Beijing Bicycle

(Original Chinese title as “Seventeen-year-old’s bicycle”, or “The bicycle I had when I was seventeen”)
The film was directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, who was born May 22, 1966 in Shanghai, China. He is a director and writer, known for Beijing Bicycle (2001), Shanghai Dreams (2005) and 11 Flowers (2011).

Beijing Bicycle centers on Guei and Jian, and their contrasting relation to the bicycle, which highlights their differences in social standing and status.
Historical background:

Since 1982 the urban population in China has gone from approximately 20% to 55%. This is one of the largest human migrations in history. Most of this migration resulted from the opening up of China’s economy under Deng Xiaoping.
Currently the migrant population in Beijing is 1/3 of the total of approximately 20 million. The migrant population generally does not have full citizenship in their new homes. They (including their children) remain citizens of their town and province of origin.

Migrants retain their ancestral *hukou*, or registration documents. They do not have the right to public services and assistance in the cities they have moved to.

Thus, migrant workers do not have equal social standing and are often looked down upon.
Hutongs, which are walled communities with narrow alleys and communal areas, have served as a community within a larger city for hundreds of years. Most of the demolition of hutongs started in the early 2000’s in preparation for the Olympics which were held in 2008. Presently, hutongs serve more as a tourist attraction or conservation of the past rather than as a functioning home or community.
Beijing has seen many changes since the early 1980’s, most dramatically in the destruction of the old style *hutongs* in favor of wider boulevards and more modern buildings.

Much of the movie moves between Jian’s hutong home and construction sites around the city. This back and forth between traditional living styles and the modern, developing city mirror the tense relationship between the two young men.
Demolition of a Hutong in Datong City

Demolished Hutongs in Shanghai contrasted with new high rise buildings
Back to the movie...

Guei is a humble migrant who has travelled to the city with dreams of gaining stability and a regular income. He finds himself struggling to survive in a foreign and chaotic environment in which traditional architecture and customs collide with an industrious and materialistic outlook.
Jian comes from a hard-working and upwardly motivated city family concerned with providing Jian and his sister with a good education.

Jian attends a co-educational school and joins his friends at video game outlets for after school entertainment.

He is not extremely wealthy but as an urban dweller he enjoys an education, which is enough to clearly set him apart from Guei.
The bicycle means different things for them and both of them rely desperately on the bicycle to ensure their “happiness”.

As a result, they struggle with each other to own and re-own the bicycle, though with quite different strategies.

Significantly, not only do Guei and Jian originate from very different backgrounds but the bicycle represents something very different and very unique to each of them.

The mountain bike grants Jian status amongst his peers and impresses his girlfriend. He relishes the popularity, honour and independence that it provides, and is therefore unwilling to relinquish such an object.
Guei’s relation to the bike is one of practical need: he is reliant upon it for his new employment. But this is not Guei’s only reason for needing the bike. Just as it represents status and pride to Jian, so it does for Guei.

It symbolises his participation and success in the city of Beijing and makes him less of an outsider. In addition, ownership of the bike signifies Guei’s possession of a material object and partly meets his avid desire to attain material possessions in the fast-paced metropolis.
Wang explores the changing dynamics of contemporary Beijing life: Beijing is depicted as an urban metropolis, comprising McDonalds restaurants, modern high-rise buildings and traditional Chinese architecture.

The streets are chaotic with cars and bicycles vying for position on the road and Guei must negotiate his way through the terrain of everyday activity.

Significantly, Wang does not see Guei as stupid or mediocre. Guei’s silence when he is confronted by new or unknown conduct (such as the bathhouse scene) simply acknowledges his difference and wonderment at the city.
Jian provides an apt example of a modern Chinese teenager who is trapped in the shifting space between his submergence in popular culture, his appreciation of consumerism, and his connection to tradition via his family.

Jian rejects his father’s values and traditions when he steals the family’s savings to purchase the mountain bike. His father’s enraged reaction is part anger and part disbelief that his son lacks any filial duty or obedience.
A very special component of *Beijing Bicycle* is Wang’s evocation of Beijing’s lanes and ancient alleys known as *hutongs*. Many were built during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Traditionally, thousands of lanes, alleys and quadrangles became residential areas for the people living in the capital.

In the expanding metropolis that is contemporary Beijing, these streets and alleys occupy approximately one third of the city and still exist as dwellings for many Chinese city residents (despite their ‘disappearing’ status and gradual replacement by high-rise buildings).
*Beijing Bicycle* contains artful chase scenes in these ancient lanes and alleys alluding to the idea that Beijing is both an ancient and modern city.

The visual crossover between *hutongs* and modern high-rise architecture throughout the film is also symbolic of the bicycle, which competes with other, more modern forms of transport.
The inclusion of cars and public transport has assisted in changing the bicycle’s pertinence and glory. It is no longer the only form of transportation available to residents and therefore not the feted possession it once was.

Nevertheless, the bicycle is still a crucial mode of transportation within Beijing, even if it is no longer the object to which most individuals aspire to own.