SPECIAL SECTION ON RICKSHAWS

Rickshaws in South Asia *Introduction to the Special Section*

M. William Steele, *International Christian University*

Abstract

The rickshaw, invented in Japan in 1869, helped to produce a revolution in mobility for millions of people in Asia and Africa. By the 1930s, the everyday mobility offered by the hand-pulled rickshaw gave way to several of its offspring: the cycle-rickshaw, trishaw, pedicab, cyclo, becak, and the auto-rickshaw. The three articles in this special section describe how these “primitive” non-motorized vehicles continue in the twenty-first century to play a valuable and irreplaceable role in urban and rural transport in South Asian cities. The authors are traffic experts, geographers, and urban planners who live and work in contemporary rickshaw cultures. Despite the reality of urban hazards, the articles describe cultural, economic, and environmental reasons to keep rickshaws on the road, now and in the future.

Keywords

cycle-rickshaw, non-motorized vehicles, rickshaw, rickshaw pullers, South Asia, urban transport

Like the sewing machine and the bicycle, the rickshaw is a simple machine that has brought about complex changes in the lives of people throughout the world from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century.¹ In particular, the *jinrikisha* (human-pulled vehicle), invented in Japan in 1869, helped to produce a revolution in mobility for millions of people in Asia and Africa.² More than the steam locomotive, it was this “exotic commodity,” to use Frank Dikötter’s term, that carried ordinary people into the modern age, fundamentally altering their consciousness of speed, time, distance, and mobility.³

In Japan, the new convenience spread rapidly. By 1872, three years after its first appearance, there were 40,000 and by 1875 over 100,000 rickshaw on the streets of the new capital. The number reached a peak in 1896 with 210,000 countrywide.⁴ The earliest rickshaw was like a small cart with a roof. An enterprising merchant, Akiha Daisuke (1843–1894) reduced the size, added a cushioned seat, hood, foot-rests, mudguards, springs, and lacquered the body for

durability and beauty. His company later added pneumatic tires for a more comfortable ride. In 1872, Akiha set up a shop in the Ginza selling carts, carriages, and rickshaws. He also began to export the machines to Asia. Rickshaws appeared in Shanghai and Hong Kong in 1874, in Singapore in 1880, in Beijing in 1886 and then to other parts of Southeast and South Asia and Africa.⁵ As Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy note in their article on hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata, the new machines were introduced to India, first to Simla (Shimla) in 1880. In many cases, they were reserved for the use of the wealthy and the powerful, but were quickly taken over by ordinary people eager to take advantage of the convenience and modern lifestyle it offered.

By the early twentieth century, rickshaws were an essential part of urban locomotion throughout Asia. In some places, Hong Kong, Canton, and Beijing, for example, rickshaw usage benefited from the creation of Western-style paved streets and increased alongside motorization in the 1920s and 1930s. But elsewhere, the everyday mobility offered by the hand-pulled rickshaw gave way to several of its offspring: the cycle-rickshaw, rintaku, trishaw, pedicab, sidecar, cyclo, becak, and the auto-rickshaw. According to Peter Cox: "No singular pattern of design or layout emerged, different cities and nations constructing distinctive styles and layouts, each reflecting local customs and practice, each having particular names."⁶ The initial marriage of a bicycle with a rickshaw may have taken place in Singapore, but by the 1920s variations on this hybrid machine were everywhere throughout Asia and parts of Africa.

As the three articles in this special issue note, these descendants of the Japanese invention continue in large numbers to play a valuable and irreplaceable role in urban and rural transport in Asian cities. Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy estimate that some 8 million cycle rickshaw are active in cities and towns throughout India, many of them illegal and unlicensed. According to Maksudur Rahman and Md. Assadekjaman, 34 percent of the residents of Dhaka rely on the rickshaw as their primary mode of transport. Nonetheless, despite their ubiquity, their utility, and (increasingly important in the twenty-first century) their eco-friendliness, cycle rickshaws and pulled rickshaws have been under constant siege. Beginning in the early 1950s, the new Communist regime in China sought to outlaw these vehicles as symbols of capitalist exploitation. It failed. By no means in as large a number as in India or Bangladesh, pedicabs remain an essential feature in Chinese urban transport, both for passengers and for freight. The articles note similar attempts to ban or limit "embarrassing" rickshaw usage in Delhi, Kolkata, and Dhaka, and a similar lack of success. Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy show how even hand-pulled rickshaws persist as a subversive form of mobility in twenty-first century Kolkata and other South Asian cities. They argue that these "most primitive form of human-powered vehicles" should have a place in debates over sustainable urban transport. Nonetheless, urban planners seem universally to favor automobiles, buses, and rail transport over smaller, lighter, and

slower forms of mobility. But where planners have had their way, as with the Delhi ban on hand-pulled rickshaws, health hazards have not been ameliorated nor have marginal people been able to escape from poverty.

All the articles in this special section agree that, for better or worse, the rickshaw remains indispensable for everyday mobility in South Asia. According to the *Rickshaw*, a student's blog for sociology at South Asian University in New Delhi, the muscle-powered three-wheeler sends out contradictory messages: "The antiquity and ubiquity of the Rickshaw in South Asian metropolis, amidst high-rise buildings, skyscrapers, super-malls and sprawling suburbs, reflect success and failure of South Asia's tryst with modernity. ... The Rickshaw is a symbol of hope and despair that South Asians have long learned to live with."⁷ The authors of the articles in this special section are all traffic experts, geographers, and urban planners who live and work in contemporary rickshaw cultures. The special section thus seeks to integrate this South Asian scholarship into work done by Western (largely European and America) historians and sociologists on rickshaws and rickshaw pulling. The comparative focus on transportation and urban planning within various regions of Asia (rather than the more conventional comparison between so-called East and West) is another goal. *Transfers* seeks to publish scholarship on the movement of people, resources, and commodities across borders of time and place, making this special section a good example of the journal's desire to encourage multi-directional academic exchange between scholars with different regional and disciplinary backgrounds.

The rickshaw has an intriguing history, but do these simple machines have a future? The articles in this issue's special section are divided in their response. Maksudur Rahman and Md. Assadekjaman, writing on Rickshaw pullers in Dhaka, argue that the rickshaw industry is unsustainable. Rickshaw pulling provides work for the urban poor, but at great cost: hard work, poor pay, ill health, and social exclusion. On the other hand, Shahnaz Huq-Hussain and Umme Habiba, focusing on the travel behavior of middle-class women in Dhaka, maintain that a total ban of rickshaws would be suicidal. In the "rickshaw capital of the world," the poor and middle-class are highly dependent on non-motorized transport (NTR). Women, in particular, would be immobilized if it were not for the convenience, safety, security, and privacy afforded by the rickshaw. The article by Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy on hand-pulled rickshaws confirms the poverty-trap described by Maksudur Rahman and Md. Assadekjaman, but nonetheless argues that even the "primitive" machines deserve a brighter future, both for the livelihood of the pullers and the flexibility of movement they provide. All papers criticize city planners for discriminating against rickshaw traffic and argue instead for rickshaw-friendly infrastructure and integration of the three-wheelers into any future urban transport policy.

There are cultural (the privacy afforded women in Dhaka, for example), economic (cheap transport plus income for a large and growing number of urban poor) and environmental (rickshaws do not pollute) reasons to keep rickshaws on the road. City planners will necessarily, as Gopa Samanta and Sumita Roy point out, take subaltern voices into account. Shahnaz Hussian and Umme Habiba also criticize transport authorities for excluding women's voices in formulating planning. And if they study history, they may seek to restore the rickshaw, once the juggernaut of modernity, to its vanguard status. Tony Wheeler described the rickshaw as "one of the first examples of Japanese technological ingenuity, a clear predecessor to CD players, video recorders, and Honda motorcycles. It was also a wonderful example of the irresistible power of technological change, an invention which not only gave you more but cost you less."⁸ The "super cycle-rickshaw" he envisioned in the late 1990s has been slow to emerge. In 2012, however, a fleet of solar-powered rickshaw or soleckshaw (solar electric rickshaw) was put into service in Delhi and other Indian cities.⁹

The rickshaw may well be the green vehicle of the future, and not just in South Asia. Vilotaxis, electric-assisted and solar-powered pedicabs, and other new-generation rickshaws are claiming space in cities throughout Europe and North America and belatedly Asia. Japan, the birthplace of the rickshaw, has also witnessed a rickshaw revival. On the one hand, electric-assisted three-wheeled "Streeters" are used to deliver mail and packages in Tokyo and other cities, overcoming both congestion and high fuel costs. On the other hand, hand-pulled rickshaws are back, and not only for tourists and nostalgia buffs. They offer an escape from the hurly burly of the fast life. As the advertisement for Jidaiya Rickshaw service, founded in 1997, proclaims: "A rickshaw is slow. It is slower than a bicycle, slower than a car, slower than an airplane. Now when we can make a round trip between Hokkaido and Okinawa in one day, it's also possible to take one hour to go to the neighborhood next door. Now we can move several thousand people at once, but a rickshaw can only carry one or at most two. Yet, despite limits on how fast we can run and on the strength of our bodies, we persist in loving the rickshaw."¹⁰ It would seem that history has come full circle.

M. William Steele is professor of modern Japanese history at the International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, Japan. He studies the social and environmental history of Japan in the late nineteenth century. He is the author of *Alternate Narratives of Modern Japanese History* (London: Routledge, 2003). Two recent publications draw attention to the role of bicycles in the contemporary world, with a focus on Japan: "The Speedy Feet of the

Nation" *The Journal of Transport History*, Third Series, 31 no. 2 (December 2010), and "The Making of a Bicycle Nation: Japan," *Transfers* 2 no. 2 (Summer 2102). He is currently working on the history of rickshaws in Japan. Department of History, International Christian University, Mitaka, Tokyo, Japan. Email: steele@icu.ac.jp

Notes

1. On the sewing machine, see Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1999); on the bicycle, Glen Norcliffe, *Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). For Asian narratives, see: Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); M. William Steele, "The Speedy Feet of the Nation: Bicycles and Everyday Mobility in Modern Japan," *The Journal of Transport History*, Third Series 31, no. 2 (December 2010): 182–209; Edward Rhoads, "Cycles of Cathay: A History of the Bicycle in China," *The Journal of Transport History*, Third Series 31, no. 2 (December 2010): 95–120.
2. On the history of the rickshaw in Japan, see Saitō Toshihiko, *Jinrikisha* (Tokyo: Sangyō Gijutsu Sentaa, 1979). Saitō discusses various theories on the origin of the rickshaw, including the claim that an American missionary in Japan constructed a hand-pulled vehicle for his invalid wife, but concludes that the honor belongs to three Japanese entrepreneurs, Suzuki Tokujirō, Izumi Yōsuke and Takayama Kōsuke, who in 1869 applied for and were granted permission to produce and operate human-pulled cabs in Tokyo.
3. Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
4. For rickshaw statistics in Japan, Tokyo, and nation-wide, see Saitō, *Jinrikisha*, 223.
5. There is an extensive literature in English on the rickshaw and rickshaw pullers in Asia: Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Fung Chi Ming, *Reluctant Heroes: Rickshaw Pullers in Hong Kong and Canton, 1874–1954* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Peter James Rimmer, *Rikisha to Rapid Transit: Urban Public Transport Systems and Policy in Southeast Asia* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1986); Subir Bandyopadhyay, *Calcutta Cycle-Rickshaw Pullers: A Sociological Study* (South Asia Books, 1990); and Rob Gallagher, *The Rickshaws of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press, 1992).
6. Peter Cox, *Moving People: Sustainable Transport Development* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 166.

7. For the mission statement of the *Rickshaw* blog, see: <http://sausociology.wordpress.com/about-2/> (accessed June 28, 2013). The blog is dedicated to critical reflection on South Asian society and culture.
8. Tony Wheeler (text) and Richard l'Anson (photographs), *Chasing Rickshaws* (Hawthorn, Vic.: Lonely Planet Publications, 1998), 80.
9. Two newspaper articles from 2012 describe the new solar-powered rickshaw initiative: "New Solar-Powered Rickshaws for Green Delhi," *India Today*, March 2, 2012: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/now-solar-powered-rickshaws-for-green-delhi/1/176104.html>; and "Solar Power Rickshaw to Power Green City Dreams," *The Times of India*, November 11, 2012: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-11-24/bhubaneswar/35333213_1_rickshaw-pullers-solar-rickshaw-soleckshaw
10. Translated from the profile of the Jidaiya Rickshaw Service homepage: <http://www.jidaiya.biz/profile.html> (accessed April 11, 2013).