

About electric bikes and autos in China

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Subject: [sustran] China's Vicious cycle

Vicious cycle

Laws against electric bicycles are the latest step in China's move towards a car culture, fuelling fears of highway chaos and an energy and pollution crisis, writes Mark O'Neill

To encourage its residents to use bicycles, the French city of Lyon recently placed 2,000 of them at 175 major sites, which users unlock with a bank or bus card, pedal to their destination and then park at the nearest junction.

On July 1, Zhuhai became the first city in China to pass a law banning electric bicycles on public roads and Beijing plans to follow suit in January, sparking a storm of protest from the 15 million people who use them nationwide and fear their cities will ban them.

It's the latest battle in the war between cars and bicycles on the mainland. Paying scant attention to the lessons learned by European cities during the past 50 years, China is hurtling with speed and single-mindedness into the car era, favouring it over bicycles and motorbikes. It wants to become a car superpower, like the US and Japan, and sees a booming domestic market as key to that ambition.

But not everyone shares this vision. Economists ask how China will pay for the imports of oil required. At the moment the mainland is 40 per cent import -dependent with a level of car ownership about one sixth of the world average.

Some cyclists say the policy is another example of how the Communist Party has abandoned the poor in favour of a small elite of large state firms, private business and foreign multinationals - all makers or users of motor cars.

Caught in the middle are city planners and academics trying to devise transport policies for megalopolises that are swelling each year with

new citizens, factories, skyscrapers and congestion.

The current debate centres on electric bicycles, which make an easier target for car supporters because the number of people using them, at 15 million, is a fraction of the total of 500 million bicycles.

The Zhuhai decision follows bans imposed by the cities of Fuzhou , Guangzhou and Wenzhou , but goes further because it was the first to have its city parliament pass a law imposing the ban. Enraged by the decision, the China Bicycle Association (CBA) asked a Beijing law firm to prepare an appeal to the National People's Congress against the legality of the measure.

The Zhuhai decision was in spite of a public opinion survey in the city in August last year that found 90 per cent of the 800 respondents in favour of keeping them on the road.

The city justified the law by saying electric bicycles caused traffic congestion, pollution through the lead batteries their users discard every three months and too many accidents - 166 in the first five months of the year, with two dead and 31 injured, and few compensation payments because most riders were uninsured.

In response, CBA secretary-general Guo Haiyan said that advanced countries supported the electric bicycle as environmentally friendly, with no pollution, low noise and small energy use.

She said it was the riders and not the bicycles who were responsible for the accidents and that in Shanghai, the city with the largest number, the accident rate was 0.17 per cent, against 1.6 per cent for cars.

She blamed the congestion on the decision of the Zhuhai government to abolish special cycle lanes, forcing bicycles to travel in the same space as pedestrians. On batteries, she said they had a high rate of reuse and the city needed to set up a recycling facility. The bicycles use less energy than any other form of transport on the road.

The CBA said an electric bicycle used 1 square metre of road, against 2.3 square metres for a car, and, during one hour, the bicycles could transport 10,600 people, against 3,600 by car.

China is the world's biggest producer and user of electric bicycles, with production this year of 10 million, up from 6.7 million last year.

Ms Guo praised the city of Hangzhou , with 280,000 electric bicycles and growing at 60,000 a year, for not seeking a ban but ways to better

regulate this popular form of transport.

Nowhere is the fight for the roads more fierce than in Shanghai, which boasts 8 million bicycles, 300,000 electric bicycles, 900,000 motorcycles, 900,000 cars and 10 million pedestrians on the move every day. One reason why the number of bicycles has risen was the abolition of a cheap monthly bus ticket in 1994. The congestion is so serious that the average speed of buses has fallen from 19km/h in 1999 to 10km/h now. The average road space is 2 square metres per person.

Congestion on the two-subway and one-overhead line became so bad that the operator raised the minimum fare in September by 50 per cent to three yuan, with little impact.

Wu Renjian, a transport specialist at the city's Fudan University, said congestion was so serious that building new roads would not solve the problem. "It is urgent to change the city's transport structure," he said.

"The global experience shows that, after the motor car becomes a consumer product, cities end up favouring public transport. At rush hour, Paris gives preference to buses, Singapore limits the entry of cars into the city centre and Seoul and Nagoya promote special bus lanes," Mr Wu said.

Critics want Beijing to follow the example of Singapore and maintain high taxes on cars, so they remain a product for the rich.

They accuse government officials of being ignorant of the traffic problems of the public because they travel in official cars, often with a police escort that clears the traffic. Yang Xiaoguang, a transport specialist at Tongji University, calls this the "sedan chair culture" - a reference to the Qing dynasty when coolies carried officials in sedans.

Instead, China is now one of the world's most competitive markets, with more than 100 producers driving prices down and introducing millions of new buyers.

But one new factor this year has provided the bicycle lobby with a powerful new weapon - record world oil prices.

Chen Mian, a professor at China Oil University, said if the mainland became a car society, that would mean 20 times more cars on the roads than now, which would require consumption of half the world's production

of oil.

"Unless there's an enormous breakthrough in new energy or the technology of auto engines, it's difficult to imagine how the world could support such a consumption of petrol," he said.

During the past 10 years, the mainland's domestic oil output has risen only from 150 million tonnes to 175 million, while demand has soared, forcing an increasing dependence on imports.

Last year, it consumed 292 million tonnes of oil, of which it imported 123 million, a dependence rate of 42 per cent, paying US\$ 34 billion, making it the single most expensive imported commodity. Of the 292 million tonnes purchased by mainlanders, 35 per cent was consumed by the transport industry, principally cars.

This year, imports will rise about 5 per cent, with the cost increasing because of record prices, and will continue to rise, with little expectation of major new oil discoveries at home.

At present, China has two cars per 100 people, against a world average of 12.7, 27 in South Korea, 56 in Japan and 78 in the US.

Source: South China Morning Post / WBCSD

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