

There Appears to Be a Bicycling Generation Gap in Chicago's Chinatown

by John Greenfield



Bikes locked near the Pui Tak Center social service agency. Photo: John Greenfield

[Last year the Chicago Reader launched a weekly transportation column written by Streetsblog Chicago editor [John Greenfield](#). This partnership allows Streetsblog to extend the reach of our livable streets advocacy. We syndicate a portion of the column after it comes out online; you can read the remainder on the Reader's website or in print. The paper hits the streets on Thursdays.]

Often as I've ed past the colorful storefronts of Chicago's Chinatown, I've noticed many cheap department-store-type mountain bikes—Huffys, Murrays, and Magnas—cable-locked to racks, poles, and fences along Cermak Road and Wentworth Avenue. I wondered if they belonged to recent immigrants to the neighborhood, toiling at blue-collar jobs in pursuit of the American dream.

So I set out to find out more about who's riding bikes in [the midwest's largest Chinese community](#). I learned that while lots of new arrivals, as well as seniors and children of immigrants, are getting around on two wheels, unfortunately there seems to be a cycling generation gap. It seems that many adults who've moved to the U.S. and worked their way up the economic ladder are choosing to drive instead.

Biking appears to be fairly widespread in Chinatown and other nearby neighborhoods with sizable Chinese populations, even more so than in the city as a whole. A transportation survey done as part of the [Chinatown Community Vision Plan](#), a neighborhood blueprint published last year by the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) in cooperation with local stakeholders, examined the habits of residents of "greater Chinatown," including neighborhoods like Bridgeport, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park. It found that 10 percent of respondents use bikes for trips of any kind, including work commutes but also errands and other excursions.

[A similar study commissioned by the Active Transportation Alliance](#) estimated that, citywide, biking accounts for roughly 2 percent of all kinds of trips. (U.S. Census data suggests the percentage of work trips made by bike may be lower in Chinatown than in the city as a whole, with 1 and 2 percent respectively, but it's possible that data omits some of the neighborhood's undocumented immigrants.)



Many Chinatown residents ride bikes to Sun Yat-Sen Park to play Chinese chess. Photo: John Greenfield

"Many residents, and especially workers in Chinatown's core, use bicycles as their main form of transportation," according to the vision plan. The plan calls for adding more bike infrastructure to "help Chinatown evolve into one of Chicago's most bike-friendly neighborhoods."

David Wu, director of the nonprofit [Pui Tak Center](#), says anecdotal evidence also suggests plenty of recent arrivals are bicycling. "When we hold our morning English classes, it's common to see a dozen bikes locked outside," Wu says. "About 60 percent of our students are restaurant workers."

With this information under my belt, I hit the pavement to interview folks in the neighborhood about their biking habits. I had translation help from Debbie Liu, a community development coordinator for the [Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community](#) who's responsible for implementing the vision plan and who grew up in Chinatown as the daughter of immigrants.

On a side street off of Wentworth, we encountered 61-year-old Kent Moy, who'd set up a makeshift bike repair shop with plastic buckets for chairs. He was fixing a flat for a buddy, inflating the tire with a foot pump. Moy, a native of the southern Chinese city [Taishan](#), said he moved to the U.S. 34 years ago, first living in New York City and then Detroit, before coming to Chicago. Moy told us he rides for his health and for environmental reasons, and said he doesn't charge for repairs.

"I do it for God, and for my heart," he said in English.

At Sun-Yet-Sen Park at 24th and Princeton, we saw men playing [Xiangqi](#), a board game also known as Chinese chess. Near the park we flagged down 75-year-old Xing Hua Wu, pedaling from the grocery store to his sister's home. A former employee of Chinatown restaurant Lao Szechaun, Wu is also from Taishan, and said he rides his bike everywhere he goes.

"It's convenient," he said in Cantonese.

[Read the rest of the article on the Reader website.](#)