

# Tokyo Two-Wheeler

Robert Hancock

Long before the advent of the car and the car industry, Japanese travellers were well accustomed to using human power for transport—in the Edo period (1600–1868), the majority of ordinary people either walked or rode in a rickshaw. In fact, rickshaw is an English corruption of the Japanese word *jinrikisha*, meaning something like man-powered vehicle.

The picturesque rickshaw has long disappeared from the streets of most Japanese cities—although a few still operate as tourist attractions in historic centres like Kyoto and Nikko—and the car and taxi now form the bulk of private road transport in Japan. However, another Western form of *jinrikisha*—the bicycle—is a thriving and important (if unacknowledged) part of the transport network of metropolitan Tokyo where the predominantly flat geography is ideal for bicycling.

Coming to Tokyo from Cambridge in the UK via Beijing 15 years ago, I thought I had a pretty good idea of how bicycles could be used as a fast and efficient form of alternative local transport. Cambridge undergraduates are an infamous hazard for drivers in the city's cobbled streets, and nobody can fail to be impressed by the Beijing rush hour bicycle traffic.

But Japanese bicycle culture is very different from that of Europe; the first sight of an early-morning mother on her way to school

casually balancing her 5-year old on a back seat, another toddler on a seat hanging from the handlebars and an infant swaddled in a backpack arrangement is enough to strike fear into the heart of any car driver. Fortunately, Japanese policemen encourage riding bicycles on the sidewalk—unlike the UK—but since most of Tokyo's smaller side streets have no sidewalks at all, I can't help wondering what the bicycle accident statistics are like. Although Japanese bicyclists use the sidewalks whenever possible, they always politely use their bell to warn pedestrians of their presence.

In fact, Tokyo (and I guess most of the rest of Japan), has very few dedicated bicycle paths to separate bicycles and cars. A few of Tokyo's 23 wards (boroughs) have plans to construct bicycle paths, but the recession and cost of land seem likely to ensure that they will remain only as plans for the future. This lack of any central policy towards promoting bicycle use is in stark contrast to northern Europe, especially Holland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Holland, for example, has 14,500 km of bicycle paths comprising a huge 8.5% of the total road network. By contrast, bicycle paths in Japan total less than 0.0001% of the road network. But one thing that is not in short supply is bicycle shops. In my locality, they are second only in number to dry cleaning

shops, and are ready to repair a dreaded back-wheel puncture at a moment's notice for ¥1000 (US\$8)!

Another clear difference between London and Tokyo is the bicyclists' attitude to air pollution. At one time, it seemed that every bicyclist in London was wearing a 'Darth Vader' type gas mask to prevent breathing the chemical brew that passes for air during London's rush hour. Surprisingly, although Japanese have a tradition of wearing masks to prevent spreading colds, in 15 years, I have never seen a Tokyo cyclist wearing a gas mask, despite the fact that Tokyo's air is just as bad as London's. And in technology-loving Japan, even the bicycle has not escaped the attention of engineers determined to make it more hi-tech. Recently, quite a few battery-powered bicycles made by big motorbike and electronics manufacturers have started appearing on the streets. I have never ridden one, but friends report that although heavy, they make hill climbing considerably easier! Of course, disposing of the large rechargeable NiCad battery at the end of its life detracts from the environment friendliness. And that's another difference between Japanese and European bicycle cultures—there is almost no official policy of promoting bicycle riding to cut air pollution, slow global warming, save energy, promote health, etc. This is not really



Rickshaws and carts were the only public transport in Tokyo's Ginza in the 1870s (Tokyo Gas Museum)



A mother and her child make full use of bicycle transport going to school (Author)

surprising because the car lobby is a powerful force in Japanese politics. So why are there 15 million bicycles registered to Tokyo's 30 million residents?

Many are used by housewives for local shopping and taking children to and from school, but a much larger percentage of these millions of bicycles spends most of the day (and night) parked in huge jams on sidewalks around the 400 or so train and subway stations that make up the Tokyo rail network. Why? First, the Tokyo bicycle is not used as a single transport mode replacing commuting by car or train to and from work. Instead, it is the first link in the long commuting chain from home to work by rail. Second, bicycles are parked illegally because there is almost no bicycle parking. For example, the Odakyu Line serving western Tokyo has 69 stations but only 14 (further out of town) have railway-owned bicycle parking. In fact, the bicycles parked on sidewalks or roadsides around heavily used stations can be so dense that they seriously hinder pedestrians and even road traffic. The railways and subways should realize they have a duty to provide parking for their customers using the bicycle as the first mode of access.

To my mind, the solution is for Tokyo's wards and railways to be compelled by legislation to provide bicycle parking at stations, although the high land price around stations makes this an expensive option. As a result, normally law-abiding office workers are forced to park illegally and the ward offices make periodic raids, taking all the bicycles to large pounds and fining the unlucky owners ¥2500 to get the bicycle back. The irony is that the land occupied by the pounds could be sold and used to (partially) fund bicycle parking nearer stations.

This situation is the result of a lack of understanding on the part of the local and central governments and the railways about the role that bicycles play in an integrated city transport system. It is well known that for city journeys of up to 5 km, the bicycle



*Bicycles block every available inch of the sidewalk at Ogikubo Station on the JR East Chuo Line*

*(Author)*

is by far the fastest, most cost-effective and environment-friendly form of transport. In fact, Japanese-government figures show that an average 2-km journey by car during the Tokyo rush hour takes 14 minutes, costs ¥780 and produces 147 grams of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), whereas the same journey by bicycle takes 15 minutes, costs ¥120 and produces 0 grams of CO<sub>2</sub>. My own experience bears this out. Sometimes, I cycle the 9-km trip from my home to the JR East head office in Shinjuku, taking about 40 minutes and costing nothing (other than injured pride when gesticulating car drivers stuck in traffic jams indicate that I should ride on the sidewalk). The same journey by bicycle and train takes more than 1 hour and costs ¥530.

There are some signs of changing attitudes. My nearest railway station on the Seibu-

Shinjuku Line has been part of a recent major transport project to put Tokyo's Ring Road 8 through a 3-km tunnel under the railway tracks. As part of the multi-billion-yen 7-year works, Tsuginami Ward built an underground bicycle park on each side of the tracks. Unfortunately, many people still continue to leave their bicycles on roads around the station because the charge for casual parking is ¥150 a day—almost the same as the one-way train fare to Shinjuku. Just recently, five localities—Nerima Ward in Tokyo (where I live), Shizuoka City, Hiroshima City, Tokushima City, and Saga City have been designated model regions in terms of their plans for bicycles. I wonder if this means that Nerima Ward will stop impounding my bicycle when I am forced to leave it outside a railway station in future! ■



### **Robert Hancock**

Dr Hancock enjoys exploring Tokyo by bicycle when not working as a Japanese-English technical translator, writer, and *JRTR* editor.