MAKING WAY FOR MOTORS. Bicyclists ride in Shanghai. China’s biggest city plans to ban bicycles from all major roads next year to ease congestion brought on by a wave of private car ownership, official newspapers said. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

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Clogged with cars, Shanghai to expand its ban on bicycles

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SHANGHAI, China — Shanghai plans to ban bicycles from its major roads next year, banishing China’s most popular form of transportation from its congested streets to make more room for cars, official newspapers said.

Police will also raise fines tenfold for such cycling infractions as running red lights, Shanghai Daily reported. Such measures aim to "control the number of bicycles on city streets," it quoted police official Chen Yuangao as saying.

The proposed ban, which extends restrictions already in place on some streets, has prompted protests by some city officials and members of the city’s cycling population.

"Bicycles are an environmentally friendly means of transportation that should not be banned," the paper quoted Zhao Guotong, an official of the
Shanghai Economic Commission, as saying.

Shanghai should instead "take firm control of the increasing numbers of private cars," Zhao was quoted as saying.

Shanghai, with an urban population of about 20 million, has some 9 million bikes, the paper said. Numbers of new bicycles in the city grew by 1 million this year.

Bicycles were long kings of the road in China, hailed by the country’s communist leaders as the perfect proletarian transport: cheap, efficient, and egalitarian.

Like other cities, Shanghai, which boasted some of China’s earliest bicycle factories, set aside special bike lanes on main roads and built bike parking lots.

In recent years, though, Shanghai has developed into a center of China’s burgeoning auto industry, and growing affluence has spurred private car buying.

Numbers of private vehicles in Shanghai nearly doubled to 142,801 at the end of last year, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. The figure is expected to top 200,000 by the end of this year, according to Shanghai media reports.

That accounts for only a small percentage of vehicles on the road, though: Private auto-mobiles are outnumbered six to one by busses, taxis, government cars, and commercial vehicles, according to the official newspaper Liberation Daily.

Officials have tried to rein in numbers of new cars by raising registration fees and restricting access to the city center.

Nevertheless, police officials cited the need to control two wheelers as the key to reducing gridlock, accusing them of ignoring traffic lights and occupying vehicle lanes.

"Bicycles put great pressure on the city’s troubled traffic situation," Shanghai Daily quoted Chen as saying.