

# Lessons From China:

## A Report On Cycling In Kunming

by Mary Frances Dunham

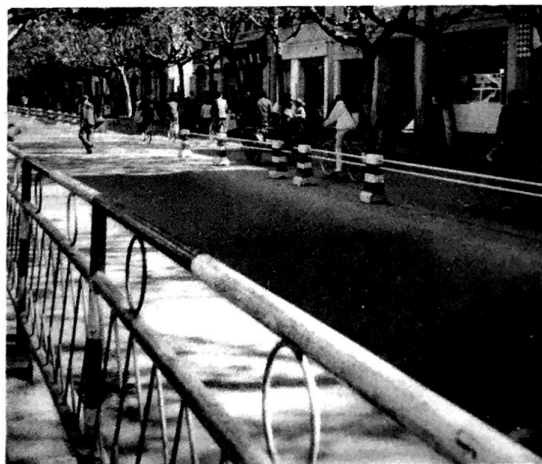
Photos: Mary Frances Dunham



New York City cyclists, how would you like to have smooth, clean bicycle lanes that are as wide as car lanes? How would you like parking lots where you can leave your bicycle knowing that it will still be there in one piece when you return? How would you like to be treated as a normal road-user, not shunted about as if you don't belong there?

"I like it!" you say, but sadly add: "You must be talking about China."

True. Such cycling luxury can only exist in a country like Holland or Denmark or China, with a firm tradition of utilitarian cycling and a government that still supports it. But even China's days as a bicycle country are numbered. This was my impression during a recent visit there.



**Secure parking and wide auto-free lanes are an everyday fact in China. But this may change. T.A. member Mary Frances Dunham reports on her visit to China**

In line with China's zeal to join the club of First World nations (she is already well fed, clothed and housed), some citizens are urging the government to limit bicycles -- "a big, if not the main reason for disorder in urban areas," as a Chinese writer puts it -- and to rev up China's car industry. (In Beijing, for example, there are only 380,000 motor vehicles as against 6.8 million bicycles and tricycles.)

"How sad," you say. "But how inevitable," I answer. The automobile craze seems to be a rite of passage that societies must endure. On Chinese TV, car advertisements alternate with ads for washing machines. On Chinese roads, cars are visibly more comfortable, convenient and impressive than the humble ►

bicycles around them. A small pickup can carry in one load what it takes several bicycle-driven wagons to transport. Grandma can travel more comfortably in a car than stashed on the back rack of a bike. Think of all the tourist spots in China that a family can visit by car! If the luxury of cars is within grasp, after decades of enforced austerity, how can the Chinese resist it?

In the city of Kunming in southwest China, where I lived for three months, bicycles still flourish. The easy-going life of this provincial capital, its gentle topography, and temperate climate are ideal for cycling. About 40% of Kunming's several million inhabitants use pedal-powered vehicles for transportation, while 50% go about on foot, and the rest on crowded buses. A privileged few have access to cars.

Wide and protected bike lanes flank both sides of Kunming's many boulevards. One-way roads are divided equally for motor vehicles and bicycles. Large trucks are barred from the city during the day and cars are forbidden to park on city streets. Best of all for cyclists, Kunming abounds in guarded bicycle parking lots -- near stores, office and school buildings, parks and markets. Generally it is a grandmotherly lady who watches over the bicycles, charging two fen (less than a penny) and making a fuss if anyone tries to leave her domain, bicycle in tow, without handing her the little receipt that she gave for it. What could be better?

Well, by New York standards some things could be better. The high density of cyclists in Kunming makes it difficult to cycle much faster than 5 mph. I found passing ahead difficult in such a crowd and if I was inattentive for a second, I risked running into a cyclist near me. While I believe that group parking is the most space-efficient and safe form of urban parking, I had to admit that masses of parked bicycles throughout Kunming were seriously congesting sidewalks and side streets, disfiguring the city's attractive layout besides.

What impressed me the most about city cycling in China was the ingenious ways in which bicycles were adapted to all kinds of uses. The Chinese 35-40 pound standard bike, though boasting only one speed, is a vehicle capable of carrying large and heavy loads, as often seen in pictures of Chinese life. The seat is comfortable, the bell has a clear, penetrating ring, and there is a lock built into the back stays of the bicycle -- no need to cope with a separate lock.

For a cyclist with a child there is a little seat between the handlebar and main seat of the bicycle. It has its own protective back, arm rests and stirrups below. Vertical stays fastened to the front down-tube support the seat securely. The child, cradled between its parent's arms, sits with hands on the handlebar or sleeps slumped over it. About one in 10 bikes has a detachable and foldable side seat with its own supporting wheel. Grandma can ride here and hold a child on her lap.

Chinese tricycle carts can hold as many as six adults seated on the cantilevered edges of the carts, or inside if there is no load of goods already there. Meanwhile, many

a disabled or elderly Kunmingian goes about in hand-cranked tricycles which they operate with little apparent effort.

I left China thinking how important it is for New York cyclists, myself included, to clarify as much as possible our vision of what it is we are fighting for. It is no use longing for better cycling conditions on our streets if we have no practical designs in mind for bike parking and no feasible programs for bicycle speed control. I have always felt this, but my experience in Kunming convinced me that we have a long way to go in making our demands for space and attention acceptable to the general public.

While we can point to China to prove the versatility and potentials of bicycle transportation, we must find our own ways to integrate it here. We must seek the help of experts in traffic engineering, security devices, and urban design, and we should coordinate our goals with those of public transportation authorities. Then, perhaps, we can crystallize our dreams into reasonable requests that are not only acceptable to the general public, but will convert it.

For more information on cycling in China, please feel free to call me at 212-472-9491.



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THE NEW YORK

# City Cyclist

PUBLISHED BY TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

MAR-APR 88

## KOCH DELAYS BAN AS SUPPORT CRUMBLES

Will Bike Ban II go the way of Bike Ban I -- into oblivion?

NYC bike riders have reason to hope so, based on this winter's events. At press time, Mayor Koch had delayed re-imposing his ban on weekday bike-riding on 5th, Madison and Park Avenues between 31st and 59th Streets. Many public officials, including key backers of an identical ban last summer, were urging the Mayor to drop the ban. And Koch faced a T.A. lawsuit and renewed demonstrations if he chose to start the ban.

Last year's ban, announced in July and intended to start in late August, never took effect. NY State Supreme Court Judge Lehner voided it Sept. 8 following lawsuits by the Association of Messenger Services and a group of bicyclists led by T.A. However, on Dec. 7, the City Dept. of Transportation (DoT) published the new ban as a "proposed regulation." By providing a 30-day comment period, DoT fixed the flaw that foiled the first ban.

When the comment period expired on Jan. 12, DoT was expected to publish the ban as a "final regulation." But at press time (Feb. 27), the City still hadn't acted. Questioned about the ban on a TV call-in show, DoT Commissioner Sandler could not offer a rationale and lamely defended it as "experimental." However, DoT was rumored to be preparing environmental studies for publishing final notice in March. The ban would take effect 30 days later -- sometime in April.

Koch's three chief allies in the original ban -- City Council President Andrew Stein, Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins, and City Council Member Carol Greitzer -- wrote to the Mayor in late January and early February asking him to withdraw the ban.

Stein wrote, "If the ban won't have the

desired effects, and I don't think it will, don't do it."

Dinkins again endorsed T.A.'s universal safety code and said, "I believe that there are other ways of making the streets safe for both pedestrians and bicycles."

And Greitzer told Koch: "A ban would merely move the problem to other streets. The real answer is better legislation and stronger enforcement."

All 7 Manhattan City Council members have written Mayor Koch to oppose the ban, as have 7 other members from 3 other boroughs -- Majority Leader Peter Vallone (Q), Transportation Committee Chair June Eisland (Bx), Environmental Protection Chair Sheldon Lefler (Q), and Jerry Crispino (Bx), Susan Alter (Bk), Sal Albanese (Bk), and Stephen DiBrienza (Bk). Ditto NY Senators Moynihan and D'Amato, Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, and Comptroller Harrison Goldin.

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