

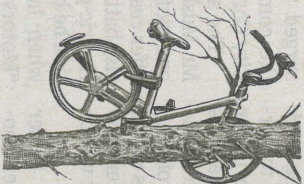
# Braking Bad: In China, Many Share Bikes Meet Grisly Fates

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Park-it-anywhere systems give vandals, pranksters a lift; Mr. Sun to the rescue

By TREBOR MOSS

SHANGHAI — They've been stripped bare, thrown in dumpsters, hung in trees, set on fire, wrenched out of shape, tossed in cars and flung under cars and piled in mangled heaps outside of town.



A bike in China

In one video, a young man trundles to the riverfront in the northern city of Tianjin and flips one casually into the water. In others, a pack of children vandalize them with delight, and an old woman blud-

geons hers with a hammer.

The moral of this story: If you're somehow reincarnated as a share bike, pray you don't end up in China.

More than two dozen bike-share startups have put millions of cheery-hued yellow, blue, green or orange two-wheelers on Chinese streets

during the past year. The hugely popular bikes cost just a handful of U.S. cents to rent per hour after users sign up, usually putting down a deposit of between

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\$15 and \$45.

Unlike programs in the U.S. and Europe, however, these bikes don't have docking stations—bikes can be left anywhere and renters use smartphone apps to unlock their built-in locks.

London and New York, where bikes can be picked up or dropped off only at docking stations, have about 23,000 share bikes between them. Shanghai alone has half a million—and the sheer number of bikes, their often isolated and haphazard parking locations, and the age-old scourges of thievery, petty vandalism and general mischief-making have led many to meet grisly fates.

The abuse has become so widespread that several hundred Good Samaritans across the country have taken up the cause. "I can't bear to see this behavior," said 26-year-old Sun Shiyue, who works for a unit of Coca-Cola Co. in Shanghai by day, and patrols his neighborhood by night with a flashlight looking for damaged or misused bikes from Mobike, one of China's largest share programs.

He reports problems via the Mobike app, moves badly parked bikes and tapes a small notice—which he made himself—to the bike's saddle reminding the previous user for irresponsible behavior: "They are the prey, and I am the hunter," he said of the saboteurs.

Before China began opening up in the late 1970s, bicycles conferred prestige. They were one of the four status symbols Chinese newlweds aspired to own—the others being a watch, a radio and a sewing machine. Bicycles lost their glow to cars as China's economy took off, but as traffic and congestion became a problem, bikes became trendy again.

In recent months, investors have plowed \$1 billion into Chinese bike-share companies.

The bright yellow, single-gear bikes from Ofo, another of the nation's largest operators, cost under \$60 apiece, making them relatively unattractive to thieves, said Chief Operating Officer Zhang Yanqi. But their



SIPA/ZUMA PRESS

Dozens of bike-sharing programs in China don't use docking stations, leaving bikes at the mercy of vandals and thieves. Above, vandals created this pile in Shenzhen.

locks are simple and security is rudimentary, a strategy Mr. Zhang said helps keep costs low. Users receive a code for a bike's combination lock after inputting the bike's ID number into the Ofo app.

Ofo has lost 1% of its bikes since it launched in September 2015—a small share but still a large number; Ofo is set to have 20 million bikes on the street by the end of 2017, Mr. Zhang said.

Mobike, Ofo's orange rival, has taken a different tack: Its higher-end bicycles cost up to \$400 each to build; users unlock them by scanning a QR code on the bike with their smartphone. They are bristling with security measures, including GPS tracking and an alarm system. That makes Mobike's loss rate "negligible," said spokesman Martin Reidy.

Nevertheless, tech-savvy

thieves have begun producing fake QR codes for Mobikes and sticking them over the genuine ones. When users scan the bogus codes they end up, in some cases, transferring money to the scammers. Two men in the coastal cities of Ningbo and Fuzhou were charged with committing such a fraud in March, state media reported.

Bikes stolen from various programs—and repainted—have turned up for sale in countryside shops.

A man in Chengdu was arrested last month after being caught red-handed, surrounded by the dismantled parts of numerous shared bikes. Stealing the bikes and reselling them whole was too unsubtle, the man told police, local media said, so he was breaking the bikes down and jumbling the parts together to form new ones.

Some people are so fond of the bikes they have taken to hoarding them, so one is always handy. It is common to see bikes stashed inside offices, or cached in stairwells. In February, two Beijing nurses were arrested for allegedly locking up shared bikes with their own locks, for which they spent five days locked up themselves, local media reported.

In January, hundreds of shared bikes were found dumped in a huge pile in the southern city of Shenzhen by unknown saboteurs. In other locations, ranks of bikes have had their brake lines severed. Vandals have also taken to scratching off Ofo bikes' ID codes, making locked bikes unusable.

Some of the vandalism is just old-fashioned mischief. Li, a 12-year-old Shanghai middle-school student, and his friends

have a game: seeing how many Ofo bikes they can unlock by exploiting a weakness in the company's system. People often neglect to jumble up the lock's combination at the end of their ride, enabling someone to flip open the lock free of charge.

"It's a lot of fun," Li said. Sometimes they mix it up by locking bikes together, Li said, or by removing locks and swapping them, baffling the next user when the code they are given doesn't work.

Authorities, until now generally supportive of the programs, are starting to get fed up with the snarls of parked share bikes blocking streets and intersections.

A vendor at Beijing's Bawangfen long-distance bus station said thousands of shared bikes routinely block buses from entering or leaving

the station. "It causes arguments and even fights," said the vendor, who gave only his surname, Yan. "The city sent a guy to maintain order, but he does nothing."

Some local governments have impounded thousands of bikes, and Shanghai authorities warned bike companies not to put any more on the streets. Mobike and Ofo both said they are working with authorities to iron out these troubles.

Mr. Sun, the Good Samaritan, said bike sharing had brought too big an improvement to urban China to be fatally punctured by crooks or vandals. He said he thinks China will eventually learn to love its bikes once more, adding, "Mobike is part of my life now."

—Junya Qian and Kersten Zhang contributed to this article.