

The Bicycle Manual for Foreigners in China

By Jocelyn Eikenburg

When in China, do as the Chinese do: bicycle. Of all the transportation possibilities available, it perhaps offers you the some of the most freedom and flexibility. No more traffic jams. No more catching the latest flu or virus in crowded buses and subways. No more fighting for a taxi during rush hour. No more being a moving target on the sidewalks.

Sounds great, right?

Yet, your enthusiasm may not find a home with your foreign colleagues. Many people shun bicycling for a variety of reasons: safety, inconvenience and even fear. Talk to a few folks and you might even hear some disconcerting tales of woe. Things such as hitting an elderly Chinese man – resulting in the poor fellow’s death – and then having to fork out \$10,000 for your little oversight (a true story from a former coworker of mine).

Is cycling worth the price? I can’t tell you any feel-good-miraculous-Lance-Armstrong tale. Heck, I once had a little fender bender and handed over 100 RMB for damages. But I do know one thing – I could have avoided this and many other troubles if I’d known a little more before hitting the road.

With that in mind, I bring you the official “Foreigner’s Guide to Bicycling in China”: everything you ever (and in some cases perhaps never) wanted to know about bicycling in the middle kingdom.

Hey look, Mom, I just bought a bike in China

Before you set out, you’re going to need your own set of wheels. I offer you this modest suggestion:

Buy the cheapest bicycle that still runs and the best lock you can afford.

Why go cheap on bicycles? It’s simple. Unless you’re one of those weekend warriors heading out to the countryside/suburbs on some gut-wrenching personal “Tour de France,” you’ll be lucky if you go 20kph on the city streets. But more than that, your brand-spanking-new Giant or Canondale (or other high-end brand) will only invite the specter of theft into your life. Look around at what’s parked around the city – do you see anything that catches your eye? Anything to make your neighbors stir with envy? No? Exactly. So what does all that mean? A one-speed beater will do the job.

As for locks, the same theft-prevention reasoning applies here. Think having a bicycle that looks like it went through the Forbidden City and back is enough insurance for you? Think again. Even beaters get stolen. They may be worth only 30 to 50 RMB, but that’s big money to someone out there (probably one of those guys you may have seen rummaging in the garbage cans for recyclable bottles). Go for the most lock you can get away with – and you can rest easy when you park on the streets at night.

Theft – your bicycle’s number one enemy

The problem with bicycles in China isn’t that they break down – and believe me, you’ll be amazed at what great lengths a good mechanic will go to resuscitate a tire or gear. If anything, your bicycle will probably be like Chairman Mao’s image – despite your best efforts, it will just live on and on and on.

It’s theft you’ve got to worry about. Over the years, I’ve learned a few tips and tricks for keeping your wheels out of the notorious “second-hand bicycle markets”...

I already touched a few important points to keep in mind when you’re on the prowl for a new set of wheels. Add to that color. If you want the ultimate insurance for your bicycle, choose one that roughly approximates the color of concrete or cement. Your bike will nicely blend in with the urban habitat and has a better chance of surviving (think Darwin’s theory of natural selection).

Okay, so you’ve got your license, your paid in full and ready to go. But wait! There’s a few small things you can do to burglar-proof your little investment.

See those colorful stickers on the frame? The ones advertising your bicycle’s brand? Peel every single one of them off. If you cannot remove the brand name, consider buying a few tools at your neighborhood hardware store to scratch it into oblivion. Spray paint works too. Basically, you want to obliterate anything on your bicycle that identifies its brand/make – so your average Thief Wang will think it’s just another generic bike.

But what if, after all that, your bike still has that “just-purchased” glow? If you’re the creative and adventurous type, why not try a little two-wheeled aging here? This is one of those times where having a sprawling construction pit in the vicinity suddenly seems like a boon. Gather up some of that nasty mud/sludge/dust and give your bike a nice little bath.* Or if you’re just a little too lazy, find the nearest lake or river and “accidentally” push your bike in.*

* Note that there are hazards involved here. Stuff like having your bike sink into the mud, falling into nasty, polluted water, getting questioned/pulled aside by police, or just looking like an idiot in front of the public. Should you choose to do this, I am not responsible for any accidents or damages incurred. Cover your own butt, okay? I’ve warned you.

Parking: where not to leave your bike alone

I used to leave my beloved Giant bicycle outside in the alleyway. I still cringe when I think of the morning I awoke to find that unoccupied space where that venerable hunk of metal once stood. But it’s not just top-shelf bikes that seem to develop legs of their own. Even my dear friend, Anya, lost a beat-up secondhand model when she left it parked near a main street all night long.

The lesson here is this: never, never, NEVER leave your bike parked anywhere overnight – even if it’s around some happening entertainment strip that seems to be hooked on opium 24/7.

What if you're just out doing the consumer shuffle downtown or chowing down on your favorite dumplings with friends? Find the busiest intersection in the area to lay your wheels to rest. I'd recommend one jammed with bikes that seem to be phantoms of their previous selves. Just squeeze – or in some cases, shove --your concrete-colored beater into the fray. In China, there's safety in crowds. An old Chinese saying states that the protruded nail is the one that gets hammered. So don't stand out and your bike won't be a target either.

This isn't a road – it's an obstacle course!

Is this your first reaction when you hit the road for the first time? Well, you're not alone. Hundreds of foreigners eschew bicycling when they discover that it's...well...kind of a war out there at times. And I'm not just talking about the aggressive motorcycles and drivers. You're also contending with pedestrians, folks in wheelchairs, overloaded three-wheeled carts and even – in some cities – donkey-drawn carriages. Kind of makes you think differently about, say, LA or NYC traffic, eh?

That said, there are strategies for staying safe that will make a difference in your riding experience. Here are few that have helped me conquer the roads – and my fears – in China.

Bells are out and grunting is in

For the longest time, I believed a bell was the best way to alert folks I was approaching, passing or just even “there” on the road. Not so. Nary a rider would even twitch when I rang out my presence behind them. It's no wonder either. China is such a horn- and bell-happy country that no one pays attention anymore. Think background noise.

Then I discovered grunting. You know – that “sound your barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” Walt Whitman stuff. And boy, did I see heads turn – almost every time. I can't give you scientific figures here, but it's in the ballpark of over 90 percent. And if safety is your big mantra, it's worth a go.

I'd suggest you practice before heading out. Find yourself a nice staccato, yet slightly masculine and intimidating woof – short enough to sound urgent without revealing yourself as a foreigner. You probably won't sound too “foreign” anyhow. Yelling, screaming and grunting, from my experience, seem to sound about the same in any language.

Seems too unrefined for you? Well, keep in mind your average person on the road couldn't give a flying rice bowl about politeness. This is a country where people have long learned how to fight for their survival and rights; nowhere is it more apparent than on the roads. And anyhow, it sure beats getting hit – or worse.

It's my turn...no my turn!

Turning in China isn't just frustrating – it can be another opportunity to become a moving target. People will pass you up, or cut you off, at the most inopportune places – such as that small space beside you that you were certain NO biker in their right mind could squeeze into.

However, turning signals can make all of the difference in the world.

Here's what you do. Hold your arm out horizontally in the direction of your turn. Now, make your entire arm violently convulse as though it were electrocuted – the scarier, the better.

This works twofold. Bicyclists know you intend to make a turn. And if they ineptly choose to pass you from the inside, they will be stopped or slapped (whichever comes first) by your oscillating appendage.

Obstacles and how to avoid them

Meat pancakes

A pervasive species on the road characterized as fast and aggressive. Usually motorcycles, mopeds, scooters and any other electric vehicle with an undeniable wish to become a nice little won ton wrapper made of flesh. Parts of their vehicles are sometimes duct-taped together. Generally the first to cross any intersection, sometimes even well before the light is green. Have a tendency to emit more noisome emissions than others.

Don't let these guys intimidate you. Instead, use them to your advantage. Let them go first – that way, they'll get hit by the cars that run red lights or disregard the traffic rules. Think of them as traffic guinea pigs.

It's a bird...it's a plane...no, wait, it's an overloaded cycle. Help!

A mountain of endless cardboard, bamboo poles, boxes or even pig carcasses. And you have the pleasure of being stuck behind it during rush hour. Nothing like an obscured view. The prospect of being clubbed by a piece of bamboo. Or seeing – and smelling – a huge tub filled with what was once someone else's lunch

Basically, you should never, never be behind these guys. Period. When you see a behemoth pile of garbage or construction paraphernalia chugging along through traffic on a cart, bicycle, donkey, someone's back...whatever... figure out a way around them. Sidewalks are great. And in extreme situations, you might try an alternative route.

One thing though...the aforementioned meat pancakes really come in handy here. Meat pancakes have zero patience for the overloads and seem to have a penchant for finding that golden shortcut. They also have a penchant for wiping out in traffic...so, keep your distance, OK?

Look out for Grandma Zhang...because she isn't looking out for you

Let me start out with a disclaimer here...I really do love China's senior citizens. The gentle morning dance of their Tai Chi. Their hospitality – in all of my years in Shanghai, the most welcoming folks happened to have a silvery head of hair. And let's not forget seniors' family devotion. Grandma and Grandpa happily help out with the little ones so mom and dad can bring home the rice.

If only they looked both ways when crossing the street.

It's not every senior citizen. Nor is it just senior citizens of course. But seniors pose a special risk. Think slower reflexes. Think hearing loss. Think my friend's acquaintance who accidentally hit a senior and watched him die from fright or just frailty.

I had the joy of passing a hospital every morning in Shanghai and the road beside it was a like a veritable slow-motion pinball table with senior citizens randomly plodding in and out of the street.

I don't have any silver bullet to offer you, beyond my implicit warning – and a little fear. The notion of being dragged through China's legal and correctional underworld changes everything. So do the right thing – slow down or just plain stop.

Buses – be very, very afraid

In every great pond of life, there exists a big fish that scares the hell out of us. In China's traffic, that big fish is the bus.

You will watch it in the left-hand turn lane, unapologetically hurtling itself at a swarm of cyclists almost like a barracuda taking a swipe at a school of minnows. Or simply tearing down the road so stridently you're convinced it will not even stop for those pedestrians. (Sometimes I think the buses actually slam on the gas pedal when they see anyone in the road.)

On the new shows TV in China, the most tragic of all bicycle accidents invariably involve some bus and a dodgy intersection. Don't let this be your path to stardom.

Understanding the psychology of the bus is key here. It thinks it is king. And given that it can plow away just about anything in its path with minimal damage to itself, it basically is. That means you, as a bicyclist, need to steer clear of this authoritarian vehicle.

Watch out at bus stops and intersections. Most buses will just violently swing over to the curb or around the corner, and sideswipe unsuspecting bicyclists.

If you see a left-turning bus ready to cross your path, stop -- or continue forward at your own risk.

Repair me!

Inevitably, even the best of bikes will need repairs. But the repair process is mired in pitfalls for foreigners. How many times have I rashly forked over money to a questionable establishment, only to have someone else fix this so-called repair?

I offer two suggestions to cut down on your hassle – and repair bills.

First, never do repairs alone. Ideally, get a Chinese friend/coworker/neighbor/lover to accompany you to the shop. They will ensure you get a fair price for the work – as foreigners will invariably be overcharged for just about anything in China – and hopefully protect you from being sold on unnecessary repairs.

Second, find a reputable repair shop in your neighborhood and give them all your business. You'll never have to worry about your tire going flat again within a week or your wheel being installed at an angle. When I lived in Shanghai, no matter where I broke down, I almost never settled for the closest shop except in the most dire circumstances. The peace of mind was well worth the walk to my trusty place.

Being wheel-happy

I once heard a Buddhist lecture where the speaker posed this situation. It was a man driving his car in rush-hour traffic, stuck in gridlock on the highway – and miserable. Miserable because he wasn't going anywhere, because the traffic...well, you get the picture. And the lecturer asked this: why wasn't the man satisfied with the pleasure of driving itself? Why wasn't that enough for him to be happy in the moment?

The same could be said for bicycling in China. It's easy to become blasé about bicycling when it becomes a part of our daily routine – and when one considers all of the aforementioned dangers and obstacles. There have been times in my life in China when I've been numb to it or just plain terrified. But when you strip away the stories, associations, fears and anything else you believe to be true about it, there is a certain undeniable pleasure. In the few moments I've approached this bicycling nirvana, it is almost like flying, gliding effortlessly on the waves of humanity that spill out into the city streets.

So I wish you peace on the road – may you too find nirvana on two wheels!