

Paying Big Bucks for Cool Number Plates

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In Malaysia, vehicle registration number is seen as a symbol of social status, which subsequently becomes an article of trade among vehicle owners due to the high value of certain “cool” numbers. Although such affection cannot be generalized to the whole community; some parties are willing to pay exorbitant price for certain number plates thus giving easy revenue for the government.

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New cars including imported refurbished units will get a unique vehicle registration number upon registering with the Road Transport Department (RTD; *Jabatan Pengangkutan Jalan – JPJ*) (Mohd Jawi et al., 2012). The same applies for other new vehicles including motorcycles, lorries, buses, but an interesting development concerning vehicle registration number in Malaysia is more apparent among private passenger vehicles. This is because certain registration numbers have become a commodity for the government (RTD) and also among car owners.

As mentioned by Zhou Yao (2014) in his master’s thesis, such willingness to pay for these numbers may be due to superstitious beliefs or visually appealing factors – funny, catchy, cool, and so on. The plastic letters and numbers displayed on the front and rear of a vehicle may evoke a feeling of superiority for the owners and perhaps would impress others. Therefore, some parties (representing individuals or organisations) are willing to part with a handsome amount of money to pay RTD through a structured bidding process to secure the “coolest” registration number. Alternatively, one could obtain his or her preferred registration number from someone else’s vehicle, which is permissible through several options and creative steps. Although it may sound absurd, this is the situation about car users in Malaysia when it comes to vehicle registration number or better known as number plate. The information on vehicle registration system in Malaysia is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic information on vehicle registration system in Malaysia

Item	Remarks
Reg. Prefix by States & Federal Territory (FT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A – Perak; B – Selangor; C – Pahang; D – Kelantan; J – Johor; K – Kedah; M – Melaka; N – Negeri Sembilan; P – Penang; Q – Sarawak; R – Perlis; S – Sabah; T – Terengganu; W – Kuala Lumpur (FT); L – Labuan (FT); F – Putrajaya (FT), formerly <i>Putrajaya</i>. • W series for Kuala Lumpur ended in 2013 with WYY 9999, since on average 1,100 vehicles are registered with W plates per day. It was first replaced by adding a letter at the end (e.g. W 1 A), but had been changed to V (without end-letter) due to low bidding by vehicle owners. (Sarabatin et al., 2016)
Special Prefix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KV – Langkawi (an island in the state of Kedah). • H is for taxi, and displayed in inverted format, i.e. black letters and numbers on white plate background.
Omission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter “I” and “O” are omitted in the alphabetical sequence to avoid confusion with the number 1 and 0. • Letter “Z” is omitted and reserved for the military, so that any vehicle found on the road with letter Z on its plate is more than sure is a military vehicle. • The second prefix after “Z” denotes the branch or component of the military, i.e. ZA to ZD for army, ZL for navy (L for “Laut” or the sea), and ZU for air force (U for “Udara” or the air).
Special Edition (Vanity Plates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special prefixes are for special occasions, fundraising cause, etc. • <i>Official/International Events</i>: “XII NAM” for 2003 NAM Summit. • <i>Sporting Events</i>: “SUKOM” for Kuala Lumpur 1998 Commonwealth Games; “BAMbee” for 2000 Thomas/Uber Cup (badminton). • <i>Vehicle make and model</i>: “WAJA” for Proton Waja cars; “NAZA” for Naza vehicles. • <i>Fundraising</i>: “IM4U” for <i>IMalaysia for Youth</i> movement; “GT” for <i>Kelab Eksplorasi 7 Benua Malaysia</i> (KE7B). • It is to note that the special prefixes as mentioned above must be written (displayed) in that exact form of uppercase and lowercase format. It is also to be noted that the above list is not comprehensive.

Technically, the word “number” in number plate should be referred to as “code” since the registration system is based on combination of letters and numbers, making it an alphanumeric coding system. However, the focus is normally more on the numbers rather than the letters. Although it may have little to do with race, the Chinese community in general sees the importance of numbers. The number “8” is therefore perceived as a symbol of luck because it rhymes with the word “prosper” or “prosperity”. In contrast, the number “4” is the least preferred since it rhymes with the word “die” or “death” (Zhou Yao, 2014). Other than language or cultural influences, the entire Malaysia community in general thinks the “cool” factor is perhaps defined by single, double and triple digit – in that order of “coolness” (less is better).

Furthermore, some are eager to secure their birth year, wedding year or anniversary as their number plates, e.g. “1983” or “2008”. Some people will pay more for a specific number which represents a sense of belonging or emotional attachment, say “5661” is the family number or “8303” is the so-called “group official number” (car club, travelling club, association, etc.). Some may think that the order of a three or four digits that rhyme beautifully has certain value, e.g. 1113 is “one-plus-one-plus-one-equal-to-three”, or 111 because of the “three-ones-in-a-row”. Additionally, there is also a chance when the alphanumeric combination can conceptually form a word, which needs a little bit of imagination. For example, “ME 55” will be presumed as the word “MESS” (mess as in “messy” or the military mess).

So, how cool is cool and exactly how much money (Malaysian Ringgit – MYR) are we talking about? There are two ways to explain this by looking at both “series record” and “individual record”. The former can be explained by the total amount garnered by RTD for the entire series, and according to the former RTD chief, the extraordinary ones or the so called “hot series” will get them triple or even quadruple compared to the income from the so-called “normal series” (Mei Mei Chu, 2014). On the other hand, the latter will become a newsworthy element when someone (or a company) had successfully won a registration number that is brief (usually single or double digit) from the “hot series”. Table 2 summarizes what had been reported in the news, although the list is not historically comprehensive.

Table 2: Example of the popular registration series in Malaysia

SERIAL & INDIVIDUAL RECORD	
Series	Remarks
BMW Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Selangor state prefix. • Symbolic to the Germany’s luxury car brand BMW (<i>Bayerische Motoren Werke AG</i>). • BMW 5 (MYR 188,100.00).
RM Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Perlis state prefix, and Perlis is the only state that still offers dual letters due to low registration rate (except for the latest V/F series for Kuala Lumpur/Putrajaya). • Symbolic to “Ringgit Malaysia”. • Total collection of MYR 7 million. • RM 8 (MYR 297,000.00).
WWW Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Kuala Lumpur (FT) prefix. • Symbolic to the “World Wide Web”, or perhaps because of the three W’s in a row. • WWW 1 (MYR 520,000.00); WWW 3 (MYR 360,000.00); WWW 9 (MYR 350,000.00).

Nevertheless, besides the dollars and “sense” behind the bidding value studied by Zhou Yao (2014), the majority of academics in Malaysia have focussed on the plate recognition ability through the image-processing science and technology – usually denoted by the term License Plate Recognition (LPR) (e.g. Khalifa et al., 2007), License Plate Detection (LPD) (e.g. Al-Ghaili et al., 2010), Number Plate Recognition (NPR) (e.g. Ng & Choong, 2013), etc. This knowledge and technology is important in traffic enforcement, parking system and entrance admission, solving crime cases, etc. In addition, the situation may change in the future with the addition of other technologies that incorporate the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) for tracking purposes, i.e. e-plate (e.g. Evizal et al., 2013).

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