

*Beijing Bicycle: Desire, Identity, and the Wheels*

Jinhua Li

China's Sixth Generation director Wang Xiaoshuai's (王小帅) *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi sui de danche* 十七岁的单车, 2001) is the previously independent filmmaker's first attempt to reconcile art cinema with popular entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Although temporarily banned by the Chinese Film Bureau, *Beijing Bicycle* received both international critical acclaim and box office success with its winning of the Jury Grand Prix at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival.<sup>2</sup> As the third installment of the "Tales of Three Cities" series—a trans-regional collaboration among film makers in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—*Beijing Bicycle* signals the coming of age of the New Urban Cinema that represents Beijing as a paradigmatic urban space which exists in the intersections of old and new, tradition and postmodernity, and memory and desire.<sup>3</sup>

*Beijing Bicycle*'s international success attracted critical attention from scholars both at home and abroad. While many scholars writing in both in English and Chinese on *Beijing Bicycle* focus either on the film's representation of the socio-economic conflicts between the city and rural areas, or on the realistic portrayal of the disillusion of youthful aspirations and identity anxiety (often comparing it to Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film *The Bicycle Thieves*), they overlook the symbolic and political use of the bicycle as a visual trope and cinematic signifier that is subtly subversive and intricately layered.<sup>4</sup> The bicycle, while necessarily invoking nostalgia and being reminiscent of a bygone era, becomes a contested site where the relationship between the individual and the society, globalization and tradition, upward mobility and social stratification, desire and dystopia, and belief and disillusion destabilizes and fluctuates.

This chapter investigates *Beijing Bicycle*'s employment of the bicycle as a politicized trope that visualizes a society in transition when discursive social forces and individual uncertainty interact in the increasingly consumerized urban space of Beijing. It argues that although the mechanical functionality of the bicycle connotes mobility, speed, and freedom, the cinematic representation of the bicycle highlights the young protagonists' social immobility, emotional incapacity, and futile attempts to find reconciliation between reality and youthful dreams, between socialist localized values and postsocialist globalized consumerism. *Beijing Bicycle* captures the confusion and anger of the youth in a society in transition, as they try to gain control over their lives through a misplaced fixation on the false promise of speed and on the adolescent desires of love and mobility. The bicycle, while simply a means of transportation to the adults, symbolizes something that is dangerously alluring yet mundanely comforting to the teenage protagonists. Therefore, *Beijing Bicycle*'s ambiguous ending, when the bicycle finally loses its motion, alludes to the uncertain future of the two protagonists.

### **Bicycle: Historicized Signifier and Politicized Trope**

*Beijing Bicycle* dramatizes the lives of two teenage boys in Beijing as both project their dreams onto the bicycle. Young migrant worker (*mingong*) Gui (Lin Cui) finds a job with a delivery company in Beijing and works diligently so that he can own the company-issued bicycle through a profit-splitting arrangement. To his despair, Gui's bicycle is stolen the night before he can take ownership of it, and is subsequently sold to Jian (Bin Li), a Beijing high school student who shares a passion for bike stunts with his close friends. By mere chance Gui discovers that Jian's bicycle is the same one that he lost, and he tries to take it back from Jian. Since neither Jian nor Gui is willing to relinquish his right over this bicycle, they reach an agreement that they will take turns using it, each using it on alternate days. When the film ends, no one owns the

bicycle, because Gui is involuntarily involved in Jian's fight with local hooligans, and the bicycle is smashed during the fight.

*Beijing Bicycle* reconfigures the bicycle's historical social significance and its political association by focusing on a different kind of bicycle—the mountain bike (*shandi che*)—than the typical bicycle that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s in China, which is of a plainer appearance and has limited functions (no speed changes, thin wheels, etc.).<sup>5</sup> While the regular bike is a much more modest machine, the fashionable and expensive mountain bike (which does not become popular until the early 1990s) is built for off-road cycling as a popular sport, and is therefore designed to negotiate complex terrains such as sudden drops, unpaved roads, and zigzagging tracks. Compared with the regular bicycle, the mountain bike has a suspension system, knobby tires, bigger and wider wheels, and more powerful brakes. While the mountain bike is apparently not meant for commuting in the city, it gained national popularity almost overnight in urban China starting in the early 1990s, typically among the young, urban generation. Sold at almost triple the price of a regular bicycle, the mountain bike now replaces the regular bike's original status as a sign of social affluence, and has become the embodiment of a modernizing China.

Just as the regular bike used to indicate wealth and social status in the 1970s, the mountain bike represents an urban youth sub-culture characterized by desires for material goods, financial excess, Western consumerism, and fashionable coolness. The mountain bike thus displaces the regular bike's historical association with government-controlled economy and an era of communist social politics, and serves as a symbol of encroaching Western values defined by material wealth and consuming power. The ruggedly cool appearance of the mountain bike invokes a powerful image of a Western lifestyle that promises fashion, freedom, and leisure. For

the first time in the Chinese imagination, riding a bicycle has purposes other than mere transportation, and this re-configuration of what used to be mundane and ordinary perfectly captures the nation's excitement and expectation when the country is embarking on national economic reformation and ideological transformation. Young, urban Chinese Gen-Xers quickly identify with the technical dexterity, mechanical precision, and the defiant attitude represented by professional mountain bikers, and deem themselves the embodiment of a youthful cultural fever that idolizes everything Western. Mountain bikes allow these teenagers to perform stunts that are gratifying, exciting, and empowering, all feelings that set them apart from their parents' generation. In other words, the mountain bike becomes symbolic of the "disappearance of the thing we always count on in life," and is therefore the projected site for youthful social unconformity and inevitable changes.<sup>6</sup>

It is within such historical and political contextualization that *Beijing Bicycle* opens with a scene where the mountain bike represents two opposing tendencies: upward mobility and fossilized class differentiation. Accompanied by home-video style cinematography and loud ambient noise, the camera cuts through a series of subjective close-up one-shots, each focusing on individual workers with messy hair and wearing dowdy, country-style clothes, and who stare blankly into the camera. Their physical appearance and awkward interaction with the camera indicate their alienated social status as migrant workers from either rural areas or small towns. Confronted with these migrant workers, the audience unwittingly assumes the position of the cold and domineering female interviewer who asks questions in a disembodied voice. Such spectatorial point of view subtly reveals a "social unevenness" by placing these migrant workers under the debilitating, urbanized gaze of the camera.<sup>7</sup> As the interviewer goes through the list and talks to her interviewees in a tone that is obviously condescending and impatient, the unequal

social exchange is powerfully reminiscent of a police interrogation. What is even more unsettling is that these interviewees have internalized such deep-rooted social inferiority that their compliance and passivity at being treated as pariahs seems to be a natural and necessary step before they are offered a job. Among all the questions, only one really matters in this interview: “Can you ride a bicycle?” Without depicting the bicycle, the film effectively reminds the audience of the essential functionality of the bicycle, its ubiquitous usage in a not-so-remote past, and its re-configured social-economic relevance in a globalizing urban space characterized by unmistakable geopolitical class stratification.

However, the politically symbolic and historically re-imagined bicycle is strategically visualized, albeit out of focus, in the title sequence, where the camera remains stationary while fragmented and blurry images of the regular bicycles in motion dominate the frame. The bicycles’ movements are shot in slow motion and are superimposed upon one another, creating a decontextualized, abstract flow of images. Notably, unlike the regular color scheme in the opening scene, here the bicycles are visualized in black and white, which subtly yet powerfully reminds the audience of old pictures showing large crowds of people on bicycles, a common scene that earned China the befitting nickname of “country on bicycles” in the past. This cinematic representation of the mundane bicycles in black and white against a muted cityscape is reminiscent of a historical period when bicycles represented limited social mobility and slow economic development, but more significantly, the nostalgic visual style underlines the regular bicycles’ declining social values and symbolic meaning in a rapidly consumerized society. The blurred images of bicycles, therefore, serve as a powerful visual trope for their ambiguous social significance in the present era and challenge the bicycles’ historical importance. Just like the indistinct bicycles that are reduced to the background of the city, young migrant workers and

poor urban youth are marginalized in a quickly stratified Beijing. By employing these fragmented and shadowy images during the title sequence, *Beijing Bicycle* strategically foreshadows its social critique of market consumerism and urban dystopia.

### **Beijing: Urban Dystopia and Wheels for Consumption**

Following the blurry representation of the regular bicycles in the opening scene, the camera cuts to neatly lined mountain bikes in a crisp and sharply focused close-up tilt shot, highlighting the mountain bikes' advanced mechanical design and high consumer values. Paralleling this cinematic upgrade from the regular bicycles to the fancy mountain bikes is Gui's own make-over. Following the order of the company manager, Gui and his fellow peasant workers take a shower and have a haircut, so that they don't look like country bumpkins and can therefore "represent the company and fit in the society." In a few shots, the camera focuses on Feida Fast Delivery Company's logo and emphasizes Gui's transformation from an outsider of Beijing's rapid marketization to a "homo economicus," as he dons the uniform and stands beside his company-issued mountain bike, excited about his new job and his soon-to-be assumed socio-economic identity.<sup>8</sup> Contextualized within Beijing's economic development and consumerist globalization, Gui's brand new mountain bike now becomes both a consumer product for which Gui has to pay and a tool that generates income. Therefore, the mountain bike serves as an inseparable connection between Beijing's urban space and Gui, providing him with a concrete and manageable goal in the alienated society.

Gui's urban transformation reveals a third layer of significance when his relationship to Beijing's socio-cultural landscape is defined through a well-known literary allusion. The manager calls Gui and his co-workers "Rickshaw Camel Xiangzi in the new era" at the end of

their job orientation, right after they are told how the profit is split between the individual couriers and the company.<sup>9</sup> This comparison captures some of the essential similarities between Gui and Xiangzi, the Beijing protagonist in Lao She's 1936 novel *Rickshaw (Lo-to Hsiang Tzu 骆驼祥子)*.<sup>10</sup> Both Gui and Xiangzi use the wheels as their work tool, both come from low social class, and both depend on their navigation of Beijing's cityscape as a means of living. But such a comparison has a rather gloomy undertone because of Xiangzi's tragic ending: he ends up a homeless, hopeless, and rickshaw-less beggar. In this novel, Beijing is portrayed as a city of false promises and a ruthless society, a place where social circumstances and character flaws cause Xiang Zi's downfall. Therefore, by calling Gui a modern Rickshaw Xiang Zi, the Beijing manager not only implies Gui's disfranchised socio-economic status and his alienation from the city, but more significantly reminds Gui that Beijing is not a land of plenty, nor will it welcome migrant workers who are always outsiders. Instead, it is essentially an urban dystopia and a society that feeds on consumerism and on labor as capital.

It is uncertain whether such implications in the manager's comment are lost upon Gui and his co-workers, or if they think long and deep enough to question the exploitative arrangement of the company wherein it takes eighty percent of the earnings until the couriers make enough so they own the mountain bike, and thereafter takes fifty percent. Yet Gui seems quite happy with such a deal, as he smiles for the first time in the film at this prospect, filled with hope and ambition, just like Xiangzi. As if the oral allusion does not quite suffice, Gui's similarity with Xiangzi is painstakingly represented in the following sequence, when Gui enjoys the fast mountain bike and its speed, taking every delivery seriously, working industriously, and above all, keeping close track of his earnings and of the days left before he owns the mountain bike. Unlike the Beijing native Xiangzi, Gui has yet to familiarize himself with both the geographic

and cultural landscape of the city. But Gui's first encounter with Beijing's urban space is characterized by an empowering speed, freedom, and hope similar to Xiangzi's.

Gui's work experience in the first half of the film crystallizes Beijing's dystopian metropolitanism and the economic values of the mountain bike. Gui's first day at work sends him to a commercial building downtown, and his anxiety over losing the mountain bike is apparent when he locks it carefully and keeps looking back to check on it. His worry is not unwarranted, given the high percentage of bicycle theft in Beijing, and it foreshadows the mountain bike's fateful disappearance.<sup>11</sup> Gui's social marginality is underscored when he is confronted with the revolving door, something that is unfamiliar and intimidating to a country boy. As soon as he clumsily jumps into the lobby, Gui enters into a space where no verbal communication occurs. The entire interaction between Gui and the faceless secretary is shown in silence, as Gui waits for her to fill out the delivery confirmation. In a subjective shot from Gui's point of view, the camera only frames the woman's torso from below the neck as she silently writes on the receipt book. The woman's anonymity suggests not only Gui's social insignificance and hence his negligibility, but more revealingly the commonality of such coldly dismissive attitudes towards migrant workers like Gui. In other words, by employing the no-face woman in this shot and counter shot scene, the camera creates an unequal power dynamic between Gui and the urban citizens, highlighting Gui's inability to look her in the eyes because of his low self-esteem as a social outsider. Under the camera's gaze, the woman's well-manicured and bejeweled hands become a fragmented visual symbol that stands for unalterable social stratification, futile communication, and ultimately, xenophobic rejection in Beijing's urban dystopia. More significantly, the woman's alienating and discriminating treatment of Gui reveals the illusive allure of the mountain bike, and highlights the futility of the mountain bike's

promises of social recognition and self-realization. Additionally, her treatment of Gui points out the cold truth that riding a mountain bike does not change the fact that Gui is still a worthless outsider who will never become part of Beijing's modern glamorization. Thus, Gui's first delivery job reveals Beijing as an alienated urban space defined by an absence of human connection and by a fascination with materialistic consumerism.

The mountain bike's illusory allure is re-emphasized in Jian's story in the next sequence. Having re-emerged when the narrative bifurcates to focus on Jian's life, the mountain bike is consumed symbolically as an insider's badge of urban youth culture and as evidence of Jian's alternative coolness. But just as the bike cannot realize Gui's urban dream, it will never bring Jian the masculine confidence and independence he craves. According to Haomin Gong, the mountain bike embodies a material "superfluity" for Jian because "the basic use of the bike has almost shrunk to nothing."<sup>12</sup> In other words, Jian cares nothing about the bike's basic function as his transportation. Instead, he attaches great significance to what it symbolizes: coolness, fashion, and freedom. However, a closer reading of the cinematic narrative reveals otherwise. Although it is not explicit in the film if Jian simply *wants* a mountain bike to be socially acceptable among his friends, or he actually *needs* a bicycle to commute between school and home, logic and common sense dictate that Jian needs transportation to get to school, which in turn suggests that the mountain bike to Jian is first and foremost a necessity of daily usage, and only afterwards a fancy toy with symbolic value.

Similarly, the mountain bike is not essential to Gui either. Yingjin Zhang argues that for Gui the mountain bike is a "crucial" necessity for his work because "it can hold up under its condition of use," and Zhang uses Gui's frustrating and futile attempt to ride Qiu Sheng's (Mengnan Li) old bicycle for his delivery jobs to illustrate the mountain bike's central

significance for Gui's work.<sup>13</sup> However, Zhang overlooks the fact that Qiu Sheng's old bicycle is already in a state of dilapidation because of disuse and negligence, and it would not have lasted very long even for minor or regular daily use, let alone for frequent delivery rides. If Gui would use a brand new regular bicycle, it would be an adequate (because cheaper and involving lower maintenance), if not excellent alternative to his mountain bike. Thus, whether in Gui's spatial imagination of Beijing with busy streets, imposing high rises, and congested traffic, or in Jian's familiar territory of Beijing's old style *hutongs* (small alleyways) with traditional single-story houses, the mountain bike assumes comparable practical significance.

### **Seventeen's Bicycle: Displaced Desire and Identity Anxiety**

The mountain bike is also intimately connected to the protagonists' youthful sexual awakening and erotic imagination, for the bike becomes the site of displaced desire. Not only is the bike often visualized as an object under the camera's male gaze, it is also closely associated with masculine identity formation and sexual competition between older and younger men. Both Gui and Jian's relationship with the bike is mediated through their respective encounter with a desirable woman, and both have to navigate their desire while simultaneously feeling threatened by competition from either a familiar elder (Qiu Sheng) or a social superior (Da Huan). Therefore, the possession of the bike signifies success in ritualized heterosexuality and triumph in the rite of passage to manhood through masculine competition.

Through the camera's point of view, the mountain bike is represented as the objectified projection of Gui's sexual awakening. Gui's encounters with Qin (Xun Zhou), a young maid from the countryside who likes to dress up in her employer's fancy clothes when left alone, needs to be contextualized within his sense of pride and fulfillment at his soon-to-be realized

ownership of the mountain bike. Gui's interaction with the city is punctuated with his regular visits to his friend Qiu Sheng's corner grocery store in an old neighborhood of Beijing's inner city. On Gui's first day of work, he brings the mountain bike to Qiu Sheng's grocery store to show it off like a trophy of his successful first step in the assimilation into the city. When both Qiu Sheng and Gui admire the glossy finish and mechanical craftsmanship of the mountain bike, the camera uses an eye-level close-up shot that glamorizes the bike as if in a commercial, in which the product is visually consumed for its surface appearance.

The same commodifying gaze is reenacted immediately after when Qiu Sheng and Gui fetishize Qin through their masculine voyeuristic gaze. Significantly, the camera positions Qin under a similar cinematic gaze as it does the mountain bike and thereby alludes to Qin's symbolic connection with the bike. Through a crack in the wall, both men look at Qin, who is seen framed within a large window, all dressed up and looking bored. Each time when the camera cuts from Qiu Sheng and Gui's mesmerized look to Qin, she is seen in a different outfit, and in a different posture. This scene is crucial as it represents Qin in a clearly recognizable style: she is a commodity behind a display window, performing her female physicality as a commercial product. What she symbolically sells to Qiu Sheng and Gui is a dreamlike urban lifestyle of surplus and leisure, one that is desirable but unobtainable, just like the elevated glass window that lures them in yet keeps them at a distance.

Gui's male gaze at Qin is never fulfilling because it is always policed by Qiu Sheng's caution against his youthful sexual desires. When Gui first looks at Qin, his gaze is interrupted and cut short by Qiu Sheng's admonition that "if you look more it will hurt your psychological and physical health." Arguably, Gui's fascination over Qin is indicative of what Elizabeth Wright refers to as his "avid desire to attain material possessions in the fast-paced metropolis;"

thus, the carefully visualized symbolic similarity between Qin and the mountain bike shows that Qin becomes a projected site where Gui's obsession over material possessions and sexual longings intersect.<sup>14</sup>

If Gui's sexual awakening results from his displaced desire for the mountain bike, then Jian's relationship with the mountain bike is predetermined by his romantic infatuation for his beautiful classmate Xiao, by his identity anxiety resulting from peer pressure, and by his frustration at his patriarchal family. Yingjin Zhang points out that the mountain bike's "intimate tie to eroticism works itself out as Xiao leaves the infuriated Jian for Da Huan (Li Shuang)," but Xiao does not leave Jian only because Jian lost his mountain bike or because Da Huan has a better bike and enjoys a celebrity reputation for his biking stunts.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Jian becomes a completely different person when he coldly distances himself from Xiao despite her efforts to console him after he lost the bike, and refuses to communicate with Xiao because of his hurt dignity and pride. Confronted with Da Huan's popularity, gentlemanly help, maturity (Da Huan ridicules Jian's adolescence by asking him for a lighter, which Jian fails to provide), and rightful possession of a mountain bike, Jian realizes he is undoubtedly a social inferior in this courting competition.

While the mountain bike gives Gui a glimpse of what he could be, for Jian the mountain bike defines who he is. In other words, while Gui's life would be better with the mountain bike, to Jian life would certainly become worse without it. Despite his instant advantage as a Beijing native as opposed to being a migrant worker like Gui, Jian has to resist social marginality due to his family's difficult financial circumstances and limited economic means. To Jian's father, it is simple to choose between sending his step-daughter to a good high school and purchasing a luxury item like a bicycle for his son that is not absolutely necessary and is obviously beyond his

means. But to Jian, the bike symbolizes a coveted identity, an identity constructed around a globalized Western lifestyle, autonomy, and erotic love.

It is precisely because of the mountain bike's significance that it is also the reason for Jian's youthful anxiety and identity crisis. Since so much of his self-image and identity formation is determined by his ability to claim sole ownership of the mountain bike, Jian establishes his social relationships around this bicycle. Therefore when the mountain bike is taken from him, Jian inevitably experiences fear and disorientation, and his world becomes de-centered. *Beijing Bicycle* spares no efforts to highlight the central position of the mountain bike in all of Jian's social relationships: it stands for recognition from his father, camaraderie and respect from his friends, and romance between him and Xiao. When confronted with his father's furious accusation that he stole the money that his father stashed away for his step-sister's tuition, Jian refuses to be called a disgraceful son by claiming that he earned the money with good grades at school, and that the bicycle was already promised to him by his father as a reward for those grades. Jian needs the mountain bike to fit in with his friends at school and to form a close bond with them when they spend time after school practicing bike stunts. But more significantly, the mountain bike as a luxurious and cool piece of equipment that allows Jian to feel socially adequate despite his family's precarious financial situation.

However, this sense of empowerment is only illusory, and Jian can mature only when he sees who he really is after realizing the futility of his commodity fetishism. Jian's maturation begins when he crosses path with Gui as they share ownership of the mountain bike: because neither is able to persuade the other to give up the bike, Gui and Jian agree that each will use the bike on alternative days, and every day at dusk they will trade the bike. While Jian is sharing the bike with Gui, the audience does not see Jian perform bike stunts with his friends any more, nor

does Jian succeed in regaining Xiao's favor, and Jian's relationship with his family becomes even more strained. Thus, Gui's involvement in Jian's life becomes an antidote to Jian's obsession over the mountain bike. Jian comes to see the mountain bike as an inadequate symbol of his identity, and thus begins to confront reality with bravery and independence. When Jian finally decides to give up on the mountain bike after he attacks Da Huan with a brick, the mountain bike eventually loses its glamour and becomes what it is on a fundamental level: a mundane mode of transportation.

### **Youth on Wheels: Transient Spatial-Temporality and Mobile Immobility**

Gui, Jian, and the mountain bike become sociopolitical coordinates that triangulate Beijing's cityscape that is rapidly changing. Metaphorically, it is through the stories of Jian and Gui, who are connected through the mountain bike, that Beijing is represented three dimensionally as a city in transition. In *Beijing Bicycle's* cinematic remapping of the city, if Gui symbolizes the axis of Beijing's spatiality through his delivery job as well as his migrant background, then Jian represents the axis of Beijing's palimpsestic temporality as he lives in a traditional courtyard house (*Sihe yuan* 四合院) in an inner city *hutong*, the most characteristic architectural style of historical Beijing.<sup>16</sup> The mountain bike, therefore, reflects the ephemeral reality of the ever-changing city when the bike's urban signification becomes layered and fluid.

The axes of Beijing's spatiality and temporality converge when Gui's experience of Beijing is juxtaposed with Jian's through a shared ownership of the mountain bike, so the bike serves as the crucial third axis through which the city's transient reality is captured. The mountain bike therefore witnesses the superimposition of a Beijing that aspires to be a glamorous and vibrant world metropolis, and a Beijing that mourns the disappearance of cultural traditions

and historical heritage. When Gui rides through Beijing's high rises and imposing infrastructures, he is often framed in high angle shots of Beijing with its intimidating skylines and giant buildings towering over him. Such cinematic style captures Gui's admiration and infatuation with the modernity of the city, while simultaneously obliterating the city's traditional characteristics and singularity. However, from Jian's point of view, Beijing is flatter, narrower, and much older. On the rooftop of Jian's family's apartment building Beijing is seen in two altitudes: single-level courtyard houses and old city corner towers form the lower foreground, and skyscrapers dominate the background. Although a Beijing native, Jian seems removed and alienated from Beijing's future, as he is framed within the restrictive space of the past, whereas Gui, an outsider in many aspects, enjoys an accommodating Beijing whose changing cityscape is made possible by many migrant workers like him.

In this rapidly changing and multi-dimensional Beijing, moral uncertainty and gray areas of social ethics are portrayed through the mountain bike's contested ownership. Jian's reliance on a material object as a centripetal force that holds his life together is more symptomatic of social problems in contemporary China's post-socialist consumer society than Jian's personal journey into adulthood. Although Wang Xiaoshuai cautiously explains that *Beijing Bicycle* is "a story about fate and the experience of growing up," emphasizing that "all are equal before fate,"<sup>17</sup> his critical dramatization of "increasingly divided social realities"<sup>18</sup> and "an obvious indictment of ... material possessions" is not lost among critics.<sup>19</sup> If allowing Gui and Jian to share the mountain bike is Wang's allusion to nominal social fairness, then this awkwardly shared ownership creates more problems than it solves. It is not difficult to predict that in a foreseeable future, both Gui and Jian will revisit this argument unless one party relinquishes his

right to the bicycle, or they settle it in the manner of businessmen and one of them pay the other for half of the bike.

The ending of *Beijing Bicycle* reveals the mountain bike's ambivalent significations. Although it metaphorizes youthful sexual awakening and erotic desire in the first half of the film, the bike facilitates the disappearance and dissolution of the protagonists' projected sexual attraction in the second half of the film. Earlier in the film, when the young maid Qin is about to sell her employer's clothes, Gui accidentally knocks her over with his bicycle, thereby revealing Qin's true identity as a petty thief. Since Qin's attraction is primarily predicated on her assumption of an urban identity, this bike accident de-glamorizes her pretentious appearance and wakes Gui up from his admiration and yearning. For Jian, it is the mountain bike that enables him to follow Da Huan and Xiao on their way home. In the scene when Jian attacks Da Huan with a brick, the camera adopts a low angle where the bike is seen in close-ups while Jian's body is fragmented, suggesting the breaking down of his identity that is so closely linked to the mountain bike.

The final scene juxtaposes the mountain bike's promise of mobility with its symbolically debilitating power, for the mountain bike's unsurpassable efficiency in Beijing's narrow *hutongs* leads to Jian and Gui's total defeat and immobility. In this scene, everybody is riding mountain bikes in *hutongs* at a breath-taking speed. The mountain bike is portrayed as an effective transportation choice because it effortlessly maneuvers the labyrinthine *hutongs*, whose maze-like design is dizzyingly visualized in the climactic chase scene when Da Huan and his gang beat Jian and Gui up. While the bicycle should have been empowering to Gui, who has just obtained its sole ownership and is therefore closer to his Beijing dream, it is precisely his possession of the mountain bike that makes him a victim of Da Huan's vengeful beating. Thus, while the bike

is supposed to give Gui speed, freedom, and happiness, it instead brings pain, loss, and helplessness. The incapacitating effect of the bicycle is also subtly implied when Jian warns Gui not to get involved in the imminent fight between Jian and Da Huan and his gang, but Gui cannot get away because he does not know his way around these *hutongs*. The audience cannot help but wonder, then: if Gui was not riding the bicycle, would he still have been victimized? It may be true that Gui just happens to be in the wrong place at a wrong time, but Gui eventually realizes that the bicycle can also bring disillusion.

The bicycle's destruction represents a climactic moment when Jian and Gui's identities are in flux. The wrecked bicycle signals the breaking of a material link between Jian and Gui, but it also allows Gui and Jian to become each other's mirrored half: Gui turns into Jian when Gui knocks down the teenager who destroyed his bicycle with a brick, which is exactly how Jian attacks Da Huan in the previous scene; Jian is lying on the ground shrouded in white, vulnerable and defenseless, powerfully reminiscent of how Gui looked when Jian and his friends beat Gui up. The broken mountain bike therefore subverts the power dynamics between Jian and Gui, allowing Gui to gain agency and win the fight, both literally and symbolically. Gui is visually represented as the last person standing and assumes the dominant position in the *mise-en-scène*, when he looks down at Jian for the first time on screen and carries the bike over his shoulder, like a champion carrying his trophy.

*Beijing Bicycle* ends on an ambivalent tone when Gui carries the useless bicycle on his shoulder and walks through Beijing's busy street. It is easy to interpret this ending as an allusion to frustrated desires and crushed dreams, as Yingjin Zhang argues, or as an indication that Gui will persist in realizing his Beijing dream and hold on to what is most valuable to him, as Ling Chen observes.<sup>20</sup> Yet if, as the director Wang Xiaoshuai claims, "owning the bicycle symbolizes

maturity and their [the teenage protagonists'] ability to possess something in society," then does the wrecked bicycle sustain such symbolic significance after all?<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, since Gui possesses the bicycle at the end, does it indicate that Jian fails his rite of passage to maturity and adulthood? And if so, could it also suggest that Beijing's urban space defies a simple understanding as an unsympathetic place for migrant workers? The answers to these questions rely on a careful reading of the *mise-en-scène* of the last shot, in which the camera employs a panoramic high-angle shot that allows the audience to see a nondescript Beijing street filled with cars and bicycles. What dominates the frame is not people on bicycles, who are positioned at either side of the frame, but cars in different sizes, colors, and shapes at the foreground and center of the frame. While the flow of bicycles is disrupted as the bicycle lane becomes invisible mid-frame, cars are driving toward Beijing's vastly expanded cityscape on the main road that leads straight to the horizon. In the end, the contested bicycle has lost its motion and functionality, and the role of bicycles in the urban space is subtly appropriated as a signifier of the teenage boys' lives: marginalized in Beijing's cityscape, but inseparable from its cultural imagination.

*Beijing Bicycle* represents the bicycle as a signifier of identity anxiety among the young generation and as an externalization of material and psychological desires in the postmodern society. Wang's bitter-sweet dramatization of a lost-then-found bicycle poignantly reveals the contested urban social space, especially between urban residents and migrant workers, and employs the bicycle to serve as a visual metaphor that problematizes the identity politics of the urban youth subculture. The bicycle, therefore, paradoxically connects and alienates people in this urban melodrama. As a representative film of the Sixth Generation directors, *Beijing Bicycle*

serves as a searching cinematic gaze that is directed at the subtly stratified, yet transparent and impenetrable, class differences in contemporary Chinese society.

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<sup>1</sup> A loosely grouped generation of filmmakers, the Sixth Generation directors typically refer to a group of young directors who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and began their filmmaking career in the 1990s. They include some of the most recognized directors in Chinese cinema such as Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuechang, Jia Zhangke, and Lu Chuan.

<sup>2</sup> *Beijing Bicycle*, directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (2001; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> The term New Urban Cinema was first used in promotional materials in early 2000 and later used in the journal *Popular Cinema* (*Dazhong dianying* 大众电影). For an excellent and informative examination of the New Urban Cinema and its socio-political engagement with Chinese urban culture, see chapter 6, “‘This Is the Story of Our Street’ Urban Preservation and the Post-Maoist Politics of Memory,” in Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 224-280.

<sup>4</sup> Among English critiques, Haomin Gong, Elizabeth Wright, Harry H. Kuoshu, Gary Xu, and Yingjin Zhang all discuss the contrast between city people and migrant workers and its thematic connection to De Sica’s 1948 film. In Chinese criticism, both Ling Chen and Lei Chen point out the contrasts and the similarities between the city and the rural, Xiaoyan Feng focuses on the identity crisis of young people, Peng He compares Wang’s and De Sica’s similarities in filmic language and cinematic narrative, and Wei Nie examines the power dynamic between the city and the rural in *Beijing Bicycle*. For articles mentioned here, see Lei Chen 陈磊, “On Sixth Generation Directors from *Beijing Bicycle* 从《十七岁的单车》看新生代导演.” *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Science)* 上海大学学报 (社会科学版). no. 2 (2003): 50-53. Ling Chen 陈凌, “Uncertain ‘Search’: Thematic Interpretation of *Beijing Bicycle* 寻找的彷徨——评电影《十七岁的单车》主题阐释的意义.” *Movie Literature* 电影文学. no. 18 (2008): 50-51. Feng, Xiaoyan 冯晓燕, “Walking at the City’s Edge: A Cultural Strategy of Sixth Generation Directors 在城市边缘行走——第六代导演的一种文化策略.” *Journal of Liaoning Educational Administration Institute* 辽宁教育行政学院学报. no. 7 (2008): 116-119. Peng He 何鹏, “When Wang Xiaoshuai Meets De Sica: *Beijing Bicycle* and *The Bicycle Thief* 当王小帅遭遇德·西卡——以《十七岁的单车》和《偷自行车的人》为例.” *Movie Review* 电影评介. no. 8 (2011): 52-54. 10.3969/j.issn.1002-6916.2011.08.022 (accessed December 23, 2013). Harry H Kuoshu, *Metro Movies: Cinematic Urbanism in Post-Mao China*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. Wei Nie 聂伟, “Part Three of the Study of New Generation Films: On Wang Xiaoshuai 新生代电影研究之三：王小帅论.” *Journal of Hangzhou Teachers’ College (Social Science Edition)* 杭州师范学院学报 (社会科学版). no. 2 (2005): 85-91.

<sup>5</sup> The bicycle played a significant socio-economical role in China’s modernization era during the decade from late 1970s to mid-1980s, when the country’s large bicycle production and

consumption earned it the nickname of “kingdom of bicycles,” or “country on bicycles.” The bicycle has since then become a politicized visual trope for an underdeveloped Chinese society, a government controlled economy, and a socialist ideology because of its intimate association with a historical period that is defined by these conditions. As China undergoes tremendous economic developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the once coveted bicycle is now a cheap substitute for cars for low-income city residents, while also serving as a nostalgic reminder of the bygone days. Therefore, once a symbol of modernization and affluence in the 1970s in China, the bicycle often connotes economic underdevelopment, low-income urban living, and limited financial means in contemporary society. This change in the bicycle’s socio-economic connotations is especially significant in contemporary urban spaces, where the bicycle is an undesirable mode of daily transportation for people living and working in Beijing, China’s largest metropolis. For a more detailed report on the history of bicycles in China, see Yuhan Luo 骆昱含, “The Bicycle’s China Spectacle 自行车的中国奇观,” *Chinese Heritage 中华遗产*, No. 89, (2013): 70-86. For a portion of this article, see *Chinese Heritage's* webpage at *China National Geography Online 中国国家地理网* <http://www.dili360.com/ch/article/p5350c3d83bd9428.htm>. Accessed September 26, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Wang Xiaoshuai in Michael Berry’s *Speaking in Images: Interview with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 175.

<sup>7</sup> Haomin Gong engages the concept of uneven modernity in his discussion of *Beijing Bicycle’s* social critique. For further reading, see *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012), 120-129.

<sup>8</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 79.

<sup>9</sup> This phrase in Chinese original is 新时代的骆驼祥子. Xiangzi is the central character in Lao She’s *Rickshaw*, a novel sets in Beijing in the 1930s. Xiangzi is a hardworking rickshaw boy who makes a living by pulling passengers in his rickshaw in Beijing, a job that is comparable to modern taxi drivers. He rents the rickshaw from the company and fixates on saving enough money to buy his own rickshaw and thereby achieve financial comfort.

<sup>10</sup> Lao She, *Rickshaw: The Novel Lo-t’o Hsiang Tzu*, trans. Jean M. James (University of Hawai’i Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> In his interview with Michael Berry, director Wang Xiaoshuai also mentions that bicycles were often stolen while he was in college in Beijing. Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 174-175.

<sup>12</sup> Haomin Gong, *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Wright, “Riding Towards the Future: Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle*,” *Sense of Cinema.com* 18 (December, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> The courtyard house, or *Sihe yuan* 四合院, refers to a rectangular courtyard with houses built along its three sides, typically a familial adobe for extended Chinese families in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Because of its popularity in history, the courtyard houses are almost exclusively associated with Beijing’s historical cityscape.

<sup>17</sup> Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 176.

<sup>18</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, "Riding Towards the Future."

<sup>20</sup> Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality*, 80-81; Ling Chen 陈凌, "Uncertain 'Search'," 50-51.

<sup>21</sup> Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 175.