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Ultrabiking Chengdu

how an American sexagenarian and a Chengdunese '80s kid are changing the face of cycling in China



Bobbi Fisher is a woman whose reputation precedes her, least of all because she shares a name with a legendary chess player. Before I met her, her name had come up multiple times in conversation with different people.

Not bad networking for somebody who's been here a mere six months.

A former entertainment-industry executive, Fisher runs an NGO in Chengdu, works out at the gym three nights a week, and is an avid bicyclist who recently joined a nonstop, 310-kilometer ride to Wenchuan and back—oh, and she's 61.

A sprightly woman who chose her Chinese name, Bai Ling, after reading about the same-named Chengdunese-turned-Hollywood actress with a penchant for roles that call for at least partial nudity, Fisher jumps right into the stories before I even ask any questions. Finally, I get one in: "So, how did you get started biking?"

"I took a bath," she starts, and we break into laughter, knowing it's the start of a well-rehearsed story, an answer to a question she's been asked countless times. "I didn't start riding my bicycle since I was 47. I did nothing aerobic in my life until I was 47," she continues.

That year, she decided to start exercising. A friend recommended

This article was posted by Jane and published July 29, 2010

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stationary-bike classes at a gym, and within weeks Fisher was hooked. Shortly thereafter another friend convinced her to take part in an upcoming bike ride. What she imagined to be a 10-kilometer jaunt turned out to be the 880-kilometer AIDS/Lifecycle Ride along the California coast. She spent the next 10 weeks training. Six days into the ride, high on endorphins, she called her employer at Universal Pictures and quit her job.

This began a 14-year-and-counting love affair with long-distance and ultra-distance biking that has included over 50 double-sentries (nonstop 500-mile courses) and two around-the-world cycling trips.

And in late 2008, Fisher packed her bags and moved to Chengdu.

Two weeks after she arrived, she went outside to find that her bike was gone. For most new arrivals to China, this is a devastating moment. Usually the heartache is over a 300-kuai Carrefour purchase; Fisher, however, had just lost the \$15,000 mountain bike she had lugged across the Pacific.

In a certain way of looking at it, though, it was an auspicious loss: After searching online for high-end replacement parts in Chengdu, she came across Hans Ngo via his website, bikechina.org.

Ngo, a 26-year-old Chengdunese with a passion for biking and a flair for languages, runs a bike shop in Chengdu specializing in high-end parts and servicing. He also organizes the Ghost Rider bike team, making weekend cycling trips to places like Zigong.

Movado Teamo and the Sichuan Esperanto Association

During a Binjiang Lu English Corner meeting in 1997, while he was still in middle school, Ngo overheard some elders speaking in a language he didn't recognize. When he inquired, he was told it was Esperanto, the language developed in the late nineteenth century by an Eastern European doctor to promote international communication.

This exchange sparked his interest in mastering his third (or fourth, if you count dialect) language. "If you want to think in different ways, you have to think in different languages," he explains. Although the Sichuan Esperanto Association was founded in 1982, before Ngo was born, when he joined well into the association's second decade, he was only one of a few members under retirement age.

The Chinese people, says Ngo, have special, historical ties to Esperanto, and these explain its popularity among a particular generation. During the Japanese occupation of China, locals published news in Esperanto to send abroad, circumventing blocked communication channels; today China is one of the few countries to maintain a radio broadcast in Esperanto (through China Radio International).

Esperanto's regularity in pronunciation influenced the development of Pinyin, and today there are a number of well-known Chinese public figures who speak the language, including Chengdunese writer Ba Jin. With interest in the most widely spoken international auxiliary language reviving, the Chengdu branch of the Sichuan Esperanto Association now numbers over 100. The group organizes regular activities, including cross-city exchanges with branches in Xi'an and Chongqing.

With three languages under his belt, a 19-year-old Ngo decided to buy a share in a tiny, Western-style dive bar along the river. At the time—2001—there were hardly any hangouts with even a hint of internationalism in Chengdu, and the teenager was eager to expand his understanding of the world. He learned how to make pizza in the bar's tiny, half-broken oven and honed his English skills with the foreigners who congregated there. The bar was called Paul's Oasis, and the original owners sold it off just before

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the SARS endemic hit China; it was later renamed Dave's Oasis.

One of the foreigners Ngo met during this time was Peter Snow Cao, a fellow bike enthusiast from the U.S. who had taken up permanent residence in Chengdu. Snow Cao had been running Bike China Adventures, a local small business with a worldwide network that specializes in operating bicycle tours. After Ngo sold his share of the Oasis, he joined the Bike China Adventures team, accompanying foreign travelers to tourist hotspots by bike.

An avid cyclist since his high-school days, Ngo took an immediate liking to the work, becoming more involved in operations and eventually opening his own parts and repair shop. But it took only a few years before he grew bored of visiting the same popular destinations over and over again. In 2007, he decided to invert Bike China's model, offering his own tours to Chinese looking to cycle to other countries—Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia. During these travels, his interest in Esperanto developed from abstract hobby to communication tool. Eager to test the language's functionality even further, Ngo rushed back home to send messages in Esperanto advertising his custom-made bicycles to people around the world. He received responses from Ghana, Nigeria, and Congo.

Then, at the very beginning of this year, Fisher found Ngo, and Randonneurs of China began.



Ultradistance Cycling

In the darkness of an early, early May morning, 34 cyclists departed from Chengdu heading toward Wenchuan. The challenge was to make it to Wenchuan and back to Chengdu in under 21 hours, covering a distance of 310 kilometers.

The ride was the second organized by the Ngo and Fisher-spearheaded Randonneurs of China, the only official China representative of the Audax Club Parisien, a Paris-based cycling club that administers long-distance biking challenges around the world.

Randonneuring is a type of cycling event in which participants challenge themselves to travel a certain distance within a certain timeframe. In contrast to a traditional race, speed and position are de-emphasized and self-sufficiency is encouraged. Bikers are forbidden from having support vehicles trailing them along the route. In France, randonneuring dates back to the early 1900s; it started gaining international popularity in the 1970s.

In addition to sportive pleasure, for Fisher and Ngo, the Randonneurs of China rides are leading up to something bigger: the 2011 Paris-Brest-Paris bike challenge, a 1,200-kilometer ride from Paris to the coast of France and back that takes place once every four years.

In order to qualify for the event, potential participants must first complete four rides of successively greater distances within certain time limits. If Ngo qualifies, he will be the first Chinese cyclist ever to participate in the event. Fisher is determined to make it to the finish line for the first time in a 12-year span of botched attempts.

The future history-making hopefuls speak highly of each other's abilities. "He's an incredible rider," says Fisher of Ngo. "She is the new Chinese cycling idol," says Ngo of Fisher, referring to the group of young local cyclists who look up to this laotaitai not so much out of traditional respect for their elders as for her formidable skills in a sport many of them are just starting. "If the old lady can do it, so can you," chimes in Fisher.

Giving Hand

But all this biking is actually weekend leisure; the reason Fisher is in China to begin with is to set up Giving Hand, an NGO whose aim is to facilitate the donation of unsellable goods from major brands and retailers to charity organizations. The concept is the brainchild of Fisher's friend Louisa Wong-Rousseau, a business-savvy HR executive whose search firm has seen considerable success in Asia. When Wong-Rousseau asked Fisher on the spur of the moment during a holiday in Thailand if she would like to start an NGO in China, Fisher answered without hesitation: "Absolutely."

Disgruntled with the changes she's seen take place in nearly four decades working in the entertainment industry, first in New York, and then in Los Angeles, Fisher was eager to try something new. She didn't speak Chinese and had no previous experience in the non-profit sector when she accepted the job. China had, however, earned a place on her "Five Favorite Countries" list after she visited (by bike, naturally) in 2000. And Fisher isn't one to turn down a challenge—or an adventure.

Giving Hand decided to base its operations in Chengdu after the Sichuan earthquake; Fisher's role is to set up the workings of the organization and start things in motion. She persuades heads of multinational corporations to donate items they can't sell; Giving Hand sees the donations through customs and onto charities who can make use of them. Recently Fisher secured a donation of 1,000 retail-display shoes after convincing Adidas's Hong Kong offices that people who have lost a leg could use the single shoes.

Despite these successes, it hasn't been an easy half year for Fisher, who has faced the sorts of incidents that would have a less hardy China newbie on the next flight back home. These include a bike accident resulting in a broken pelvis and the ensuing surgery, an irritated kidney stone requiring further hospital visits, and a bout of ringworm from an adopted kitten.

But Fisher is the type of woman who prides herself on finishing what she sets out to do, although she's not without complaints: "When I came here, I had a 26-year-old boyfriend," she laments. "Six months ago I looked easily 10 or 15 years younger."

"Some day I want to do a movie about my life, because my life has been very unique, I've always had adventures in weird ways—it's not a normal life."

Links

Randonneurs of China (ride and bike shop information)

Sichuan Esperanto Association (Esperanto and Chinese)

Giving Hand



Cycling in Sichuan

Most cyclists in China just want get from A to B as quickly as possible, and Chengdu is no exception. However, if you're an avid cyclist and want to cycle for exercise or pleasure, the city is far from ideal.

You can discover small country roads in the outskirts of the city, but if it's mountain biking, off-road cycling, or downhill you are looking for there are several suitable areas. We have made a selection of the better ones around Chengdu.

Depending on the distance, you can cycle, take your bike on the bus, or hire a van and driver to your destination. Once there, you will find two types of terrain surrounding Chengdu: hills and mountains. The hills around Chengdu are a mixture of sand, clay and stones; the western mountainous areas are granite. Both areas are suitable only for experienced bikers with proper equipment, especially since landslides often occur during heavy rainfall.

Your bike should be suitable for the terrain you want to explore. If you head for the mountains, make sure that your bike is technically sound, outfitted with heavy-duty brakes. We also recommended wearing a safety helmet and body protection.

Take a repair kit and spare tube. Usually you can fix a puncture in most small villages for about RMB2, but you may have difficulties in more remote areas.

Cycling groups in Chengdu regularly organize bicycling trips: Peter Snow Cao of Bike China (custom tours for groups of all sizes, can provide equipment): bikechina.com
Hans Ngo bikechina.org

This article was originally published in CHENGDOO citylife Magazine, issue 24 ("Summer"). Photos by Hans Ngo. Thanks to Penny Hope for cycling tips.

Comments

- Brian Barker
July 31, 2010
Esperanto is a great language.
If you have a moment please look at <http://www.lernu.net>
- Bruselo
August 2, 2010
Bobbi Fisher said "Some day I want to do a movie about my life, because my life has been very unique, I've always had adventures in weird ways— it's not a normal life." : not only Esperanto is a great language, also Bobbi is a great woman whose life and bike performances may inspire us all. Let's hope these great things can ever be shown to a worldwide public by means of this film. Salutojn al Hans Ngo de Bikechina.org kaj membro de Sichuan Esperanto Association !
- Lars Sözüer
August 13, 2010
Mi tre antaŭĝojas renkonti Hans kaj Bobbi dum Paris-Brest-Paris 2011. Ĉu ni havu renkontiĝon de Esperanto-biciklistoj tie?
I am looking much forward to meet Hans and Bobbi during Paris-Brest-Paris 2011. What about a gathering of Esperanto cyclists there?
- Hans Diablego Ngo
August 13, 2010
Kara Lars,
Ni povas konatiĝi kun Esperantaj biciklistoj dum PBP. Ĉu vi estas en Ĉinio?
Amike~!
Hans
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