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jinrikisha

The Japanese word jinrikisha 人力車 literally means “human-powered vehicle.” First appearing in 19th-century Japan, this invention combines two major traditions: human traction and the modern lightweight wheel. The vehicle is pulled or pushed by a person while one or more passengers sit in the back. Its development coincided with the rapid modernization of Japanese cities during the Meiji era. The jinrikisha offered relatively fast mobility in urban areas where motorized infrastructure was still limited. It quickly became a symbol of Asian urban life before spreading to other parts of the world. Its history also raises social questions. Passenger comfort depends directly on the driver’s effort. The vehicle thus reveals economic hierarchies and changes in the nature of work within industrializing societies. Straddling tradition and modernity, the jinrikisha occupies a unique place in the global history of mobility.

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