

China Images

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From Bicycles to VWs

1991. "Follow me," said Gong as she merged into the rush hour bicycle traffic. Off we went—Gong weaving in and out of a sea of bicycles; I following tentatively, on my first Chinese bicycle ride. We were headed for meetings at an elementary school. We couldn't be late, and we had to cross a large industrial city at rush hour.

Out of a side lane came a bicycle rider. I stopped, unsure if he would stop; he looked at me surprised. We bungled past each other and I restarted fast, trying not to lose sight of pink-jacketed Gong in the crowd and recognizing how little I knew about the rhythm and expectations of Chinese bike riding. Gong was going too fast for me to spend time thinking. That was good, and exhilaration took over. I began sensing the ebb and flow of traffic and fell in line with the bicycles moving along beside me eight to ten across. They flowed around pedestrians walking in front of them, bicycle lorries unloading their wares in the middle of traffic, and riders going up stream on the wrong side of the street. Then came a major intersection. Everyone seemed to know the system except me. Motorized vehicles, unstoping, wove in and out of bicycle traffic. A woman directly in front of me stopped short as someone cut her off. I pulled right and bumped a person coming from the other direction. Embarrassed, I got back on, and the next big intersection was easier. By our return trip, I had some of the rules in place. No quick starts or great speed. Follow the fluid pace and interactions

between the bicycle lanes and the trucks and cars cutting across them. Cars and trucks usually stop at red lights but not all the time, and bicycles seem not to heed them. For me, however, it continued to be hard to predict what other people would do. This was definitely not my culture.

During my first trips to China, bicycles seemed to be everywhere. I couldn't get the Nanjing street sounds out of my head, they were so foreign to my Western senses. Bicycles poured by, the hum of their tires and the incessant *brring, brring* of their bells interrupted only by occasional car horns. They pretty much owned the wide city streets, both the bicycle lanes on the outer third and the motor vehicle lanes as well. One mist-laden morning I rode in the back seat of an elegant university car as the driver, continuously honking her horn, seemed to push waves of bicycles aside—slowly, persistently, smoothly. At intersections cars, bikes and pedestrians pursued interwoven paths. Three-wheeled bicycle lorries carried any manner of things from geese to suitcases to oil drums. To and from school small children sat in their special seats behind their parents chatting merrily in good weather, tucked under ponchos in rain or snow.

Rows and rows of bicycles were parked everywhere, all looking the same to me. In Shijiahuang I parked my borrowed bicycle beside three others near a classroom building. When I came out there were

hundreds--all black, all looking exactly the same to my untrained eye. It took ten minutes of growing panic to find mine. When I confessed this to my Chinese hosts, they giggled and told of a much-loved visiting American who was never able to find his bicycle so they painted a pink dot on the back fender. Then they laughed good-naturedly again, wondering why foreigners had trouble finding a specific bicycle.

I usually walked around cities rather than pedaled, however. This gave me the luxury of soaking up the rhythm of the streets. I began to see the skill with which people got on and off bicycles—hopping on behind friends after they'd begun pedaling, their balance and control well beyond anything I had learned in my bike-riding childhood. Young children in their special seats watched passing scenes, waved to friends, and carefully extracted chips from foil bags, never letting one fall. Friends rode with friends laughing and talking. They all seemed to know when to slow down, when to swerve, where another rider would go.

During my hours of walks, I learned to move in synchrony with Chinese pedestrians as they sped up, stopped for turning taxis, and threaded their way among the myriad bicycles and carts. I gained confidence in navigating through traffic, but even so I was often reminded that I didn't have an insider's knowledge. One day, in anticipation of crossing a street, I leaned forward ever so slightly, bringing an approaching bicycle rider to a screeching halt—and all those behind him. My micro-movements were strange to him and unconscious to me.

It wasn't always like this in China. In fact bicycles apparently were introduced by two American adventurers, Thomas Allen and William Sachtleben, who rode across the country in 1891 and at the end of the trip were interviewed by the prime minister, Li-Huang-Chang, who needed to be convinced

that China's roads were adequate for bicycle riding. The history of the bicycle itself is fuzzy. In the West diagrams of chains and sprockets have been found in drawings as early as 200 B.C. and Leonardo DaVinci drew a bicycle-like machine that apparently never left the drawing board. A Frenchman is credited with building the first functioning chain-drive in 1770 for silk reeling and throwing mills, and in the 19th century various Europeans invented bicycles, first those almost impossible to ride with 6-foot diameter wheels and finally the "safety bicycle" similar to what we are familiar with. In China a chain pump had been used to pump water from about the 1st century and by the 10th century the chain drive was in use, but these mechanisms were evidently never adapted to transportation. At the time Allen and Sachtleben adventured from Europe to Beijing, most human transport was by cumbersome hand-pushed wheelbarrow, rickshaw, or farm cart. Although bicycles were fairly slow to catch on in China, and were a luxury item for decades, the increase was steady. Photos from the 1940s show China's city streets crammed with walkers, rickshaws, and some bicycles, streetcars, trucks, and hand- and bicycle-pulled carts. 1970s photos show many more trucks, bicycles, and bicycle lorries carrying any number of things. But says graduate student Yang Weihua [Yaung Way-hoo-uh], "When I was growing up in my village in the 1970s and 80s, almost no one had a bicycle. It was a luxury we couldn't afford."

Today traffic has changed. Bicycles are still very common but taxis, cars, and vans are increasing continually. In the 1980s and 1990s trucks, taxis and buses were also common fare, although in small ratio to bicycles. Now on city streets and in ad hoc parking lots Toyotas, Lexuses, Santanas, Fiats, and Passats—all made in China—shine beside much smaller numbers of

Chinese makes such as Geely Haoqings, Fenyuns, Oriental Suns and Red Flags. As salaries have risen and the infrastructure has developed, Chinese (10% of the market) and joint-venture companies (90%) have been rolling out motorized vehicles that are gradually dominating city centers and becoming more prominent in rural areas. Taxis, vans and buses now own the middle street sections; bicycles are relegated to the side sections separated by curbs or fences—except at intersections.

Elevated expressways have risen from city streets and major intersections have complex traffic signals for turning cars and bicycles. In city centers multi-pronged overhead walkways ask pedestrians to trudge up staircases to cross intersections, and fences corral pedestrians along extensive stretches of streets to keep all but the most athletic from scurrying through mid-block traffic.

In recent years in order to document changes, I have counted vehicles and taken photos at busy times of day. More bicycles have pedal-activated motors than in the early 1990s and motorbikes have appeared. Well-off individuals ride new motorcycles and scooters. A Shanghai sidewalk parking area contained about 30% motorcycles, scooters and motorbikes. The rest were traditional single-gear bikes. Traffic on a Xi'an street at 4:30 p.m was 40% bicycles, 40% taxis or cars, 25% walkers and only 2 buses. A marketing study following 70,000 Chinese since 1997 has found that those riding bicycles as their major transportation mode has decreased from nearly 41 per cent three years ago to 34.4 per cent in 2004, while the number of walkers has steadily increased from 12.5 per cent to 20 percent. Traveling by private car, often chauffeured, has increased from just 2.4 to 2.6 percent over the last two years. Taxis, however, have increased their fleet sizes continuously. My sister noticed recently that on a street in central Shanghai at 6:30 a.m. all were taxis

with the exception of two buses and one truck. There were no private cars.

These days headlines about China consuming all the world's oil grab our attention, and indeed she is growing and becoming energy hungry. We sometimes get a vision of every one of those bicycles turning into a car, as one U.S. car producer dreamed. A year ago GM, Ford, Volkswagen and Toyota planned to invest 10 billion dollars in China with the hope of doubling production in three years. Said GM's chief executive, "Success in China is crucial to GM's global success." A more environmentally optimistic *Wired* article stressed that not only would China soon be the car capital of the world, but also the first alternative fuel superpower. We'll see, and although automobile change in China seems slow compared with other Chinese technological explosions such as cell phones, the numbers are so great, they cannot help but be noticed worldwide. In 2000 the Chinese owned only 12 cars per 1000 people, the US 710 per 1000 people. In 2020, the Chinese number is projected to grow to 95 per 1000 people, still well below current US auto use.

Air pollution in China is a big problem, but primarily from sources other than vehicles. The government is beginning to make inroads into this area. Before the 2008 Olympics Beijing plans to convert its entire bus fleet of about 120 thousand vehicles to compressed natural gas. Initiatives for electric cars, fuel-cells, and more are being encouraged. The answer isn't in as to what the future will hold, but there are likely to be many more cars and motorized vehicles, and the pollution challenges will be significant.

People's changing attitudes and experiences are more subtle and complex than the more obvious growing traffic jams. Private citizens owning and driving cars, or renting them for weekend trips, are new concepts. Licenses are much easier to get

since a maintenance course is no longer required, and young people are versed in how to get one. My Nanjing language teacher observed, "Many Chinese consume much time discussing whether or not to get a car." Yet a car remains a luxury well beyond most people's means. Of all the people I know, most connected to universities or schools and earning mid-range salaries, only one owns a family car. The rest ride bicycles, walk, and take buses and cabs. Wang walks or takes the bus. She has given up on bicycles since hers were all stolen at the university, even the last one which she intentionally bought to be shabby. Wen Qiufang [Wen Chu-fahng], about 45 years old, rides her new pink bike. Well it's the second new pink bike, her last one was stolen. She and her husband live about a 20-minute walk from the university. They used to live on the other side of the city in university housing, a 30-40 minute bicycle ride. Her husband learned to drive in the United States and "had the U.S. driving experience," but he does not drive in China.

Yu Zhenyou just moved to Beijing. He, his wife and 13-year-old son lived for many months in university housing a 40-minute ride from the campus. In a May phone call fraught with traffic noise, he answered, "Hello. Wait a moment. I have to get through this intersection before I can talk." Now they have moved to the campus, but his son was accepted to Qinhua University high school and rides city buses 1-1/2 hours each way.

Prof. Yue, now retired, gave up riding five years ago when she was hit by a motorcycle at a busy intersection.

Despite the increase in motorized transportation, the farther away from the city centers you go, the more bicycles there are. In Beijing at an intersection of wide streets in the outlying university district I was surprised to see how many bicycles passed my window. Cars and trucks dominated one

street; bicycles had equal footing on the other. The early morning scenes were similar to the 1990s. Parents rode with children on the back, even middle school students whose feet almost touched the pavement. Adults rode two to a bike, chatting as they went. An elementary school student read a book as her mother pedaled along.

Bicycle bells are now dominated by car horns and gasoline engines, but bicycles and old rhythms remain. One morning recently pedestrians threaded between two sidewalk bicycle repair shops. At one a woman squatted over a dangling kick stand trying out nuts and screws from her four tin cans of parts. Her tool a simple hand held wrench. At the other a man and an elegantly dressed woman office worker tried to dislodge a foreign object from her bicycle chain. Down the block a steady stream of shiny green taxis pulled onto the sidewalk to be washed and scrubbed spotless for their next shift. Later that day as I passed a nursery school at dusk, a grandfather pedaled by with his granddaughter nestled into her seat behind him. She was half singing, half saying a rhythmic poem. He chuckled to himself as she finished, and he began reciting his own rhyme as they pulled out into the bike lane of a main thoroughfare—taxis, buses and cars swooshing by.

2005. Twelve noon, northwest Beijing. I stood on the sidewalk edge watching Yu inch into the bicycle lane. Six lanes of noon-time traffic and one traffic light. As many times as I've crossed Chinese streets this one seemed daunting. None of those wonderful pedestrian signals and large count-down placards like Nanjing now has to control all of the traffic and to let you know when the other traffic will move. I followed him, trusting his movement among the moving bicycles and his judgment of when the cars would turn left or right, not

always in accordance with my western notion of when they should. Although I've learned to follow the pace of the Chinese around me, this time I was distracted by impatient left turning cars, free-moving bicycles and motor-bikes, and the right-turning cars and vans. Relieved to reach the far sidewalk I realized that after 15 years my intuitive movements were still not in tune with the dance and interweaving of Chinese cars, trucks, motor bikes, and bicycles.

Mr. Sun, a Chinese-American professor next to me on the plane home, talked exuberantly about the interwoven traffic.

“It’s almost mystical to watch the movement, the judging of where people know each other is.” Vehicles are changing and moving faster, making the city traffic increasingly complex. Yet in spite of the continuous changes, the old rhythms and movements remain. Bicycles, pedestrians, buses, taxis and cars braid themselves into intricate flowing patterns. The Chinese seem to drive cars the way they ride bicycles, making the dance faster and more complicated, but fundamentally the same.

Resources

Across Asia on a Bicycle: The journey of two American students from Constantinople to Peking, by Thomas Gaskell Allen, Jr. and William Lewis Sachtleben. Written after their trip and now reprinted. You can find several editions via Google, including some excerpts. Available through Amazon.com for about \$10. I've ordered a copy in case you want to borrow it. My initial information about their trip came from articles on bicycles in a current and manageable encyclopedia about China which seems to be fairly accurate (in case your library would like to buy one). It is Dorothy Perkins, *Encyclopedia of China: The essential reference to China, its history and culture*. New York: Checkmark Books. First paperback edition, 2000. Only 660 pages!

Beijing Bicycle. A contemporary Chinese remake, it appears, of the Italian classic *The Bicycle Thief*, though with some strong differences. An excellent window into modern Chinese urban living and into everyday lives centered around bicycles.

“China’s Next Cultural Revolution,” by Lisa Margonelli. In the April 2005 issue of *WIRED*. As the by-line states, “the People’s Republic is on the fast track to become the car capital of the world. And the first alt-fuel superpower.” A good read and introduction to China’s means for coping with modernization and transportation challenges. Also plenty of facts about China’s resource needs.

<http://www.volkswagen.com> gives you an idea of the cars available in China. On the homepage, choose “China—Volkswagen China” for country selection (it’s the fastest of the 3 options) or select “Volkswagen International” and dig down a few layers to country selection. If your computer delivers Chinese (or ???s) the line of text just below the full-screen picture contains the models. Try some. (Try bright green Santanas to envision the Xi’an taxi fleet.) To translate the model names, select “English” in the upper left of the homepage. Volkswagen was the first Western car company to engage in Chinese joint-ventures.