

“

HERE ARE
NINE
MILLION
BICYCLES IN
BEIJING.
THAT'S A FACT.
IT'S A THING
WE CAN'T DENY,"
SANG THE
SONGSTRESS
KATIE MELUA
ON HER MILDLY
INANE 2005
HIT SINGLE
"NINE MILLION
BICYCLES". THIS
FIGURE, HOWEVER,
WAS A TAD OFF.

By Jamie Fullerton

A couple of years after the ditty's release, Melua's estimate was questioned by CBS News in the United States, which reported that the Chinese capital, in actual fact, housed about 13 million bikes. Neither the award-winning singer nor the American news network, though, mentioned anything about the social cachet of bicycles in the city.

For most Beijingers in the noughties, when China's economy was going interstellar, cycling was purely functional – something you did only if you couldn't afford a car. But this wasn't always the case. Decades ago, cars were the exclusive preserve of the political elite and people with *guanxi* – or connections and social clout – and upgrading to four wheels wasn't an option available to many residents, regardless of income. Indeed, Beijing was considered the bicycle capital of the world. Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's captivating 1972 documentary, *Chung Kuo, Cina*, filmed during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, even recorded iconic images of hordes of Beijingers in Mao suits on bikes cruising past stark Communist monuments, with few motorized vehicles in sight.

In early 1970s Beijing, owning *sanshengyixiang* (literally "three rounds and sound" and referring to a wristwatch, bicycle, sewing machine and radio) was considered the marker of modernity. An estimated three million bicycle trips took place each day in the city, largely on bikes made by the state-promoted brand Flying Pigeon. Incidentally, the firm still operates out of Tianjin, and has provided the two-wheeled contraptions as diplomatic gifts to world leaders including the late Fidel Castro, David Cameron and Donald Trump (who arguably hasn't fully embraced the environmentally friendly mindset associated with the vehicle).

But China's gradual opening up in the 1980s allowed more imports into the country and put the emphasis on cars, while modernization in the 1990s put the pedal to the metal. According to the Earth Policy Institute, between 1995 and 2005, bike ownership across the country nosedived from 670 million to 435 million.





"ANYONE SEEN RIDING A BIKE WAS seen as old hat," says Shannon Bufton, the Australian founder of Serk Cycling, a bicycle shop and tour company he runs in the city's Beixingqiao area. "There was a TV dating show on which a girl was asked by a guy if she'd go for a ride on the back of his bike. She said, 'I'd rather cry in the back of a BMW than be happy on the back of a bike.' But around 2012 to 2013, I could see the image of the bicycle in Beijing starting to shift."

Bufton, bike-oil-for-blood and never without his cycling cap, tells me that you don't hear attitudes like that dating show brat's these days. He explains that over the past few years, more and more locals – inspired by the rise of cool cycling scenes in foreign cities such as Copenhagen and Portland, coupled with rising awareness of environmental issues

– have been buying expensive bike gear as a status symbol and taking up cycling as a serious hobby.

With the Chinese capital having experienced dire traffic and pollution problems for years, the government and its state-controlled media have jumped aboard the cycling bandwagon and encouraged the shift, too. Bufton reveals, "I've gotten interviewed loads by the state media, who say, 'The government says we need to do stories on bikes – just tell us anything!'"

A trip to Sanlitun, Beijing's fashionable shopping area, confirms that cycling is hugely back in vogue here. Hands that aren't clasping white-and-green Starbucks takeaway cups are gripping bike handles. Row upon row of parked blue, yellow, silver and orange frames make paths spoke-laden obstacle



THIS SPREAD,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Parked Mobike, Ofo and Bluegogo bikes; colorful spare bike parts at Natooke, a cycle shop in Beijing; people biking around the city

IMAGES: MATIAZ TANCIC (TOP), JASPER JAMES (BOTTOM)

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Shannon Bufton, the founder of Serk Cycling; one of Beijing's historic hutongs, perfect for exploring by bike

courses, with almost as many cruising the narrow streets, ridden by flocks of shopping bag-laden riders.

Most of the vehicles are shared bikes made by companies such as Mobike, Ofo and Bluegogo – users unlock them with a smartphone app, ride to their heart's content, then ditch them on any path in the city, ready for the next rider.

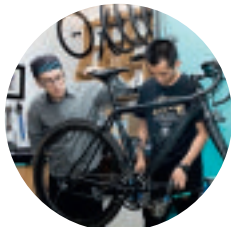
But while these convenient bike-sharing systems present clear advantages, they also cause problems that the city's newly bike-happy government has had to contend with. Beijing's municipal government recently banned new shared bikes from being distributed, as current numbers already clog up the narrow sidewalks (search "Shanghai bike graveyard" for striking images showing how bad the overspill can get in China). Despite these issues, shared bikes' meteoric rise in popularity over the past two years represents what *The Guardian* recently described as a "bike-sharing revolution".



IMAGES: JASPER JAMES (TOP), MATIJAZ TANCIC (BOTTOM)

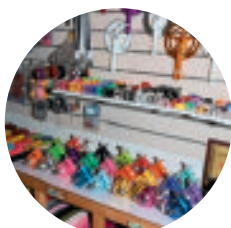
GEAR UP

Top Beijing independent cycle shops and community hubs



Serk Cycling

Run by Beijing bike overlord Shannon Bufton, Serk offers bikes and accessories for serious riders, plus rentals. The company is the center of a strong cycling community, organizing bike holidays and day trips. Open by appointment. serk.cc



Natooke

This small, hipster-trendy shop on the lovely Wudaoying Hutong is the home of fixed-gear cycling in Beijing. It's filled with colorful contraptions and has a friendly, community vibe that's topped off by the team serving craft beer on tap. natooke.com



Bamboo Bicycles Beijing

Found in the charming, winding lanes around Gulou, this small, community-minded space constructs customized bikes with bamboo frames. Contact the team ahead of time in order to sort out a workshop visit. bamboobicyclesbj.com



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Commuters using one of Beijing's many bike lanes

IN THIS CITY, THE REVOLUTION IS AS

fun as it is practical. Whether you're dodging dogs in one of the city's charming old residential lanes, sailing underneath Mao's portrait at sunset by Tiananmen Square or doing laps around the Worker's Stadium, Beijing is an incredible city to experience by bike.

More confirmation of this comes when I unlock a Mobike and join Bufton around the traditional city lanes, known as *hutong*, near his shop. A ceiling of tree branches shields us from the dappled sunlight as we cruise past nobbled red temple gates, before gliding past selfie-snapping tourists at coffee shop-saturated Wudaoying Hutong. I swerve past a Chihuahua perched in its master's bicycle basket, the pint-sized pooch propping itself up with the nonchalance of a Roman emperor riding a chariot.

IMAGES: MATIJAZ TANCIC (MAIN), JASPER JAMES (SIDEBAR)

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Local residents take to Beijing's streets on two wheels

Around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when they were first introduced to Beijing, the only shared bike options were slightly tacky, government-issued frames that could only be left in specified docking areas. But through a combination of clever marketing and swish design, the likes of Mobike and Ofo have made shared bikes cool here, encouraging more city slickers to adopt two-wheel travel.

Speaking in Mobike's Brooklyn-trendy Beijing headquarters, Florian Bohnert, the company's head of global partnerships, tells me: "Our CEO says that people used bikes in university in China because they didn't care about how they looked – [they just cared about] their homework. But when they graduated, the bike [was ditched]. So it was important for our bikes to look amazing and give 'face' to the people riding them."

Similarly, Ofo has cleverly cultivated a millennial-friendly image with its striking yellow bikes, and by recruiting popular celebrities, such as the singer and actor



IMAGES: MATIJAZ TANCIC (TOP), XI LI (BOTTOM)



“
People used to hang out and play basketball, now they ride. People go on nights out, drinking and hopping between bars. It's seen as cool
 ”

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 Night riders explore the city by bike, often punctuating sightseeing with a drink or two



Lu Han, to promote them. "It's like when basketball became popular in Beijing," claims Liang Siyuan, Ofo's marketing director. "People used to hang out and play basketball, now they hang out and ride." Bufton agrees with Liang's assessment, stating, "People go on nights out, drinking and riding bikes and hopping between bars. It's seen as cool."

INDEED, THE DRINKS ARE IN FULL FLOW before the bikes are when I join a group of 20- and 30-something night riders who meet weekly to explore the city's warren of backstreets and tourist sights after dark. Over the years, the group has evolved from a network of serious



QUICK FACTS

Three mind-boggling figures about biking in China

500
 MILLION

THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF BICYCLES IN CHINA

\$ 0.15

THE HOURLY COST TO USE A SHARED BIKE IN BEIJING

500
 THOUSAND

THE ROUGH NUMBER OF SHARED BIKES BEING USED IN BEIJING

IMAGES: XI LI



Riding free

Few first-time visitors to Beijing realize that some world-class countryside rides are easily accessible from the enormous, cab horn-soundtracked city. Cycle groups regularly stick their bikes in the back of a van, drive between 40km and 100km north, east or west of the city center, then enjoy stunning rides zipping through rural villages and along roads cut into mountainsides, with stop-offs on the Great Wall of China. Serk Cycling organizes regular weekend day trips for riders of varying abilities leaving early morning from the city center, and offers bikes for rent. serk.cc

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It's a sensory overload, the juxtaposition between old and new. The adrenaline rush... you don't even think about it, you just zone out and pick your way through traffic

”

fixed-gear cyclists called Big Dirty to what it is today – a rag-tag gang united by their love of experiencing the city casually on two wheels, as well as their love of booze. Before we depart from the Gulou area's historic Drum Tower for our next destination, I'm handed a bottle of indefinable orange grog as fuel.

Later, heading southwest from the westernmost point of Donghuamen Dajie, we ride along the canal encasing the

Forbidden City, past ornate and imposing former imperial palace buildings. We burst onto headlight-streaked highways, the lit-up Mao portrait and Tiananmen Square behind us. Then we duck into more hutong mazes, eventually parking for celebratory beers in a rustic bar.

Xi Li, one of the riders, says that Beijing's problematic pollution can hamper rides. "But when you get these super-awesome days you just feel, 'Wow, this is it'. It's a sensory overload, the juxtaposition between old and new. The adrenaline rush... you don't even think about it, you just zone out and pick your way through traffic."

We sink more beers, someone starts playing Motown music through a portable speaker and conversations about how brilliant cycling in Beijing is stretch into the early hours of the next morning. I slowly wobble home, happy to be on a bike rather than in a BMW.



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Exploring the Forbidden City by bike at night



PAL flies between Manila and Beijing four times weekly.

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IMAGE: XI LI