

## GP Paper 2 Comprehension Practice #4

### *("Transport & Travel")*

- 1 When spaceflight Apollo 11 landed the first humans on the moon in 1969, the euphoria was understandably more palpable than that of the lonely, unobtrusive flight of the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, a Russian-Soviet pilot and cosmonaut. The moon landing was broadcast on live television to a worldwide audience, who were awash with jubilation when Neil Armstrong pertinently described the event as 'one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind' as he stepped on the lunar surface. Even though numerous moon landings have demonstrated America's supremacy in spaceflight capability in the space race, a look back at history surprisingly reveals equivalent seismic progress in transport which has impacted mankind since the beginning of civilisation. 5
- 2 Travel and the transportation of goods were an arduous process in ancient times. Rudimentary footwear limited the distances that man could travel, confining him to his settlement, powerlessly yielding to the indomitable surroundings. This changed drastically with the domestication of animals when beasts of burden – donkeys, horses and oxen – became the precursor to animal-drawn travois (a frame used to drag loads) and wheeled vehicles. Today, with the advent of technology, the construction of canals, rails, roads, tunnels and powered mechanised vessels means that man can voyage farther, survey uncharted territory and expand his influence over larger areas for commerce and military endeavours. Plainly, with modern marvels such as mega-infrastructure, intricate rapid transit network systems and supersonic aircraft, the story of transport is chiefly one of technological innovation. 10 15
- 3 Traditionally, transport has been a spur to cultural expansion: trade routes not only convey to distant cities precious stones, silk, spices and crafts but spread new knowledge and ideas. The Silk Road linked merchants, monks, nomads, pilgrims and scholars across six thousand kilometres from the Asian Continent to the Mediterranean Sea. Economic activities aside, the Arabians, Chinese, Greeks and Persians... invariably promoted their own and adopted others' agricultural techniques, mathematical and scientific knowledge, art, cuisine, fashion, music and dance. And predictably, as communities along the trade route prospered and enjoyed material wealth, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam spread and flourished all across Eurasia. It is thus unsurprising that Admiral Cheng Ho from the Ming Dynasty – a mariner, explorer and diplomat who was celebrated for commanding expeditionary voyages to Southeast Asia and East Africa – was a Muslim. 20 25
- 4 Today, the economic perspective provides strong evidence of the value of transport. Transport makes possible the movement of products from one place to another – with great speed. (How else could firms fulfil surged internet orders during busy holiday seasons?) It also allows consumers to buy myriad products indigenous to or produced in other countries. But more crucially, transport is a requisite for businesses to capitalise on the proximity and access to cheaper factors of production by planting segments of the manufacturing process in different geographical areas. This not only keeps the business viable, but more importantly, it also provides employment for many in these areas, as evident in firms from developed countries farming out their operations to developing countries. And where else could pilots, ship captains, cargo crew and port personnel offer their services without the aviation and shipping industries? So imperative is transport to the economy that countries invest billions of dollars to build wondrous infrastructure to accommodate navigation and maritime trade – the Suez Canal in Egypt cuts sea voyage distance between Europe and India by about seven thousand kilometres while the Panama Canal allows ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans 30 35 40

through the Isthmus of Panama, avoiding the lengthy, hazardous Cape Horn in South America – a substantial, risky enterprise that may prove lucrative, in the long run.

- 5 Furthermore, transport is now an inseparable part of our lives and dramatically improves 45  
our well-being. With hassle-free, secure and affordable air travel today, sight-seeing and vacation  
abroad are essential diversions from our modern day pressures (which undoubtedly also explains the  
rising popularity of sea cruises). Any anxiety from scurrying to and from work on public transport is  
entirely negated by the enviably luxurious and efficient commute: in Japan, the Shinkansen – bullet  
trains running at up to 320 kilometres per hour – is renowned for its silent cars with spacious seats, 50  
untarnished record of zero fatal accidents and on-time arrival and departure to the second. And  
unbeknownst to many, gigantic, recognisable infrastructures that are part of transport network – the  
Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the Sydney Harbour Bridge – are representative monuments  
that exemplify man's admirable engineering prowess and an immanent part of the populace's identity  
and pride. 55
  
- 6 However, the uninitiated and cynics are either not cognisant or are dismissive of the importance of  
transport, unduly obsessed with and paranoid about its downsides. They decry the insufferable irony  
of traffic bottlenecks on city freeways and lament the ever-rising fuel prices (why then do they own a  
car?). They chastise motorists for exacerbating carbon footprints and causing mishaps that endanger  
the lives of pedestrians. They 'justify' aviophobia, the irrational fear of flying, by blaming the lax 60  
vigilance by aviation and security personnel, worsening our vulnerability to injurious acts by  
extremists. And they deem the unbeatable trend of migration propelled by the ease of travel today  
'culpable' for the rapid erosion of indigenous culture and increasing social disharmony triggered by  
the migrants who stubbornly carry on their way of life. Supposedly, travel can broaden our mind but  
sceptics think that our dispositions and assumptions inherited from our past still make us strangers 65  
to each other, and that we can never be united politically.
  
- 7 Be that as it may, air, land and sea transport networks are lifelines to our existence. They  
are the conduits on which people fly, ride and sail in order to get needful resources, attend personal  
and professional events, assemble for a cause as well as escape from present predicaments. Indeed,  
the web of transport networks is like our arteries and veins, transporting nutrients, tonics and by- 70  
products to parts of the body where they are properly assimilated or expelled. And if doctors can  
preliminarily diagnose a patient's health and vitality by feeling his arterial pulse, then surely we can  
detect the economic vigour and vibrancy of a city by examining the efficiency and extent of its  
transport network.
  
- 8 The British television hit series Doctor Who, in which the protagonist is a Time Lord who travels 75  
through time in a machine known as the Tardis, has been an institution on the goggle box for half a  
century. Such powerful blending of science fiction and popular culture does not merely give us  
intriguing characters with superhuman abilities and novel gadgets and machines. On a more  
understated yet fundamental level, it fires the fascination and ignite the imagination of audiences  
worldwide, and across generations. In this extraordinary century of massive and unprecedented 80  
progress in the development of new technologies, our ancestors' fairy tales about travels beyond  
space and time may just become factual triumphs. It is thus not surprising that Chang'e – the mythical  
Chinese goddess living on the moon – has become the namesake of China's lunar exploration  
programme in the twenty-first century.