

The cultural anthropology of getting on a bicycle

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I can tell where you grew up by watching you get on a bicycle. Well, sort of. In my limited experience, I've observed two distinct ways of getting on a bicycle. The first is what I'll call the Chinese method, since it's the dominant technique in China, Taiwan, and Japan, as far as I can tell. To get on a bicycle using the Chinese method, stand to the side of the bicycle (let's say, the left side) with both hands on the handlebars in the normal riding position. Put the left pedal at the bottom of its stroke and place your left foot on it. Now ride the bicycle like a scooter, pushing off with your right foot, until you pick up some speed. While coasting forward, swing your right leg over the back of the bicycle and place your right foot upon the right pedal (which is at the top of its stroke). Sit down and begin pedaling. The second method I will call the U.S. method since it is the dominant technique in the States. To get on a bicycle using this method, straddle the bicycle with both hands on the handlebars in the normal riding position, placing one foot on the ground and the other foot on its corresponding pedal at the top of its stroke. Simultaneously push forward with the ground foot and put all your weight on the pedal foot (driving it forward). This will get you coasting very slowly. Use this time to take the foot that was on the ground and place it on its corresponding pedal (which by now has reached the top of its stroke). Sit down and begin pedaling. Each of these methods has its own drawbacks. The U.S. method requires you to be able to maintain your balance on a bicycle at very low speeds and then get your ground foot into position quickly before you run out of momentum. (This is particularly tricky when you have to strap or clip your foot into place.) On the other hand, the Chinese method requires you to shift your weight while balancing on a single foot. That bit is my downfall. When all my weight gets on that one foot, I start wobbling and can't quite finish the move. Now, using this method to determine where someone learned to ride a bicycle is not foolproof, of course. Some of my childhood friends who grew up in the United States to Taiwanese parents use the Chinese method.

During my brief travels in Europe, I neglected to take note of how the locals got on their bicycles. Maybe there's a European way of getting on a bicycle?

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