

Jinrikisha in Meiji Japan

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The *jinrikisha*, which is Japanese for a man-powered vehicle, is also known as rickshaw, ricksha, and pull cart. It is a two wheeled cart with a padded cushion that is built to seat either one or two passengers. In Meiji Japan it became vastly popular after its invention in 1868. Japan had very few horses which were used mainly for military and agricultural purposes and were very expensive to keep because the land was unsuitable for grazing. This ruled out the possibility for horse drawn carriages as a popular form of transportation. Manual labor was a cheap form of labor in Meiji Japan, especially in the cities because of industrialization, which left the poorest of citizens to pull *jinrikisha*.

The original *jinrikisha* was very simple; its design was centered on the seat platform and there were four erect columns with curtains hanging off the roof and over the sides. The *jinrikisha* was built slim for these two reasons; first the pullers could run easily with them, and second, they could fit the overflowing streets of Meiji Japan. The *jinrikisha* was first popularized by Akiba Daisuke, who designed the current model of the *jinrikisha* that has the box cab, furnished steps, lacquered sides and metal rims. Prior to Daisuke and the *jinrikisha*, there was the *beka-guruma* and *daihachi-guruma*. These were personal transportation propelled by manual labor; both had wooden wheels and were cumbersome to use in taxi services. They were soon made obsolete by metal-wheeled *jinrikisha*. Once Daisuke, with his partner Tobihisa, started to mass produce and export the *jinrikisha* to other parts of Japan and spread out their factories, *jinrikisha* production soared. Others began to manufacture the *jinrikisha*; they include Yosuke Izumi, Tokujiro Suzuki and Kosuke Takayama. The *jinrikisha* practically appeared overnight; there were over 113,921 in use barely five years after they started to manufacture them.

There were speculations of who invented the *jinrikisha*. Some say that an older man, who lived in Shiba Tokyo, named Uchida Kanzaemon, invented it. Others claim Jonathan Goble, an American Baptist missionary who was stationed in Japan, invented it for his invalid wife but when he tried to send the blue prints to a Japanese builder they were lost. The French claim to have invented it first with the *brouette*, which is a two wheeled carriage pulled by men. There have been two other American missionaries who have laid claim to the invention of the rickshaw as well as one American blacksmith. Three Japanese men also claim to have invented the rickshaw based on the designs of the European horse drawn carriage, the dray, which is a low heavy horse cart that has no sides, and the *Kago*, which is much like the Roman litter that was used to carry around the Roman aristocrats. No matter who produced the *jinrikisha* first there is no question as to the impact the men who pulled them had on

Meiji Japan through transporting the foreign diplomats, showing them Japan, and also being able to adjust to the constantly changing economic environment that was Meiji.

The social elites favored the *jinrikisha* and it soon became a status symbol. Many Western travelers chose to hire *jinrikisha* men to run them all around Japan. Through the foreigner interactions these lower class Japanese soon learned bits of English in order to attract more customers. They were seen as being very respectful not only to the foreigners but also to other Japanese; this impressed the foreign travelers. The foreigners, who would travel inside cities or the prefectures, would often call solely on one set of *jinrikisha* men; this was similar to having private *jinrikisha* men. But if the foreigners were traveling too far from the prefecture they often hired new *jinrikisha* men in the towns and cities they stopped in.

The wealthier Japanese families, officials, and businesses often hired private *jinrikisha* men. The private *jinrikisha* were often decorated differently and had constant changes or perks to them. Some of the perks included the hood, to cover the rider when it was raining, sunny, or snowing; decorated sides, rubber wheels, and fancier uniforms for the *jinrikisha* men. The private *jinrikisha* owners started many trends which trickled down to the lower classes and quickly became must-haves for them. The rubber wheels are one such example; they started out on private *jinrikisha* and then spread to the lower classes and soon the demand forced all *jinrikisha* men to have rubber wheels on their carts. These wheels were not only for the customers but for the pullers as well as they made the *jinrikisha* easier to pull.

The *jinrikisha* men ran all sorts of people around the city ranging from diplomats, families, geisha, and foreigners. The *jinrikisha* men were a part of the welcoming committee to foreign diplomats and royalty. The Japanese welcoming committee would hire carriages for the diplomats but some would insist upon traveling in *jinrikisha* for the "Japanese experience," like Czar Nicholas II. Nicholas II's entourage consisted of *jinrikisha* and carriages, but upon seeing the *jinrikisha* he refused to enter the carriage and chose instead to ride in the *jinrikisha*. His insistence to have the Japanese experience proved to save his life because someone tried to assassinate Nicholas II. The quick action of his *jinrikisha* man and surrounding *jinrikisha* men thwarted the assassination attempt and they beat and chased down the assailant allowing Nicholas to escape relatively unharmed.

Many of the younger *jinrikisha* boys would show the foreigners around Japan and it earned them a favorable spot in the foreigners' minds. The foreign diplomats and traders would bring their families over to Japan. Clara, one woman who grew up during Meiji Japan, kept a diary of her life there. She wrote how she found out bits of gossip from *jinrikisha* men, such as when an Empress had a child. The pullers got their information from other pullers and from their clients who liked to gossip. The near constant talking and gossip of the pullers promoted the popularity of the shade that customers could pull down to ignore their *jinrikisha* man.

Even though the majority of the *jinrikisha* men made a positive impact on the foreign mind there were others who did not. The *jinrikisha* was one of the chief attractions for the foreigners and while some of the foreigners found the *jinrikisha* men charming, others found them a terrible waste of man power. One traveler found not only the *jinrikisha* men disgusting but also the streets; these foreigners could complain about anything. Another complaint the foreigners had was that the *jinrikisha* men tried

to charge them more than what they had originally agreed upon or that they tried to overcharge them from the beginning. Fortunately for the *jirikisha* men, this view was not popular. In general, the foreign consensus of the *jirikisha* men was that they were charming and hard working.

At first the *jirikisha* men were scoffed at by the *kago* carriers, even though usage of the *kago* was quickly declining. The *kago* was one of the main methods of transportation prior to the *jirikisha*. The *jirikisha* were not only faster and cheaper but they were also able to travel longer distances than any previous method of transportation, and by 1872, there was "not a single sedan chair" in use. The relatively easy transition from a scoffing *kago* carrier to a *jirikisha* man helped the *kago* carriers maintain a living.

Not all *jirikisha* men started out, or were ever, terribly poor. Initially the Japanese loved the *jirikisha* and some of the younger boys from upper class families pulled them occasionally because the "soiled clothes after one haul were at the height of fashion." This did not last for very long, like most fashions, and the pulling was soon left to the poor.

After the fashion trend died out, the *jirikisha* men were *kago* carriers, samurai who had their rank and stipend removed in the Restoration, and anyone else who was too poor to have a better means of making a living.

The *jirikisha* men had to be at least eighteen and wear a common uniform. The uniform consisted of blue or

white cloth passed between the legs and wound tight around the waist; a blue cotton shirt, and under it a cotton chest-protector hanging from the neck, and held in its place by a strap buttoning on the back; sometimes a blue and white handkerchief is bound in a twist around the head. Sometimes they wear blue cotton trousers... shod with sandals made of rice straw.

This was to ensure that the *jirikisha* pullers looked uniform and were not an eyesore to the public as they tried to make a living.

There came to be four main types of *jirikisha* men: the private, unionized, those owned by a *jirikisha* operator, and independents. Each type of *jirikisha* had a different price they charged that was ever changing over time. The private *jirikisha* pullers were hired with a fixed monthly salary and the employers often gave the men room and board. Some men did decide to have their own home and therefore had to travel back and forth between their employers. They usually made ten to fifteen yen a month depending on how busy the employer was. Even though the *jirikisha* men were employed, and well taken care of, they would venture out into the streets to make some extra money. They were often encouraged to do so by their employer. Sometimes the private *jirikisha* men would marry a household servant of the family where they were employed. Sometimes whole families would work together creating a bond with the wealthier families and their servants that lasted many generations.

Other *jirikisha* men were employed by *jirikisha* companies and were just given a room and salary, or commission. These were the second richest *jirikisha* men. In the busier parts of the cities there was often one company per block. The companies

took up to twenty five percent of the *jinrikisha* men's fees, leaving the *jinrikisha* men to depend upon tips; the *Yado-guruma* was one of these companies. These men pulled a *jinrikisha* owned by an entrepreneur and tended to be found in districts nearer to government buildings and geisha. *Jinrikisha* men would stand by a stall that had ropes hanging down with street names and numbers on them and the customers would pick which rope and which puller they wanted. The *jinrikisha* men would pay their employer about three yen per month and their employer would supply the uniform, lunch and hot tea for that month. The employer would also get about thirty percent of the fares, which equaled out to about thirty to thirty five yen per month. This lifestyle did not work for long periods of time because they had set rates and customers often looked for cheaper rates, forcing the *jinrikisha* pullers to find new employment within three to four months.

Another group was the *yonashi*, the night-time *jinrikisha* men. They were forced to work late at night or early in the morning. There came to be two categories, the experts and the amateurs. The experts would focus on the rich customers and relying on their tips, while the amateurs would walk around looking for customers and when they got tired would go home and make very little money.

The unionized *jinrikisha* men were in a fixed location and had to pay an entrance fee of one *sho* of sake plus 100 *sen*, plus an additional ten *sen* per month after the initial month. This money went into a pot that helped any *jinrikisha* man that could not work because of illness or had another misfortune and could not work. The unions were started because there were often outcast *jinrikisha* men who traveled from town to town looking for and trying to steal the customers of local *jinrikisha* men. The unions also had set prices within their unions. Being in a union came in handy around the 1880s when the government started to regulate the *jinrikisha*.

Special police were employed to ensure the laws that the government passed on the *jinrikisha* men were followed. The special police were there to prevent any fights between the *jinrikisha* men, mostly between the local *jinrikisha* men and the drifters, to ensure that rates were being honored, and to make sure that places were not overcrowded with the *jinrikisha* men. The unions would have to have their rates approved by the government and all *jinrikisha* men had to post their prices in order to prevent the bickering between them and the customers.

The pay the *jinrikisha* men received was often very low and it was often barely a decent wage. They were paid about one *sen* for every *ri*; a *sen* is one hundredth of a Japanese dollar and a *ri* is two and a half miles. Not very much when one is to consider that an average *jinrikisha* man could cover about twenty to thirty miles a day, which averaged out to about seventy *sen* a day. This was the standard rate for federal workers, which meant that the price could become negotiable as the customer learned how to bargain.

The worst off of all the *jinrikisha* men were the independent pullers. The independent pullers were not only the poorest but also the most numerous. The independents were forced to live in the slums because they had no support like the other *jinrikisha* classes. Many, if not all, had to rent their *jinrikisha*; the rent was known as "tooth money." Some also had to rent their uniforms, all of which were charged a daily fee. Not only did they have to keep up with the renters but they also had their families to feed, clothe, and give their children spare change. The whole family had to work in order to keep up with the bills and to survive.

The independent pullers had to work extremely hard to provide for themselves as well as their families. In 1890 it became even harder when the price of rice skyrocketed. Even foreign rice was too expensive to buy. The only food affordable was wheat husks and bran, which was used to make dumplings that the *jinrikisha* men and their families had to survive off of. Unfortunately these dumplings would cause their stomachs to cramp and make working even harder. The wives and daughters of *jinrikisha* men would often become mid-wives and the children would sell candies to people walking on the streets in order to try and get by.

All of the *jinrikisha* men were considered a very substandard social class, but this subclass was the worst, they rarely had a place to call their own and often had to sleep in overcrowded rooms functioning as inns, when they could afford it. When they could not afford it, the *jinrikisha* offered not only a way of life but also a house and storage area. Many of the *jinrikisha* men stored their possessions under the cushioned seat. These possessions often consisted of "a spare pair of straw sandals, a pipe and tobacco pouch, and a paper lantern." Another smaller group of *jinrikisha* were part-time. They were mostly farmers who needed to make extra money and pulled *jinrikisha* in the rural areas for a very short period of time.

There was competition between the different *jinrikisha* men along with the initial niceties that the foreigners noticed. Most of the competition came out in what each *jinrikisha* had to offer; in the winter charcoal heaters became a part of the *jinrikisha*, and newspapers were given to the customers so they had something to do during the ride. In 1877, with the cholera outbreak, the *jinrikisha* men started to disinfect their carts after each customer with carbolic acid, and meters were installed in the *jinrikisha* to record the distance traveled and to help stop arguments among pullers and customers about prices. Needless to say these enhancements often led to higher prices and arguments between the *jinrikisha* men and the customers on rates.

Teams of *jinrikisha* men were used in order to travel faster and farther. The teams would work so that one person was pulling while the other was running along side or behind the *jinrikisha*. When the puller became fatigued then the runner would take his place. In order to increase the speed of the *jinrikisha*, teams of two or three would pull and push at the same time. This impressed the foreigners a great deal.

Once the railways started to open up and snake across Japan, the *jinrikisha* slowly disappeared. However, they were not obsolete. The *jinrikisha* men no longer made a living traveling across Japan but instead they had to fight for positions inside and around the train stations. The special police decided that it was best to give out lottery numbers in order to prevent over crowding in the stations.

The impact of the *jinrikisha* is still prevalent today, not only in Japan but also throughout Asia. The *jinrikisha* men helped to move foreigners across Japan and allow them to see Japan as it really was, while opening up cultural connections. The *jinrikisha* men helped to forge Meiji Japan through showcasing Japan while transporting the foreign diplomats, and also being able to adjust to the constantly changing environment that was The Meiji Period.

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