

CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

the last ride

faster than the speed of life



China Foto Press

I'm a founding member of *Fei Mao Tui*, or Flying Hairy Legs, the infamous cycling club. We get up early several mornings a week to pant and sweat around the city and its suburbs. In case you're interested, this is an effective mid-life-crisis antidote. It's also a great way to keep track of the city's development, mostly because at 5am there's less traffic on the roads and it's easier to take in the view.

Which isn't to say that the streets are empty. Along Huaihai Lu, firemen stretch their hoses, and soldiers run in formation past disoriented night clubbers on their way home. There are the other usual exercisers too – practising *taiqi*, walking backwards, and rubbing trees. At one time, street cleaners handling large brooms were also part of the early morning landscape, but they have been mostly replaced by mechanized sweepers. There also used to be a poignant parade of heavy bikes piled high with roses, but not since they tore down the old flower market on Maoming Lu.

From Puxi, we normally take the old, oily ferry to Pudong. For most two wheelers, and for a surprising number of pedestrians, this is still the only way to cross the Huangpu. The early Dongmen Lu ferries are packed with fruit sellers, egg carriers, and construction workers. The river crossing also offers the best perspective of the skyline. Five years ago, many of the big Lujiazui towers were already up, but most of the high-rises south of Superbrand Mall were still in planning. Now, they form a massive architectural palisade along the middle stretch of the Huangpu. Unlike the Bund esplanade, which is festooned with kites during early mornings, the Pudong waterfront park is nearly deserted. At dawn, the Aurora building seems dull and mute, exhausted from its night-time light shows. But rising up confidently behind it is the skeletal silhouette of the World Financial Center; soon, the outline of its controversial chisel point will rise higher than the Jinmao Tower.

One morning, a buddy and I missed

the 5:15am ferry, so we churned up the Puxi entrance spirals of the Nanpu bridge (Shanghai's only big hill!) and then bombed most of the way across the central span. But we were captured by vigilant bridge guards. They didn't let us complete the crossing (or even take the elevator or stairs down the Pudong stanchion), so we swooped back down the Puxi ramps, banking steeply at 60km, the city's skyline pin-wheeling deliriously above our heads.

Once we make it out to Pudong we skip the bike paths altogether; the highway's better. We love speed and hate crashing into all the wrong way bikers, learner drivers, and defenseless elderly ladies. A few years ago on Longdong Lu, there were only scooters draped with dripping pig carcasses, a few smoky dump trucks, and a tangle of scaffolding and mid-rise construction. Now, the suburbs are more ordered, but we share the highway with municipal buses as well as Volkswagens and Buicks surging to beat the rush. We try not to run too many red lights.

We pick up other Pudong riders opposite the Maglev station. The magnetic tracks at Longyang Lu are poised to blast through a recently completed block of residential towers – in a few years, they will connect through to the Expo site, and then on to the new South Station and Hongqiao. From the Maglev station we ride to Pudong Airport, where we race along the service roads paralleling the runways. We love the turbine shriek of departing jets, but we are wary of the bulky loaders and cement mixers working on the new air terminal.

Last year, the Flying Hairy Legs welcomed the construction of the new double-decked Fuxing Lu tunnel, primarily because it meant that the surrounding feeder roads would be improved and make our biking even faster. Recently, we've started sneaking through the tunnel itself, so that we don't have to dawdle at the ferry. As we zoom through the underwater tube, we lower our elbows and flatten our backs. The air in the tunnel thrums around us. We keep an eye on our heart-rate monitors as we hammer the pedals. We know there are guards waiting for us on the Pudong side, but if we go fast enough, we can get by them, racing, like the city itself, into the future. ■

Christopher Choa is an architect and urban designer. We regret that he will be moving to London, and this will be his last column. However, the Flying Hairy Legs will keep riding. Contact the writer at Christopher.Choa@edaw.com