

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nancy Snow](#)

Snow's Job: 8 Weeks Teaching Public Diplomacy in China ^[1]

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Lesson 1: When in China, buy a bike.

Yes, it's along the lines of 'when in Rome' but there's no better way to get around this sprawling campus Tsinghua University in northwestern Beijing than to join the thousands of Chinese students taking to the paths. Entering a bike lane is like trying to merge onto the 405 in Southern California. I'm more concerned about getting run over by a fellow cyclist than I am about being hit by a car, but I would just as soon avoid either prospect.

My bike cost 175 CNY (China Yuan Renminbi) or about \$23. One Chinese student asked me how much I paid and when told said "very expensive." You can buy a used bike here for a few bucks but I wanted a shiny new purple Tsinghua bike that I could donate to the School of Journalism and Communication when I leave. The next visiting professor should not be without local transportation.

One must be vigilant and ride defensively at all times. No one wears a helmet. I take that back. One American exchange student who chatted me up was wearing a helmet. He told me I'd find it in the skateboard section of Wal-Mart because they don't really sell bike helmets. Although it's the safe thing to do, his protective gear looked geeky because it's not the norm here.

I'm not very talented on my bike. When it rains, the Chinese ride with umbrella in one hand and the other hand on the handlebar for steering. Did I miss this class when I was learning to ride a bike as a kid? Last Friday I attempted to do the Chinese bike version of simultaneously patting my stomach and rubbing my head -- with no success. I put my umbrella in my basket and arrived at my dorm looking like "Cat" from Breakfast at Tiffany's. The final scene.

Okay, so buying a bike in China would seem to have very little to do with public diplomacy, but there may be a connection. Bike riding with other riders is a very mutually beneficial experience, like the most valuable exchange program should be. I feel at one with my fellow global citizen as we cruise along on our own energy source. Everyone from the highest level faculty person to the street sweeper is on this personal transportation. I know that Beijing has the worst air but it's comforting to see so many people using the old-fashioned and efficient way to get around. And you get the added bonus of people watching when you are not dodging other riders or beeping cars.

I like the freedom and intimacy of the bicycle.

Forget the car. The car is an enemy here. Every time I've been in a taxi it's been hurry up and

wait with everyone -- bicyclists, push cart vendors, and drivers -- descending on the same narrow turn lane. There is some good alternative transportation, including the train and Beijing subway. I tried the subway and found it a fast, clean, and cheap alternative to hailing a taxi.

My journey from the so-called Cambridge district of Haidian to the Chao Yang district of Beijing took me to The Bookworm, a wonderful restaurant, bar, bookstore, and lending library that reminds me a bit of the old Midnight Special bookstore on the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica. Founded in 2004, the 'worm hosts an author event or music night several times a week. Last week BoingBoing.com editor Cory Doctorow was in town and this week is Duncan Hewitt, former BBC Shanghai Bureau Chief and author of *Getting Rich First: Life in a Changing China*. Great food and laid back atmosphere with a mix of expats and local intellectual types listening to MP3 players and working on laptops. I bought *Mao: The Unknown Story* by husband-and-wife writing team Jung Chang and Jon Halliday. The cover blurb from Time magazine read, "An atom bomb of a book." It may seem puzzling that the Chinese government would tolerate a critical historical biography of its former Chairman, but this is a new century and as we all know China is open for business. If it maintains current growth rates, in 2025 it will be the biggest economy in the world.

Next Lesson: Medical Check-Up, Most Honored Teacher, and Made in China
