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One Man's Meat

Shanghai's ambitious development plans require close attention to public transport

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ON Thursday, the frontpage of the Xinmin Evening News proclaimed: "Shanghai to develop into 'megacity.'"

Some residents — including those fed up with long commutes and traffic jams — will probably find Shanghai's "mega" ambitions less than heartening, and wonder whether local urban planners have fully realized the challenges that will come with making such a city livable. Not least of these challenges will be developing a green, sustainable urban transit system.

Last month, while attending the Sixth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum in Jakarta, Indonesia, at the invitation of the UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, I participated in a session on "Sustainable Transport and Infrastructure in Asia and the Pacific." I was truly surprised by the insights and agreements experts have formulated when it comes to building sustainable urban environments. I was also utterly dismayed at how much of this invaluable knowledge seems to have eluded our urban planners and officials.

Throughout the forum, personal experience of Jakarta's epic congestion provided ample fodder for my own transport-related observations. After landing at the Jakarta Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, it took me a good half an hour to find the shuttle buses, another half hour to wait for the right bus to come, and after getting on another half hour for the bus to actually crawl away from the airport. While this was happening, I could not help but envy the stream of motorcycle riders zooming past us.

Later, I asked a taxi driver if many local families have cars. "Four!" He exclaimed, "two for the mom and dad, and two for the two sons." This was substantiated at the transport session by Sigit Irfansyah, director of the Land Transport and Railway R & D Center in Jakarta.

According to him, in Jabodetabek (Greater Jakarta), the number of motor vehicles increases by about 11 percent annually. Yet, cars travel at an average speed of just 10-20km/

per hour in central Jakarta.

Recent years have seen a steady deterioration in the performance of public transport.

In 2002, motorcycles and buses accounted for 21 and 38 percent of commutes, respectively, in the city center. These figures shifted to 49 and 13 percent by 2010, suggesting a growing dissatisfaction with bus service. Experts contend that the right way to ease local traffic congestion is to expand the city's public transport, create policies aimed at discouraging the use of private cars, and encourage non-motorized traffic (by developing pedestrian and cycling facilities).

In his presentation titled "Integrating Sustainable Transport in National Urban Policies," Madan B. Regmi from the Transport Division, UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific), Bangkok, shared his thoughts on the challenges facing a rapidly urbanizing Asia-Pacific. The region, Regmi explained, includes more than 2 billion urban residents — or 55 percent of world's urban population. What's more, the Asia-Pacific is home to 17 of the world's 28 megacities, including the three largest — Tokyo, Delhi and Shanghai. No less than 90 percent of the world's urban expansion is happening in developing countries, where urban sprawl and slums are all too common. But amid the challenges also lie opportunities. The emergence of secondary and small-sized cities in Asia provides opportunities to plan and implement sustainable urban transport policies.

Transport corridor

In his presentation titled "Developing Sustainable Urban Transport Corridor through Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)," Yoga Adiwinarto from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) shared his vision of what might be in store if we identify sustainability as a priority and provide the right incentives in terms of urban mobility. Since 2004 the ITDP has designed, supported and inspired 54 BRT corridors, at a



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total length of 1,033 km.

Every day, some 7.7 million people ride these BRTs, saving each person seven days a year in commuting time, according to Adiwinarto. The principles for sustained urban mobility include developing neighborhoods that promote walking and cycling, creating dense networks of streets/paths, and building regions with short commutes.

In Baku, Azerbaijan, dissemination of these concepts has translated into tangible results: reduced block sizes, complete sidewalks, and cycle lanes and parking at transit stations.

Efforts have also been made at having families of different incomes in the same neighborhood, limiting driveway access, restricting car parking spaces at new buildings, and pursuing compact developments with dense pedestrian networks.

Adiwinarto's dream of tomorrow's urban world might evoke feelings of nostalgia among Chinese over the age of 40. Decades from now, he hopes, cities will no longer have highways and flyovers, and cyclists and pedestrians will rule the streets. Another panelist also shared some encouraging results from pilot programs that ban cars from cities altogether.

These ideas and initiatives would probably shock residents of Shanghai, who still view private car ownership as a sign of prosperity, as well as officials

who try to create more space for cars in their sincerity to "serve the people."

In some cities, new parking spaces are increasingly being created by destroying green space, or encroaching on sidewalks and road space.

Dr Paul Barter, an adjunct professor at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore, observed that most cities plan parking in the same way they plan toilets. But unlike toilets, parking takes much more space (about 25 square-meters per slot including aisles, turning area and ramps), and excessive supply encourages car use.

US lessons unlearned

In the US, for example, a typical 2,500 square-foot, 90-seat restaurant with 12 employees could require a minimum of 20 parking spaces covering a total area of 6,500 square feet, according to local requirements.

Regulations that require plentiful on-site parking are, according to experts, a fertility drug for cars. They also harm housing affordability and hinder inner-urban building reuse. Realizing the folly of such requirements, some cities are legislating against the provision of parking space. In Seoul, for example, there are parking maximums on new buildings in all major business districts.

Seoul officials are also promoting the use of bicycles.

According to one plan, by 2020, bicycles would account for up to 10 percent of urban traffic, more than the share of taxis. To achieve this, the local government is trying to create a bike-friendly environment with more bike lanes and cycling facilities (parking, sheds and bike racks).

China used to be a kingdom of bicycles, and residents in Shanghai once frequently went out to *guangjie* (take a leisurely stroll). Today, walking (or biking) is a much more intimidating experience. In big Chinese cities it is no longer easy to cycle your way around. In the design of roads, to ensure the smooth flow of motor vehicles, pedestrians are often viewed as nuisances.

It is not uncommon for a pedestrian to wait five minutes or more just to cross a single street. In building people-centered cities, there is need to adopt traffic calming measures, which include creation of speed tables or reduction in road widths, or giving pedestrians and cyclists better legal protection against motorized vehicles.

In a presentation submitted to the session by Professor Jiang Yulin from the China Academy of Transport Science under the Ministry of Transport, she explained that China can no longer afford to repeat the mistake of developed countries. In much of the US, for example, public transport has become effectively an option only for the poor. But even in this context, the situation in big cities like New York is somewhat different.

Jiang believed that without proper policies regarding public transport, bicycles, and private cars, China will miss the opportunity to cultivate sustainable urban mobility.

We cannot afford to wait until we are forced to change due to choking pollution and congestion. We should try to expedite positive change by pursuing policies that foster green and sustainable public transport.

It is still not too late for China. As Jiang explained, car ownership here is still low by Western standards, suggesting that there is still room to make things better before they get worse.