permanently free from 5am to 7am on all buses in the city, effectively allowing a fare-free morning commute to a large part of the population.

#### KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL COOPERATION

As for the cooperation with Tallinn, the experience has been very positive and is set to be extended in the future. “We were very positively surprised with the smooth exchange between our cities,” says Allan Alaküla. He has some tips for setting up effective cooperation between European and Chinese cities, though. “The language barrier needs to be taken into account, at least once it gets to the political level where everything needs to be translated. As long as the contacts remain technical, everything can be done in English, which makes things a lot easier,” he says.

Alaküla adds that it is also very important to identify the mutual interest between cities and to focus on certain areas or measures. “Tallinn is a front-runner in the field of free public transport. Despite



our very different cities, we ended up being ideal partners.”

Tallinn and Chengdu have signed a partnership agreement in the meantime and are now working together to develop a joint research project on free public transport. Both cities have already announced that they will send delegations to the next European conference on free public transport in Avesta, Sweden, due to take place in late 2015. ☺

**In terms of free public transport as a congestion-easing measure there was no better example than Tallinn**

#### FYI

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