Pedaling into the Future: The Evolving Role of Bicycles in China

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Abstract: Once the dominant mode of transportation in China, bicycling has been in steady decline since the 1990s. However, in recent years there is a renewal of interest in bicycling from both the government and the public, fueled by the pressing needs of finding sustainable alternatives to travel by cars on congested roads, and the emergence of the new bicycle culture among urban middle-class. This paper examines the evolving roles of bicycles in China. First, major factors that contribute to the decline of bicycling are examined including: 1) The effect of urban expansion and transformation of inner cities on bicycling; 2) The cumulative effect of two decades of adversarial government policies discouraging bicycle usage; and 3) The cultural shift and lifestyle changes that resulted in negative public perception of bicycles. Next, a current analysis of the challenges of widespread bicycle use in today’s Chinese cities is provided, using actual examples of urban planning and city design as case studies. Finally, opportunities as to what role can bicycles play in future cities of China and what can be done to promote bicycle usage as an integral part of that future are explored, focusing on these areas: 1) The seamless integration of bicycles with rail and public transportation; 2) Designing bicycle friendly communities in areas that have high potential of bicycle users, such as university districts and high tech campuses; and 3) Promoting and supporting the new bicycle culture as a healthier and environmentally responsible lifestyle.

Keywords: Role of Bicycles, New bicycle culture, China

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