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An Electric Boost for Bicyclists

By J. DAVID GOODMAN
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SHANGHAI — Jiang Rumeng, a marketing manager, owns a van, but for many errands, he hops on a futuristic-looking contraption that lets him weave rapidly through Shanghai's messy traffic. He rides an electric bicycle.

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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Roger Phillips, 78, uses an electric bicycle in Manhattan, although they are not officially permitted on New York streets.

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J. David Goodman for The New York Times

Electric bicycle riders in China, where about 120 million such bikes are used, with some going up to 30 miles an hour.

Half a world away, in San Francisco, the president of that city's board of supervisors, David Chiu, uses an electric bike to get to meetings without sweating through his suit.

And in the Netherlands, Jessy Wijzenbeek-Voet recently rode an electric bicycle on a long trip that, at 71, she would not have been able to make on a standard bike.

Detroit may be introducing [electric car](#) designs and China may be pushing forward with a big expansion of its highways and trains. But people like Mr. Jiang, Ms. Wijzenbeek-Voet and Mr. Chiu — as well as delivery workers in New York, postal employees in Germany and commuters from Canada to Japan — are among the millions taking part in a more accidental transportation upheaval.

It began in China, where an estimated 120 million electric bicycles now hum along the roads, up from a few thousand in the 1990s. They are replacing traditional bikes and motorcycles at a rapid clip and, in many cases, allowing people to put off the

switch to cars.

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In turn, the booming Chinese electric-bike industry is spurring worldwide interest and impressive sales in India, Europe and the United States. China is exporting many bikes, and Western manufacturers are also copying the Chinese trend to produce models of their own. From virtually nothing a decade ago, electric bikes have become an \$11 billion global industry.

“It’s miraculous — it takes the hills out of riding,” said Roger Phillips, 78, who rides an electric bike around Manhattan. The sensation is akin to a moving walkway at the airport, he said.

Electric bikes have been a “gift from God” for bike makers, said Edward Benjamin, an independent industry consultant, not only because they cost more — typically \$1,500 to \$3,000 — but also because they include more components like batteries that need regular replacement.

In the Netherlands, a third of the money spent on bicycles last year went to electric-powered models. Industry experts predict similar growth elsewhere in Europe, especially in Germany, France and Italy, as rising interest in cycling coincides with an aging population. India had virtually no sales until two years ago, but its nascent market is fast expanding and could eclipse Europe’s in the next year.

“The growth has been tremendous in the last two years,” said Naveen Munjal, managing director of Hero Electric, a division of India’s largest bicycle and motorcycle maker. He expects sales at Hero to increase to 250,000 electric bikes in 2012, from 100,000 in 2009.

While the American market has been modest — about 200,000 bikes sold last year, by some estimates — interest is rising, said Jay Townley, a bicycle industry consultant. [Best Buy](#) began selling electric bicycles in June at 19 stores in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Portland, Ore. Trek, a manufacturer based in Wisconsin, recently began selling a bike created by Gary Fisher, a prominent bicycle designer.

“Electric-assisted bicycles will change how people think about bikes in urban areas,” predicted Mr. Chiu of San Francisco, who has been riding a prototype of the Trek bike since the summer.

Improvements in technology are resulting in lighter designs that appeal to older cyclists. “Now you’ve got a product you can present to a baby boomer,” Mr. Townley said.

New York City’s largest electric bike store, NYCeWheels, opened in 2001, and in the last few years, business has been growing, said Bert Cebular, the owner. In Chinatown, electric bikes are showing up on nearly every corner and several shops have recently appeared, selling bikes imported from Chinese factories.

As the global market develops, two types of electric bikes are emerging. One is

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similar to a standard bicycle with pedals, but it has an electric motor that engages on command or when the cyclist pedals. These are the most popular type in the United States and Europe, with many people using the electric motor mainly for help in wind or on steep hills.

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Fan Wenxin contributed reporting from Shanghai.

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