

Modernity, Memory, and Movement: Three Picturebooks of Asian Children and Bikes

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Abstract

First marketed as luxury consumer items near the end of the nineteenth century, the earliest mass produced bicycles were high wheelers that appealed to risk-takers and grandstanders. The invention of the safety bike, however, with shock absorbing pneumatic tires, a chain drive, and two equal size wheels allowing riders to touch the ground while mounted, soon made the bicycle a commodity available to the masses. Safe and easy to ride, they liberated huge populations including women and children from authoritarian gaze and restrictions of place. American suffragette Susan B. Anthony famously said that the bicycle “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world” citing the feeling of freedom and self-reliance. Thus, the bicycle was a major catalyst for bringing modernity’s new understanding of place as no longer stable or clearly defined. Despite its diminished appeal as cutting edge technology for personal transport after the rise of automobiles, the bicycle continues to be an object of desire for many children promising freedom, delight, self-sufficiency, and enlarged spaces that moves them closer toward a modern adult world.

This paper examines the bicycle in the context of three Asian picturebooks. Each story is set in the author’s own past and shows the child protagonists expanding their personal worlds through interactions with bicycles. *A Bicycle in Beijing* (2019) depicts author and artist Dawu Yu’s memories of riding and crashing his father’s bicycle with his friends in the streets of Beijing. In Ander’s *Me and My Bike* (2008), The young protagonist lives in late 20th century Taiwan and longs for a new bicycle his family can’t afford but learns to get around on his grandfather’s old bike. Allen Say’s *The Bicycle Man* (1989) is not about children riding bicycles at all, but is Say’s memory of an American soldier crashing his elementary school’s sports day and performing tricks on the principal’s bicycle. This paper explains how each of these stories of remembered Asian childhoods uses the bicycle to move the protagonist into a new and hopeful understanding of an increasingly modern world.