Beijing Bicycle: The Cruel Story of Youth, City, and Modernization in Contemporary China

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Editorial Introduction

Despite active globalization, many individuals lack an appreciable knowledge about contemporary China that could foster a deeper level of empathy. Within the world’s general understanding, the political ramifications of China’s unprecedented growth undermine the social cost affecting its people. The film Beijing Bicycle points to the universal relevance of contemporary Chinese lives through a faithful tale about two disenfranchised Chinese youth caught up in the many idiosyncrasies of a changing society. Directed by Wang Xiaoshuai in 2001, the film revolves around a poor country teen Guei who came to Beijing to seek work and a schoolboy Jian from a working-class family in the city. Guei’s bicycle is stolen and sold to Jian and the events in the film become linked by the bicycle’s literal and metaphorical significance. This collection discusses the different cultural themes in contemporary China as depicted via the bicycle’s symbolism. The first essay considers the distinctive Chinese frame of mind that motivates and inspires the characters to try to overcome their underprivileged circumstances. The second essay then explores the characters’ self-perceptions and identity struggles shaped by the increasingly unfettered development. Lastly, the third essay places these characters’ experiences within the context of China’s ambitious policies to shed light on the overall cost to citizens. These essays serve to interpret some of the many complex personal issues and social tensions that are emerging in the fast developing China as it gains more presence on the world stage. We
hope that from the chaos around the bicycle in the rapidly industrializing city of Beijing the reader can sense the seamy side of “capitalism with Chinese characteristics.”

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Respect in *Beijing Bicycle*

Patrick O’Conner

The “American dream” has often been defined in terms of the ability of the average person to pursue success, and over the years that success has been symbolized by various status symbols such as a house in the suburbs or a nice car. In the new booming economy of contemporary China, the “Chinese dream” has been described in much the same way: “You too can succeed. You too can be empowered. You too can have the car, the apartment, the respect” (Rob Gifford, *China Road*, 192). However, like all material objects, demand is often unlimited while supply is very limited. In Wang Xiaoshuai’s movie *Beijing Bicycle*, the bicycle around which the movie’s plot revolves serves as a similar status symbol to two teenagers desperately fighting for possession of it. This illustrates the complexities and tensions of surviving and negotiating one’s identity in the changing China. The bicycle symbolizes the illusory nature of the “Chinese dream,” the necessity of adapting the dream to meet the demands of reality, and the tragic consequences of chasing this dream.

Soon after arriving from the countryside, Guei receives the bicycle for his job as a delivery boy in Beijing. He is supposed to pay his employer out of his proceeds until the bike is paid off, at which point he can begin earning a larger share of the proceeds. For Guei the bicycle is necessary for him to earn a living, but it also has symbolic and emotional value. In his eyes,
lasting in his job long enough to earn the bicycle outright will benchmark his success. Fatefully, on the very day he earns enough to take ownership of the bicycle, it is stolen and ends up in the possession of Jian, a Beijing local schoolboy.

Jian desires the bicycle for different reasons. He doesn’t need it for his livelihood, but it is no less important to him than it is to Guei. Owning the bicycle confirms his sense of self and sense of status within his circle of friends. It is his ticket to acceptance, to impressing the girl that he likes and basically to success as he defines it. For both of Guei and Jian, the bicycle is central to their sense of self-worth.

However, there is only one bicycle and two people who need it desperately. When Guei tracks down the bicycle, a desperate struggle ensues. The bike goes back-and-forth between both of them and the fight becomes increasingly frantic as both youth now view this item as central to their own identities. To have the bicycle is to have respect; to lose it is to lose respect. The fight and its intensity mirror the interactions in Beijing between the city dwellers that were already facing a tough existence and the pressures added by the influx of people coming from the countryside.

The “Chinese dream” is both real and somewhat of an illusion. The opportunity is there but not everyone can grasp it. One of the sub-plots in the movie also represents the illusory nature of the dream these teenagers are chasing. Guei and his friend “Mantis” discover a beautiful girl on the high-rise balcony who appears in an expensive new outfit daily. But she isn’t as rich and glamorous as she seems. They realize she was just a servant for a wealthy family and enjoyed trying on clothes she could never actually afford.

For both Jian and Guei to have a shot at their respective “Chinese dreams”, they eventually work out a time-sharing arrangement in which each gets use of the bicycle for certain
periods of time. This suggests something about how the urban and rural Chinese ought to pursue their economic interests; in a spirit of cooperation rather than fierce cut-throat competition. The single-minded pursuit of this bicycle caused these young men to subordinate all other values to the need to feel respected. No parental guidance or any religious, ethical, or moral framework controlled or balanced this need. The movie’s tragic resolution ultimately turns a coming-of-age story into a cautionary tale about market forces unleashed upon a generation that lacks any means of constraint.

Identity Struggles in *Beijing Bicycle*

Victoria Do

Packed in rows and racks throughout China’s capital city, bicycles line the streets in *Beijing Bicycle*. For navigating the congested metropolitan highways or the impoverished back alley districts, their widespread utility in burgeoning urban China is visually unmistakable. However, rapid industrialization has brought together distant neighbors. Contemporary Chinese problems are resulting in a cultural crisis, because divergent social classes have been crammed into a clumsy coexistence. The characters Guei and Jian individually struggle to navigate this uncertain landscape. In the story, after some shady business, they fight for ownership of the very same bicycle. As the two compete in their respective country-versus-city roles, the bicycle itself plays a part of a basic commodity, but more importantly the vehicle for a scarce sense of personal identity.
At the beginning of the movie, Guei presents the bicycle to his friend, both brimming with optimism in front of his quaint corner convenience stand. “You must never get tired of riding this,” he says in awe of the sleek chrome finish and cutting edge gear controls. This thought subtly reveals to the viewer the peculiarity of the circumstances, indiscernible as the irony may be to the characters. Demographic disparities have rendered the Chinese population disconnected from itself. In the movie the privileged few, reaping the rewards of modernity, exist on the periphery of the average Chinese plight, represented by Guei and Jian. The multitude of stratifications between the greater Chinese people further complicates the issue. Citizens float between fleeting perceptions of an undefined area of society. Lack of definition then breeds conflict.

For Guei, a newly hired courier, fresh from rural China, the bicycle guarantees his livelihood. His story opens with a cut and dry city life induction. Wide-eyed and unassuming, Guei ventures forth in his deliveries with the promise he will eventually own his bike. Out of eagerness, he even marks the bike for his own. However, the boy immediately falls victim to the unforgiving corporate commerce that taints the city. The disparity between the rural and urban mentality is striking. The viewer is repeatedly reminded that Guei is “so stubborn.” His employers heartlessly mock him for this as they fail to understand that when his bike disappeared, so did his chances. Big business and commercialization have uprooted certain simple notions of interpersonal relations.

Jian likewise finds himself contending with the skewed perceptions he attributes to the bicycle. As a poor city teen, he has anxieties regarding his social standing amongst his peers. Driven to steal family savings allocated for his young stepsister’s education, Jian, like Guei, is at odds in facing the social hierarchy surrounding him. After earning the praises of his friends and
romantic crush, Xiao, the loss of his bike leaves him out of place. Xiao, in a gesture to comfort him, remarks, “It’s just a bike.” A girl of a wealthier household, she is in no position to understand. Sullen and perturbed, Jian hasn’t the wherewithal to explain that the bicycle was beyond his means to begin with. Where Guei’s predicament reflects cultural shifts, Jian’s reflects economic ones.

Throughout most of the movie Guei and Jian are at extreme odds with each other. The only thing they appear to share is a dogmatic attachment to the bike, for only they deeply feel how high the stakes are. During the brief moments in which the bike was in each of their possessions, they each experienced a feeling of personal solidarity. Against the backdrop of a society with constantly fluctuating standards, the experience proves to be worth fighting for. In effect, this common sentiment foments compromise between the two. With a sharing arrangement, Guei and Jian come to respect their mutual stubbornness in not relinquishing the bicycle.

Originally intended merely for transportation, the Beijing bicycle turns into a symbol of identity for Guei and Jian as disenfranchised Chinese youth. The bike exists as the one constant in the story around which the characters interact and project their perception onto it. The story comes full circle as both boys lose the bike in an ally brawl, but not without having learned to fight for their place in society. Literally and figuratively the bicycle built up and broke down social class structures present in contemporary China. The ubiquity of such an everyday object, while reflecting the mundane and the superficial also reflects the opportunity for individual connections to be forged in a meaningful way.
The Paradox of City Life in *Beijing Bicycle*

Eric A. Curry

The film *Beijing Bicycle* is an illuminating account of the effects that some of the Chinese people were exposed to and encountered as China, without hesitation, ventured down a path to fuse capitalism and socialism after 1978. Met with a rather shy, stubborn, and determined young man—Guei, the film details the awkwardness of the country boy in a constantly modernizing and ever-changing city atmosphere. Guei’s experiences in the city are a result of him trying to make a simple living as a courier. He embarks on daily journeys riding through the many twisted and bustling streets of Beijing while trying to fit in with its native inhabitants.

The divide between the country and city people in the film is indeed quite rigid as Guei discovers. City people seem to operate and exist solely to pursue wealth and money, and in fact equate their very happiness to the amount of money they have and possessions they own. In his transformation Guei has to forfeit his countryside identity in order to fully assimilate into the city. An identity crisis ensues from which one may extrapolate the whole of China is suffering—an alleged communist society practicing capitalism and plastering advertisements on any available space eyes may glance at as a mere boy navigates its streets absolutely full of people who care more about money than morality.

During this period, modernization is quite a weird process in Beijing. A large amount of emphasis is placed upon smoking cigarettes in order to look cool and fit in. Even the poorest of poor people have access to toothpaste and insist on brushing their teeth incessantly—almost as if doing so elevates their social status and makes them appear more urban and “civilized.” Guei
assimilates into city life, undergoes a transformation process learning how to deal with revolving doors and smoking cigarettes, and a rather apt distinction is embodied by the characteristics of the city poor versus the city rich.

The movie is ironic as it is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution in 1960s and 1970s when urban youth were sent to the countryside in order to receive their reeducation. Guei suffers the exact opposite fate as he is reeducated in the ways of city life. Country folk resemble “the little engine that could” when compared to the city dwellers who come off as arrogant, wasteful, and condescending. While Guei appreciates his bicycle and respects its value as a tool needed in order to perform his job; Jian, a city boy, exploits the bicycle mercilessly as a status symbol that puts him above all others even though he himself is from a poor family at the bottom of the city.

The separation between the two classes appears quite large indeed. Jian misplaces his sense of value in the bike, something he falsely believed made him part of a higher echelon in society. When his status symbol is removed from the equation, even the rich girl interested in him at school becomes of no concern. The girl does not care that he has lost his bike and is so out of touch with differences between the city poor and rich that she suggests, “it’s just a bike, and you can always buy a new one again.” However, the shocking truth is that Jian cannot afford such an expense as he had to steal the money from his father just to acquire it. The way Jian frivolously spends his money obtaining the bike and impressing his friends at the arcade exemplifies the arrogance of youth and delinquency.

The attractive girl whom Guei and his friend perceived as rich is another element of the movie that is quite ironic. They are left to discover she was but a maid from the countryside. Guei wanted to make a move on her and was quite attracted to her. But he never acted on his instincts as he believed this rich woman was out of his league, though no actual league or gap
existed between the two of them. Sadly, a relationship never came to fruition to which Guei’s friend laments, “if I only knew she was from the country.”

The film is a great reminder that while China is quite a rising power, this is not without a cost to its people. As a result of the plan to “let a few people get rich first,” the divides between the country and city folk and even urban poor and urban rich are constant reminders of China’s rapid economic growth over the past few decades. Drenched in irony, the film resembles modern China—a prosperous nation where people living in cities with populations exceeding millions can be left isolated and alone to fend for themselves in dark, dank corners due to a failure to adapt to China’s industrialization, globalization, and modernization.

About the authors

Patrick is a Savannah native and a history major at Armstrong. He served for ten years in the US Army. He is married with four children and now resides in Metter, Georgia where he enjoys making muscadine wine and hopes to become a history teacher. Eric is from Fort Myers, Florida and currently a history major at Armstrong. He hopes to pursue a career in the Intelligence Community or Office of Foreign Service. After retiring from his government ambitions, he hopes to settle back down in Florida to teach history.

Reference: