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Bus line looks to shed its reputation for risk; Fung Wah takes steps to right record of mishaps

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ON THE ROAD TO BOSTON -- As the big white bus cruises smoothly along a lightly trafficked stretch of Interstate 84 in Connecticut, it's easy to forget you're riding Fung Wah, notorious for overworked, lead-footed drivers who are strangers to English and clueless in an emergency.

A series of hair-raising incidents over the past two years has helped make the Fung Wah Bus Line -- which carries passengers between New York and Boston for a mere \$15 -- part scandal, part joke, part cult attraction.

Now, that could be changing. Fung Wah, whose brand reputation for risky, economy-price speed actually attracts some riders, is slowing down. That's the tentative conclusion of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, which regulates interstate bus companies.

"They seem to be improving," says Melissa Delaney, speaking for the agency. She adds, "We're keeping a close eye on them."

Last year, when it was fined a total of \$44,000 for violating federal safety rules, Fung Wah hired Joe Mokrisky, a Massachusetts transportation consultant, to help clean up its act.

Three drivers have since been fired for speeding; drivers now receive English immersion and remedial driving safety instruction; and the company meets regularly with state and federal inspectors.

Mokrisky, who sometimes shadows Fung Wah buses in his car to make sure they're not speeding, says the goal is "an average bus company. After you've been an F student, B is just fine. ... This is a work in progress."

The bus line has a satisfactory rating from the federal safety agency based on its overall performance record.

In 1998, Fung Wah became one of the first Chinese bus carriers to provide cheap curbside service between Chinatowns in East Coast cities.

Now, dozens of these lines, federally and state licensed, operate in the Northeast and Midwest. Their popularity with non-Chinese travelers -- immigrants, students, artists, retirees, budget tourists -- has forced traditional bus companies to lower fares on the same routes.

Fung Wah, which means "magnificent wind," has had some stormy trips:

*Aug. 16, 2005: A bus is consumed by fire on the side of Interstate 91 in Meriden, Conn., shortly after the passengers escape. Some later say the driver failed to clearly order an evacuation. The fire is determined to have been caused by manufacturer's faulty wiring.

*Sept. 5, 2006: A bus flips over on a highway exit ramp near Worcester, Mass., injuring 34 passengers, none seriously. Federal investigators later conclude that the driver was driving too fast, and the line is fined \$31,000 for that and other violations.

*Jan. 3, 2007: Two rear wheels become loose on a bus heading east on the Massachusetts Turnpike. The driver pulls over, and state police find the wheels had been wobbling on the axle because of improperly tightened lug nuts.

*Feb. 14, 2007: A bus slams into a guardrail on the Massachusetts Turnpike in Boston while driving in a snowstorm that led other carriers, such as Peter Pan Bus Lines, to ground its vehicles. The driver is ticketed for speeding.

*March 23, 2007: A bus gets stuck atop a concrete barrier after the driver enters an "autos only" MassPike toll lane and tries to back out. He's cited for failing to keep a proper log, which would show if a driver has been working too many consecutive hours.

Pei Lin Liang, a former noodle factory deliveryman who founded the line in 1998, did not respond to several requests for an interview.

His competitors, however, have plenty to say. "At the beginning, the media laughed at our warnings (about Chinatown carriers). That's not true now," says Bob Schwarz, a vice president of Peter Pan Bus Lines. "The good news is that nobody's been killed. The bad news is that it's only a matter of time."

Fung Wah and other curbside carriers cut costs by not berthing buses or selling tickets at bus terminals. (Boston requires buses to pick up and discharge passengers at South Station terminal.) They do not pay union wages, maintain large maintenance facilities or hire more-experienced drivers.

They also cut corners, according to Peter Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association, which represents the major carriers.

He says Fung Wah lacks other, more lucrative routes that allowed the major carriers to lower fares in the Boston-Washington corridor: "If everybody's got the same gas prices and tolls and insurance premiums, what's not being done?"

Despite Fung Wah's well-publicized mishaps, no passenger has been killed or seriously injured.

The \$15 New York-Boston fare is less than a tenth the cost of the air shuttle, a sixth the cost of Amtrak's Acela express train and a fourth the fare on a regular Amtrak train on the same route. Peter Pan and Greyhound charge between \$15 and \$35, depending when and how the ticket is purchased.

Fung Wah's waiting room on Canal Street in Lower Manhattan consists of a few folding chairs chained to the sidewalk in front of its office.

But anyone expecting a Third World bus experience -- chickens under the seat -- will be disappointed. Buses are clean and comfortable; seats have head and foot rests. Trash bags dangle from arm rests on the aisle. Buses leave pretty much on the hour and are fairly punctual, especially considering they must fight through congested Chinatown.

Ironically, the bad publicity that has soured some people on the Fung Wah brand has attracted others willing to take a little risk to save a little money.

Luke Andreas, a young tourist from Illinois, bought a ticket to Boston last week. "I heard about this crazy Chinese bus line that had all these problems, but when I found out about the fare. ... It was too good to pass up."

Fung Wah has even acquired a certain underground cachet. "It's kind of cool," says Emmett Patterson, a musician and writer from Brooklyn. "It's got this mystique. It's Chinatown. It's a little bit out there. Not for the white collar, nine-to-fiver."

Those who've seen another side of Fung Wah are skeptical.

Mark Holliday of Belmont, Mass., who was aboard the bus that caught fire in 2005, commutes to work on the MassPike. When he sees a Fung Wah bus, it evokes the memory of his driver running from the bus, minutes before it caught fire, with most passengers still on board. "I tell the guy I commute with ... 'Do those people on that bus know what they've got themselves into?'"