Pedal power declining on the roads

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Dubbed the "kingdom of bicycles," China is home to 470 million bicycles - a third of the global total - but they are no longer the kings of the road.

In recent years, the flow of bicycles has gradually shrunk with an increasing number of people no longer choosing them as their major means of transport.

The numbers bear that out.

There are 142 bicycles for every 100 families, across the country now compared with 182 per 100 families in 1998, according to statistics of the China Bicycle Association.

A quarter of Beijing residents, mostly workers and students, commute on bikes between their homes and offices or schools; a decade ago, as many as 60 per cent of the capital's residents relied on bikes.

Suburban living

As cities keep expanding, riding a bike between home and the workplace is not a wise choice for many.

Many residential areas are mushrooming in the suburbs of large cities. In Beijing, for example, many people live in areas far from the city centre and commuting by bike is not an option.

Zhang Yuhu, a 33-year-old media professional who bought an apartment in Tongzhou District outside Beijing's Fourth Ring Road three years ago, has dumped his bike and takes buses and the subway to work.

"It would take an hour by bike to reach my office in downtown," Zhang says. "If the office were less than a 20-minute ride away, I would have opted for a bicycle."

For Li Yawei, who works in a foreign-funded company, it was not distance which made her discard the bicycle.

"I have to wear make-up and formal clothes for work, so riding a bike is not a wise choice for me," Li says.

Li usually travels by bus or taxi although she bought a car two years ago.

"Traffic jams are so annoying," she says. "Taking a bus is sometimes more time-saving than driving my own car in rush hour because there are special bus lanes."

A recent survey by Datasea Research shows that 45 per cent of Beijing residents use...
Once a luxury

The bicycle was once a luxury and one of the "three major possessions," along with a wrist watch and sewing machine, for young couples starting their families in the 1970s.

Today, it is just a minor item on the shopping list.

"A bike is like a television, a telephone or even cabbage," says Xiao Liu, a freelancer writer in her late 20s, who sometimes rides a bike to the grocery store.

"When I lost a bike 10 years ago, I was really upset and it made my life very inconvenient. Now, buying a bike is no big deal," Xiao says.

There are more than 1,000 brands of bikes available in Beijing but as fierce as the competition is, four brands are the most popular.

Flying Pigeon (Feige), Phoenix (Fenghuang) and Forever (Yongjiu) are the most popular traditional brands among older people. For the younger generation, the Taiwan brand Giant is the favourite.

The first three are sturdily built and offer smooth riding. The frame and the rims, basically, last forever. The problems lie in the details such as half-hearted chrome work. Overall, though, at less than 400 yuan (US$48), and nostalgia thrown in, it is worth it.

Giant is claiming more of the market because its bikes are well-made and fashionable. It makes regular, racing and mountain bikes. They have more gadgets and gizmos than other brands and the models are often upgraded to keep up with the latest trends.

In 2001, after just seven years entering the mainland market, Giant bikes ranked No 1 in domestic sales despite their higher prices.

Cyclists' headache

Buying a bicycle is a snap but keeping it can be a headache - everyone has a tale to tell of thefts in big cities.

So before you decide to buy a bike, you should factor in the risk of losing it.

Beijing authorities issued laser-technology licence plates with information about the owner to curb rampant theft in 2002. Lost bikes can be retrieved and verified through special equipment, traffic management officials say.

But few people dare to park their new bikes where they please, especially at night.

Local cyclist Shu Juan has a simple solution.

"Once you can't see the paint on your bike any more, you have become part of the Beijing bike community and have earned the best anti-theft protection," he says. The caveat, of course, is that you keep it till the shine wears off.

Besides, bicycle injuries also pose a threat; they top traffic-related injuries in China, traffic management experts say.

Cyclists do not commonly wear helmets in China, since they are simply unaware of how effective helmets are in preventing injury, says Zhao Jintao, a researcher with the Communication Economy Research Institute under Nankai University.
"That is why two-thirds of the deaths resulting from bicycle accidents are due to head injuries," Zhao said.

Although many roads have special bicycle lanes in cities, some narrow streets and most rural roads do not have such lanes, which makes cyclists compete with motor vehicles, Zhao says.

Electric bikes, slower than fuel-powered vehicles, but faster than ordinary bikes, are more dangerous in mixed traffic, he says.

Bicycle management dilemma

Statistics show Shanghai has more than 6 million bicycles, of which some 1.68 million are unregistered.

The question of how to better regulate bicycles has been a thorny one for city governments.

Do bicycle licence plate and bicycle tax really play an important role in bike management and theft prevention?

The Beijing municipal government announced at the beginning of this year that tax on non-motor vehicles was abolished.

The 13-year taxation policy was phased out following public calls, government officials say.

The city's tax evasion rate was as high as 80 per cent in past years and taxation officers spent more on publicity and collection procedures than actual collections.

Many other provinces including Jiangsu, Anhui and Fujian have done away with bicycle tax in recent years.

Like bicycle tax, bicycle licence plates have also phased out in Southwest China's Sichuan Province.

The provincial government stopped bicycle registration late last year to save owners the troubles, a spokesman with the provincial government says.

Du Wen, a professor with Southwest Jiaotong University in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, welcomes the government move. "The move will help make a smaller but efficient government which attaches importance to major issues, not everything," Du said.

"Bicycle licence plates will find a new place on the display board of collectors," he adds.

However, some think the move will encourage bicycle thefts. And the Sichuan rule is in conflict with the national Law on Road Traffic Safety, effective from May 1 this year - every road vehicle (including bicycles) should have licence.

The Beijing Traffic Management Bureau has confirmed that it has no intention of following Sichuan's move to cancel bicycle licence plates.

A resurrection?

Because of traffic jams, fumes and noise pollution produced by cars which pose a serious threat to the health of people in developed countries, more and more people are realizing the benefits of cycling.

Some predict that bicycles will reign supreme in the near future. Apart from China, bicycles are the chief means of transportation in many countries in Asia and Africa.
In some cities in Europe and North America, there are also many bicycle lovers.

Most riders in the United States cycle for pleasure, says Richard Hurst, a visiting US professor working in a Beijing college. Hurst says he has also found great pleasure riding bikes in China. "If you spend your vacation on a bicycle tour in China, you'll know more about Chinese life and enjoy closer contact with Chinese culture and traditions," Hurst says.

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