

Age does not weary cycling granny

Shanghai is usually attractive to the young, the adventurers and the risk takers. But grandmother Mary Frances Dunham has, in her four years here, also found a place to make a difference. It shows that this city is for all who are active and passionate.

In her long and active life, Dunham has travelled all over the world from Asia to Europe and Africa as an ethnomusicologist with her architect husband.

Having grown up and gone to school in Paris, this American has fallen in love with cities where bicycles still form a sizeable chunk of transport, and in her travels has supported it everywhere she has gone.

"I just love green transportation — bikes can be connected to many other forms of transport. Cars are a terrible thing to happen to city centers."

In New York where Dunham grew up, she was part of the early days of New York-based Transport Alternatives, an NGO promoting green transport and cycling in the city. She was part of the organization when it was just 20 people, "meeting in kitchens."

Dunham moved to Shanghai four years ago when her daughter, an architect, and son-in-law, a jazz pianist, came to find more opportunities. In China, previously the bicycle capital of the world, Dunham wants to continue her campaigning.

Glamorous setting

But due to her age, Dunham's campaigning these days is limited to writing letters — of which there have been many — to the mayor, to the press, to biking organizations, and the Expo organizers.

One of these letters was to Shanghai Daily (see February 2 edition, "Reader: Free Bicycles Needed Throughout Expo Site").

"It would be wonderful to allow bikes inside the Expo — it will be a showcase for biking," says Dunham.

Although Expo organizers have written back to say that too many bikes will be dangerous for the site, Dunham is undeterred. She is trying to persuade them that bicycle rentals are the solution — limiting the number of bikes without ruling them out completely.

Now in her late 70s, Dunham is still determined to keep riding her bike well into her golden years.

Although she has Parkinson's disease, she has attached training wheels to the bike so she can keep riding: "I don't want to give up!" And the family has rescued a disused *sanlunche* (three-wheeler) which she and her son-in-law use to go shopping.

Dunham's travels around the world started after she married her husband, who she met on a ship in the days just after World War II. "But it wasn't like the Titanic!" she says laughing. The US army ship was a rather

Grandmother Mary Dunham has pursued a passion for cycling in many parts of the world she has lived. A Shanghai resident for four years, she is an active advocate of more two-wheeling, Nancy Zhang reports.



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less glamorous setting but the romance was no less perfect. They married as their lives kept crossing paths in Paris, London and New York.

Specializing in tropical architecture, her husband was stationed abroad in the 1960s in the then fast-growing area of what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

They lived in Dhaka for seven years, with her husband working on low-income homes for migrant workers.

It was in those seven years that Dunham became fascinated with local ethnic music, especially the epic Muslim ballads which were performed for hours of each day by a succession of different singers, retelling the original dispute

about who were the rightful followers of Mohammed.

At the request of the local poet laureate, Dunham notated one of these songs.

When she returned to America in the early 1970s, it formed the basis of further study in the very new discipline of ethnomusicology — the study of non-Western folk music from around the world.

She also ventured into Indian traditional music, and was part of the team that brought Ravi Shankar, the famous sitar player,

to American audiences for the first time in 1979.

During her time in India, Dunham and her husband also helped a poor local family emigrate to America.

Recalling her own father who was a Greek immigrant to America in 1914, Dunham has seen how people's fates can be changed when they're given a chance. Arriving with little money, her father ended up going to Harvard law school and putting his daughter through a prestigious college too.

Editor's Note:

This weekly series focuses on individuals who have lived in China for a while and have a tale that's worth telling. Age, gender, nationality and race are all unimportant in comparison with what adventures the subject has been up to, the experiences they can recount. Get in touch with a tip about a China story that deserves to be told. (features@shanghaidaily.com)

▶ Mary Frances Dunham

Nationality: USA
Age: 78
Profession: Ethnomusicologist

▶ Q&A

Self-description: Happy, curious and adventurous.

Favorite place: The whole city from end to end with its variety of architecture and numerous well-tended parks and gardens.

Strangest sight: People bicycling easily in the traffic and the rain while holding up an umbrella — not something I have seen in New York, Dhaka, Calcutta, London, or Paris.

Perfect weekend: Go on an outing to the Shanghai parks with my family, then attend a monthly concert by my jazz pianist son-in-law at the Two Cities art gallery on Moganshan Road.

Worst experience: Being unable to read enough Chinese to use a city bus map.

Motto for life: "Carpe diem." (Latin for "Enjoy the day!")

How to improve Shanghai: 1) More facilities for cyclists and pedestrians such as dedicated bike lanes, and permission to carry baby strollers, bicycles, suitcases etc. on the Metro trains at off-peak hours. 2) More playgrounds for children to run and fly kites. 3) Less super malls and more varied shops at sidewalk level which are currently disappearing.

Advice to newcomers: Learn some basic words and characters in Chinese.

With the help of the Dunhams, the Bangladeshi family, who was her husband's driver, his wife and four small children, was able to settle in America and put their children through good schools.

History comes around in cycles, says Dunham. Today the combination of architecture and music still run in the family. Her daughter is also carrying on her and her husband's good work in Shanghai, working in urban planning to design a better city.

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