

BEIJING BICYCLE

(*SHIQI SUI DE DANNIAN*) OR
THE AWKWARDNESS OF BEING SEVENTEEN

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

In the press notes to *Beijing Bicycle*, the director, Wang Xiaoshuai, describes the bicycle as central to the Chinese experience: 'We all went through the time when we were jubilant about getting a bike and heartbroken over losing one'. Yes, yes indeed. The first bike that had to stand in for a pony, the first racer (stolen from a rail station), the second racer (stolen from a rehearsal studio, replaced by the cast) and, cruelly, the cherished replacement (stolen from a swimming pool forecourt in South London, opposite a police station, along with about fifty other bikes *and* the railings to which they were all chained). Ah yes, it's bad, that lost bike feeling.

In this chronicle of late teenage angst and urban trauma, the bike is everything. The particular one here is a flash silver mountain bike, which belongs to a delivery company, but which a courier can buy for himself with hard work. For Guei (Cui Lin), a rural migrant with nothing to his name and only one friend, the delivery company's bike is the way he earns his living, sees his new city, and travels as fast as every other seventeen year old in Beijing. When the bike is stolen, it passes (by way of the used bike market) to Jian (Li Bin). Jian is a high school student who needs a bike badly. His friends hang out on bikes, doing dangerous wheelies on the railway lines or just careering coolly around underground car-parks. His object of desire, Qin (Zhou Xun), cycles to school, and could do with a bit of protection on the way (well, not really—it's the boys in this film who end up in tatters).

The story brings these two boys together. They are very different people: urban and rural, educated and working, sulky and tenacious. The contrast between them is profound and yet their similarities are sufficient to take the film into a debate on the meaning—and meaningless—





ness—of boyhood. In different contexts and to vastly different degrees, these boys are both poor. They are both lonely. They are both inept around women. As the title of the film suggests, they are both negotiating an odd number, which is also a difficult age—seventeen. Jian responds to this awful time of near adulthood with intense, screeching anger. In a confrontation with his father, he screams like a child with the strength of a man, his voice swooping between adult fury and babyish frustration. It's incredibly sad, and it sums up something about being a seventeen year old young man anywhere on the developed planet, something about needing to be respected *and* loved *and* cool *and* left alone *and* then loved again, all at once. Guei doesn't betray quite the same morass of frustration. He is left alone, he respects himself, he doesn't have time to figure out what cool means, his friend loves him in an understated way, and—with the bike—he is getting close to belonging to the anonymity of the city streets. But he also breaks down. As a gang of boys try to take his bike (for a second time), he lies clutching it and roaring out another mixture of fury and childlike unhappiness. He has reached the city, he has found a good job and he has worked hard enough to buy the tool of his new city trade. Why, then, is it so hard to keep what he has earned?

At this point it is possible to see the film, especially the last shot of Guei's wounded body carrying his battered bike back through the traffic of Beijing, as a treatise on China's long-suffering rural poor. They are required by history to take on the burdens of feudal poverty, collective revolution and, now, modernization. As the changes unroll, so they must bow to the rhetoric of the architects of one new China after another. Although Guei does not bow, he just gets on with it—"it" being survival in the face of overweening urban indifference.

Wang's film is neat and well-crafted. Characters are organized into matching pairs, with the story of the bike taking the boys through the city streets in a circular quest for happiness. Perhaps it is all quite trite, but Wang's sympathy towards the most recent troubled generation rings true for this reviewer. He is gentle with his subjects, and draws exquisite performances from both leading men. He also quotes from an emotional *tour de force*

of the 1980s: when Guei cries out for his bike he is reminiscent of the farmer-entrepreneur in *Wild Mountains* (*ye shan*, 1984). That film was made at the beginning of the reform period, and its use of melodrama to prise open the despair of rural people struggling to come to terms with a new value system is still remarkable. This film does not cut the swathe

of rail tracks, and tiny, shared living spaces. Being seventeen in Beijing, at least in this film, is about being awkward. It has nothing to do with freedom and everything to do with impoverished opportunities. ■

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of *Wild Mountains*. It is altogether more contained, and much more aware of its international appeal. Nevertheless, *Beijing Bicycle* is good. It keeps faith with the intense misery of its protagonists. It notes their cruelties and their refusal to acknowledge the perspective of an older world. They exist within the parameters of their generation and manage their affairs through its immediate, internal logic of friendship, jealousy and bravado. The claustrophobic anxiety of youth is visualised in devastated urban landscapes: the famous, and fast disappearing, *hutongs* (residential alleys) of Beijing, low ceilinged building sites, rusty



