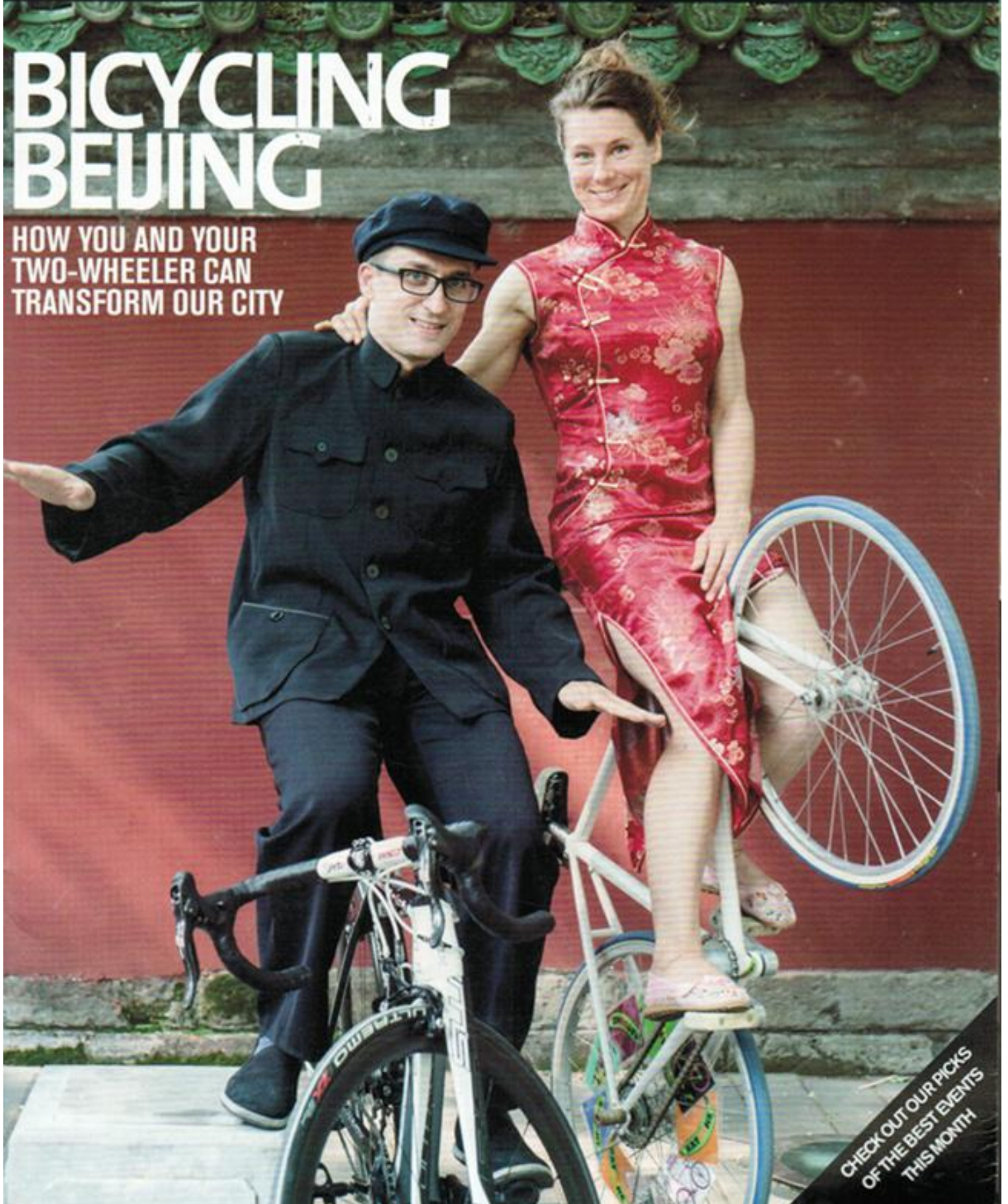


CAPOEIRA ★ CIDER ★ CUSTOM CAKES ★ CASH

# thebeijinger 2013/09

## BICYCLING BEIJING

HOW YOU AND YOUR  
TWO-WHEELER CAN  
TRANSFORM OUR CITY



CHECK OUT OUR PICKS  
OF THE BEST EVENTS  
THIS MONTH

# TRANSFORMING BEIJING

**TWO WHEELS AT A TIME** by Cat Nelson

In everyone's first memories of China there must be a bicycle. Mine is no exception. I am eight, with no intention of ever moving to China, and looking down from a hotel window onto the rainy boulevard below. A patchwork of bicyclists each bedecked in a different color poncho surges across the street in a rainbow river of smooth movement.

Although enough residue of the bicycle kingdom that China once was remains to impress upon foreign memories, things have changed in the last 30 years. Those were the days when the pinnacle of making it for a newly married couple could be packaged tidily, as the Chinese language is so apt to do, into the short phrase *sidadjian* (四大件 "the four big items"): a watch, a radio, a sewing machine and a bicycle. Now, far more revealing is the

reply: "I'd rather cry in the back of a BMW," was a young woman's recent retort on a TV dating show to her suitor's suggestion of a bicycle date.

I sat down with Shannon Bufton of Serk Cafe and Ines Brunn of Natooke, who have both been negotiating this moment between the city's, and the country's, rich history of the bicycle and a contemporary social climate where luxury cars are now the idealized mode of transport. For them, it's a matter of fighting against the negative status quo that's enveloped bicycles, creating a new modern bicycle culture and realizing a return to the cycling utopia that they see in Beijing's past, and its future.

## **Can you help us put Beijing biking in context?**

**SB:** Beijing is like the ancient Greece of bicycle cities. We did this comparison of the number of daily bike trips in Beijing in 1986 when it had the highest ridership compared to other modern cities that are really getting into cycling. If you look at Copenhagen, which is a small city but with high bicycle rates, it has something like 200,000 bike trips per day. Berlin, which is a bigger city and has a larger population but also a smaller motor share, has up to 400,000 per day. But Beijing in 1986 had 3.3 million bike trips per day, which is massive in terms of scale compared to anything any other city has experienced.

## **Why the shift from bicycle to car?**

**IB:** I think it's a lot about status symbols. Before people had no personal wealth; it was all communal. You didn't really have anything. Then suddenly with the opening up of the economy, people could actually earn some money and spend it on something to show others how much they made. Of course, first you need food, then you need to buy a house, and then the next thing is a car.

**SB:** There are some huge structural problems to the city, too. Forty percent of the



population is now in the outer suburbs (Tongzhou, Changping), and it's just unrealistic for those people to ride.

It's a very different city to that of 1996 when everyone was living within the Third Ring Road. The challenge is how do you get people back on bikes when you have such large distances to cover. So, while, this is a great city for cycling, the structure of where people work and live since modernization has really become less bicycle-friendly.

**IB:** But still, there is mixed transportation. I have an employee who lives farther out. She takes the subway to Dongzhimen and she won't just transfer for one station because that's too *mafan*. So, she has a small crappy bike parked there and then she just rides to the office from there.

#### **What about the safety of riding in Beijing?**

**SB:** I had a friend visit from Europe and he was saying that the traffic seems very chaotic and there are a lot of cars, but the one thing that is different is that the cars are moving so slowly. It's actually better to be on a bike because you are more flexible and the car is moving slowly, so you can just move out of the way or stop. It's not like a modern Western city where the cars are really traveling quite fast. The traffic systems are optimized and that's what makes it so dangerous to bike – when there is a difference between car speed and bike speed. If you move at the same speed as everyone else it is very safe. The first thing that I say to people is actually that I don't

think it's dangerous at all, I think it's safer than my home city to ride a bike.

**IB:** I think so too, definitely. One hundred percent.

**SB:** And there is one other concept that happens here which I call "negotiated flow." In Western cities we have rules sets where you have a bike lane, a pedestrian zone and a car zone and there are strong rules for everyone. So if you are moving in the car zone, you indicate, you



## WHY BIKE IN BEIJING?

*Shannon and Ines break it down*

1. It's a great city for cycling and an excellent way to engage with the city. As a foreigner you've got to go with the flow and get into bike culture here because it's a unique opportunity. And it's flat as a pancake.
2. Moving around is more efficient. People often measure the efficiency of a city by how many meetings you can have in a day. Beijing is getting to the stage where if you move by car or taxi, you might be able to have two. The bike can change that.
3. Free yourself of the rigid systems of the city. You can flow through the city at your own pace and can control your own path. This is really important for helping with your sense of sanity in a city like Beijing where there's so many different things going on. Being in control of your path through the city is very liberating.
4. Make life richer. With a bike, you feel the city much more. You're not in a closed environment, and you have much more interaction with the community around you.
5. Get fit. Despite problems with air pollution, it is healthy and the exercise is good for your heart.
6. It's just fun.

leave space. If you are going to walk across the road, you look both ways and wait for the green man, before you go over.

**IB:** Watch Chinese people, they don't look at the cars because they know if they look the car's driver might want to negotiate. If they don't look, there's no negotiation possible so the car driver has to stop and it's easy, you just cross the road. It's a very different concept.

**SB:** You have to get the Western, Cartesian rule-based logic out of your head and think about how the system works here. That's when it becomes safe and you can appreciate it. But it's really a different way of thinking.

**IB:** Just for the record, I do believe there are rules. It's not like there are no rules or something. It's just looser how you deal with the rules.

#### **What about that recurring question of pollution?**

**IB:** It's always funny that people say, "Oh, such high

pollution, I'm going to take a taxi." What kind of air do you think is in the taxi? The taxi doesn't have a high quality air filter that filters out the PM 2.5 or anything. It's still the same air. Plus there's usually a traffic jam or dense traffic where the car is then sucking in air mainly out from the car exhaust in front. There have been studies done that the air inside a car is actually worse than on a bike. And you're still contributing to the pollution.

**SB:** When you ride in the city in Beijing, you shouldn't ride super fast, just at a reasonable pace. And the amount of energy that it takes on a modern bike to ride 16-20 km per hour is the same amount of energy that it takes to walk because the bicycle is a much more efficient vehicle. So people say "well, it's bad to ride your bike in a polluted city," but if you use the same energy as walking on your bike, then you are breathing the same amount as if you were walking.

## GET INVOLVED

**Beijing Peloton** – With a focus on long distance road cycling, this club organizes Saturday rides in the mountains (March-November). A van leaves from the Trek Store at Chaoyang Park and brings you back to the city following the ride. Pre-registration for each trip is required. For more details, visit <http://www.asiapeloton.com/the-beijing-peloton-road-bike-club/>



**Beijing Road Cycling** – This online group acts as a coordination point for Tuesday and Thursday morning rides starting out from Chaoyang Park South as well as evening rides around Olympic Park. For more details, visit their Yahoo! Group: [beijingroadcycling](http://beijingroadcycling.com).

**Big Dirty 巨脏** – This urban cycling crew does a weekly ride with two groups, fast (race-pace, fixed-gear only) and cruise (conversational-pace, all bikes welcome). Routes vary weekly, but always depart from Workers' Gymnasium West Gate at 8pm and end at the Drum and Bell Towers every Thursday. For more details visit <http://bigdirtycycling.com/>.

**Natooke** – Well-known for their focus on urban cycling and fixed-gear bikes, this hutong institution organizes related events such as the annual Fixed Gear Open and bike polo (not limited to fixed gears). For more details and newsletter sign-up, visit [www.natooke.com](http://www.natooke.com).

**Serk 速旷** – This cafe-booze-bike space organizes a number of activities including rides in the mountains on the city outskirts, vintage wear rides, the MeWe bicycle festival and I'm In group rides held on the best air quality days. They are also revitalizing **Mountain Biking of Beijing (MOB)**. For more details and newsletter sign-up, visit [www.serk.cc](http://www.serk.cc).