

INFRASTRUCTURAL URBANISM IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA



KA-MING WU

VOLUNTEERING,
INFRASTRUCTURES
AND CIVIC
IMAGINATIONS

LEIDEN
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Acknowledgements

My fascination with volunteers in China began after I read a news report on how volunteers at the Guangzhou Asian Games opening ceremony went through smile training so they revealed only eight of their teeth as they smiled at the audience. I wondered what it meant to be a volunteer in today's China with China's rising geopolitical power and economic wealth. My curiosity has since taken me to Guangzhou and Beijing. Since 2014, I have talked to over a hundred Chinese citizens who unanimously called themselves volunteers or *zhiyuanzhe* (志願者), but who were actually doing very different things. When I started my research, I thought I would be writing a book about how the Communist Party-state successfully mobilized and indoctrinated its citizens to serve during the mega-events hosted by China.

The reality was much more complicated and it took me years to come to terms with it. I discovered that volunteers also meant corporate workers running with the visually challenged. I have seen students and retirees compete to become volunteers at museums in order to provide free guided tours to the public. I have met young women who called themselves volunteers but were advocating a sexual harassment-free public transit system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was volunteers who ensured that residents lived with dignity when the lockdown restrictions barred everyone from going anywhere. Most importantly, I discovered that Chinese volunteers work around and within a much-transformed cityscape of mobility, convenience and technology, not only in the biggest cities of Beijing and Shanghai, but in numerous medium and smaller cities and rural areas.

Coming home with a bunch of field data and pictures, I could not prove the hypothesis of the ideological state and obedient citizens. Instead, I found that volunteering as a discourse and practice is connected to an emerging disability movement, a national debate about access to urban infrastructure, corporate responsibility programs, local NGO advocacy campaigns and a population eager to connect with one another. Ultimately, this book reveals an unexpected relationship between the practice of volunteering and urban transformations by examining the ways citizens negotiate everyday experiences with improved city infrastructure and emerging city cultures. Many equate infrastructure investment in China with the country's rising GDP and the party's political legitimacy. In western media, it is often linked to China's geopolitical power in Africa or Latin America. Few questions were asked about how Chinese citizens connect with their changing urban environment, particularly regarding their political, social and cultural experiences as they access spaces and services previously unavailable to them.

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Introduction

It all started on the running tracks in the Olympic Forest Park, Beijing, in 2014. Fangfang was frustrated about her weight, which had reached more than 90 kilograms after the birth of her second baby. Her job as a software engineer at Alibaba, the country's top IT company, also meant she was sitting all day. She failed the biometric authenticity test—now a standard checkpoint device installed at every high-speed railway station that verifies a passenger's identity using biological traits such as facial features and fingerprints—multiple times. The weight sensor in elevators also annoyed her. Hoping to rid of the label of 'plus-size girl', Fangfang decided to go jogging and later, marathon training. At the Beijing Olympic Forest Park, a park attracting runners from all over the country since the 2008 Olympic Games, Fangfang met many visually challenged people in athletic outfits running together. It was there she started her weekly training in run volunteering. Fangfang has not only lost weight since; her experience of running with blind runners, widely circulated in the media, has enabled her to become a coordinator in her tech company's social responsibility program. In 2018, Fangfang was nominated to accompany a female blind runner to a marathon race in Japan (Guo, 2022). In 2023, she was nominated to become a member of the Beijing Winter Olympic Torch Relay team (Yishushi, 2023).

Fangfang's story sounds like propaganda promoting corporate social responsibility, disability care, and woman empowerment in today's China. It is also easy to put her story under the frame of a model citizen narrative engineered by the Communist Party-state news media. Yet, a closer look at her interviews reveals that she paid attention to problems in existing urban planning and related disability-unfriendly features in cities. As Fangfang reflected in one of the interviews:

The large-scale Campaign of National Civilized City (創建文明城市) encourages and awards municipal governments in the country to benchmark urban management best practices such as city hygiene and air quality control and public transportation provision. It motivated these governments to install tactile paving for blind pedestrians in small towns. The reality or implementation is full of problems. Some of the tactile pavings (textual ground surface indicators) lead to a wall, or to a pothole on the street, or are covered up by bikes. A friend with visual impairment told me he would rather walk on the driveway because following the tactile paving could be dangerous and might make him fall. (Yishushi, 2023)

I did not see the above media interview with Fangfang when I was conducting field research on volunteers and citizen-making after China had hosted multiple mega

events in 2015. But when following a local NGO, I attended a run volunteering event at the Beijing Olympic Forest Park on a Sunday morning, I met 50 visually impaired people and about 100 volunteers from IBM, also a major tech giant. There the NGO spokesperson for the disabled *Zheng laoshi* (鄭老師) gave a briefing on the essentials of guiding the blind to run, including the method of holding the guiding rope and giving audio reminders on the presence of covered manholes or twigs on the running track. She also spoke extensively about the lack of disability-friendly facilities in the city and the difficulties faced by the blind in engaging in physical exercise. What she said was similar to Fangfang's reflections. That Sunday, the run went smoothly and the run volunteering session passed rather quickly. After the training, I caught up with one woman participant for a quick chat. She told me that her blind partner ran much faster than she did! A hundred of us exited the park through the subway station built right underneath the park. I rode the subway train together with a blind man, Tie, who worked as a professional masseur in the city. He shared with me how this running exercise had entirely changed his experience of the city.

When I first became interested in the figure of volunteer or *zhiyuanzhe* (志願者) at mega events, I had no idea that volunteering could be connected to an emerging disability movement, a national debate about access to urban infrastructure, corporate responsibility programs, local NGO advocacy campaigns, and a population eager to connect with one another. Many of these trends were initially specific to the capital of Beijing in the Olympics year of 2015, but they have become more common in many other Chinese cities in recent years. The sheer number of volunteers in China is astounding. By 2023, the number of citizens registered as volunteers with the official national volunteer organization had exceeded 23 million. In Beijing and Guangzhou, where most of the fieldwork for this study was conducted, there are more than ten million registered volunteers.

Volunteering was first promoted by the Chinese state at many mega events, such as the 2008 Olympics, to signal the country's internationalization and the party-state's mobilization capacity. Chinese citizens joined in massive numbers as translation volunteers, etiquette volunteers, medical volunteers, security volunteers, and city volunteers at various mega events. Existing research associated volunteering with the party apparatus (Luova, 2011), institutional legitimacy (Xu, 2012), and a soft form of party-state propaganda (Chong, 2011) that channels youth enthusiasm into political projects (Palmer & Ning, 2020). Indeed, the Chinese government likes to deploy volunteering to channel civic and altruistic spirit into forms of service delivery. At the same time, it suppresses citizens from articulating social problems and structural inequalities related to a lack of political accountability (Xu, 2014). If the figure of the volunteer represents an image of a patriotic citizenry serving in the many grand events hosted by the party-state, this research shows that the ways volunteerism is practised afterwards turns out to be way more than

that. The above vignette and the chapters in this book show that volunteering is not only a form of civic practice, but also a way for citizens to engage in various new city spaces and infrastructural services and reach out to unfamiliar social groups. This book discusses volunteering with and beyond the intentions of the Communist Party-state government.

This book articulates a less-attended relationship between the practice of volunteering and urban transformations by looking at the ways citizens negotiate their everyday experiences with urban spaces, improved city infrastructure, a tighter surveillance regime and emerging city cultures. Many equate infrastructure investment in China with the country's GDP and political legitimacy. In the western media, it is often linked to China's geopolitical power in Africa or Latin America, with few questions asked about how Chinese citizens connect to their changing urban environment, particularly regarding their political, social and cultural experiences in accessing spaces and services that previously were unavailable to them. Volunteering in the city provides a good entry point into understanding the nuances of urban life and various bottom-up civic experiments. This book examines the embodied experiences of mega-cities development, arguing that it is in the thick textures of everyday life, a potential site of arrangements, imaginations and contestations (de Certeau, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991), that citizens carve out distinct cultural, physical and gender spaces, identities and actions/imaginations that go in directions not intended by the party-state.

Three major questions thread through the book. First, how do citizens conduct volunteering in new urban spaces produced by mega events? Second, how do volunteers negotiate intensive state monitoring and their own sense of place in a highly capitalized urban space? And third, what kinds of new public culture and infrastructural urbanism become relevant?

I show that urban volunteering forms and shapes micropublics of change and alternative encounters in the dominant order of capital and state-led urbanization. Urban volunteering does far more than connect people and facilitate the flow of information during the mega events. At the various infrastructural spaces traced in the following chapters, volunteers simultaneously serve to promote the national campaigns while advocating strategies for the rights of the vulnerable, localizing social change ideas, and promoting an unofficial way of thinking about national history. With infrastructural improvement, corporate social responsibility programs and changing governance, volunteering has become an urban practice in which citizens negotiate with existing hierarchies of urban and rural, gender, age and abilities in China's cities. In sum, the book is an inquiry into the power at play in the everyday experience of mega cities. It reveals multiple ways whereby citizens translate and negotiate a top-down mega-event urbanization into engaging with the city's temporal, social and spatial relations.

My major argument is that the discourse and practices of volunteering, in the context of an expanding network of urban infrastructural projects combined with the country's powerful digital media technology, is redefining the meaning of urban everyday life, citizen rights and the political in China. I have found that volunteer interactions with new urban infrastructures often do not align with the party-state intentions of service. Instead, volunteers' interchange with the affective infrastructural backgrounds shapes civic imaginations, mediates alternative ideas, and auto-constructs the public sphere. Volunteering contributes to an assemblage of mediations and expands on a materialist and participatory form of citizenship that unsettles official logics within an authoritarian state structure. I also show how various infrastructural upgrades now provide a sense of what many Chinese citizens have come to experience not only in terms of mobility, convenience, and technology, but also in terms of a new form of urban entitlements. Brightly lit parks, well-curated museums and improved transportation mean enhanced social rights for millions. This is especially true when residents from smaller cities and the rural areas now share the same set of infrastructural hardware, services, and mobility that were once exclusive to residents of Beijing and Shanghai: subways, high-speed railways, roads, parks, museums, libraries and shopping malls. At the same time, the power of consumption, social control, and surveillance has become more omnipotent and normalized. By infrastructural urbanism, I mean to look into a condition of urban experiences marked by enhanced mobility, increased civic practices, time-space compression, digital media, technological and social transformations, in which state power, consumption, and surveillance are embedded together, opening up new possibilities for politics and change.

Volunteers as Urban Operators

This book contends that urban volunteering provides a major lens through which we can understand citizens' embodied experiences of the mega city and its extensive infrastructures. In proposing infrastructural urbanism, I adapt urban studies scholars John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski's everyday urbanism (1999) to find 'unnoticed situations and experiences in public spaces and urban life', to understand people's bottom-up appropriation of place as well as their experiences of infrastructure as a site of claiming urban rights (Appel, Anand & Gupta, 2018). I also pay attention to arenas and meanings of tactics, practices and experiential—the lived experiences that are often not captured by news media reports. I was inspired by cultural theory scholars, particularly Lefebvre's (1984) concept of the everyday and de Certeau's (1988) theories on the practice of everyday life. Both see the everyday as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance, where people create their own space and resources, care and solidarity. Acknowledging that urban space often serves and could be dominated

by capital-state interests, my analysis brings these ideas to bear on the everyday urban experience of Chinese citizens and their relationship with existing social hierarchies.

If one looks at China's urban spaces today through Lefebvre's (1984) lens, represented by highly spectacular infrastructural projects, hundreds of surveillance cameras and passengers stopped and searched at every subway station, urban everyday life is doomed. It is highly programmed and controlled. Henri Lefebvre has for a long time stressed the alienation of everyday life and the colonization of urban spaces. He depicts capitalist modernity as a 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption' in which capital relations penetrate thoroughly into 'the details of everyday life', including housing, transport, even food and leisure, and where social relations are segregated by hierarchies of class, race and gender. Worse, the Communist Party-state social control and the ways it aligns with capital accumulation mean alienation is ever more heightened in the spheres of labour, production, even consumption and the reproduction of the society (Lefebvre, 1984). In mainstream media coverage of Chinese society, urban life is colonized by discourses and practices of the party-state state, its governmentality, techniques of control, as if nothing else is possible. Under such a state-centric framework of control, urban volunteers could only be passive instruments deployed by the party-state for political management or service functions.

This book nonetheless reveals a complex lived experience, simultaneously physical and virtual, that is not immediately visible in a structural analysis of capitalism and state. It examines Chinese citizens' everyday experience of the city in an increasingly commodified and heavily monitored regime through volunteering. I show that urban everyday life cannot easily be simplified and subsumed into an explanatory framework of a top-down governance or party-state totalitarianism. This is particularly so when numerous infrastructural spaces and new facilities have left citizens in many cities with improved mobility and access to resources. Although urban volunteering does not directly confront intense capital accumulation through dispossession (Harvey, 2008) or the panopticon state-capital control, volunteers regularly expose, reflect about, even challenge the social hierarchies within the citizen-making process. I argue that volunteering reflects and reshapes the urbanization process driven by the power of capital and the party-state in a subtle and indirect way. Volunteers' actions could be those unnoticed 'microbe-like operations' proliferating within the technocratic structures of urban transformation, market consumption and state-capital surveillance.

I call volunteers *urban operators*, whose services and actions open up the thick textures of urban life socially, culturally, and politically. By operating, I refer to Michel de Certeau's (1988) concept of the practice of everyday, in which users—who are commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules—'operate' in their own ways in the space imposed by the dominant political and economic

order (1988, p. xi).¹ de Certeau stressed the concepts of dwelling, language and walking that could provide some emancipatory moments, no matter how limited, from within dominant relations and institutions. To de Certeau, the everyday exists ‘in between the lines’ and in the submerged layers (Highmore, 2001, p. 26), the traces of which have to be actively rescued. This book attempts to do this job of rescuing in order to find out the imagination, innovation and creativity in society that dominant interests aim to suppress. By becoming volunteers, citizens resist being merely users or passive bystanders in the planned and commodified cities. Their job is not only to help facilitate the flow of service, ideas and people in state-engineered mega events, and cater to the demands of government. They are agents actively connecting different social groups and helping them to negotiate the spatial and content operations of various infrastructural facilities and resource access. In fact, volunteers are the connectors who fill many gaps: the gap between new urban/cultural spaces and citizens’ demands; the gap between state propaganda and grassroots quotidian knowledge/practices; and the gap between state intentions and bottom-up appropriations.

Urban volunteers in China are often not interested in defying the intended function of the disciplinary system, nor do they compose a network of anti-discipline. They often conform to the official logics of law and regulations, so it becomes hard to see their creativity. It is therefore convenient to see volunteers as reduced to a tool, or being integrated into part of the state surveillance or top-down organization. But does that mean there is no lived or heterogeneous experience of the city? What are the strange and the bizarre of everyday Chinese modernity? Cultural theorist Ben Highmore (2001, p. 16) once said that ‘the everyday offers itself up as a problem, a contradiction, a paradox: both ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and unknown, obvious and enigmatic. Adopting the critique of the everyday from cultural theories, the book’s concept of infrastructural urbanism is not about anticipating a complete system and structural change, or a superficial form of resistance in the Western liberal context. Instead, *Infrastructural Urbanism* proposes digging out those mixed experiences of urban renewals, short-lived attempts of challenging hegemonic norms, even ephemeral connections that make ‘brutal places liveable’ in Chinese cities, especially under extreme conditions during the pandemic control.

¹ de Certeau (1988, p. xiv) once said that ‘if it is true that the grid of discipline is everywhere becoming more clearer and extensive, it is more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what procedures (also minuscule and quotidian) manipulate the discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what ways of “operating” form the counterpart, on the consumer (or dominee’s) side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of the socio-economic order’.

This book examines this unique concept of infrastructural urbanism in China with volunteering. I show how new social relations emerge from the existing restrictive urban space. Chinese citizens cannot go on any street protest against the authoritarian state or the powerful real estate developments, but they actively volunteer to redefine the civic ideals of city life. Volunteering provides the most legitimate and popular language, such as love, charity and public interest (*gongyi* 公益) for citizens to connect across class, gender, age and bodily disparities. By providing services in or beyond mega events, citizens formulate their demands and redefine the existing boundaries and hierarchies within the city. In other words, volunteers' service has as much to do with fulfilling certain services and learning as it does with engaging with ambiguous 'moments', stranger 'others', and complex experiences (Highmore, 2001) that are part of the modernity of the Chinese city. These strange moments and complex experiences are particularly significant because they are not immediately obvious in either the official story of China's rise or the media portrayal of China as a totalitarian society.

In this way, the book contributes to studies that show how Chinese citizens become agents of urbanization and how their activities involve a great amount of improvisation, strategies and imagination of what an ideal life or livelihood might look like. I show how urban volunteers carve out bottom-up narratives of history and memory and articulate the gendered and the disabled perspectives of urban designs while negotiating with intense state surveillance and government restrictions. Instead of positioning citizens and the government as the only, binary actors in the state–society relationship, this book engages the urban material environment and brings the focus back to examining the transversal relationships between volunteering and its connection to and appropriation of urban infrastructures. It is the volunteers and their transversal practices—often spatial—that reinvent the carefully planned and top-down technocratic urban spaces. Bringing small relational or social change into an infrastructurally improved or limited setting, volunteers operate in the massive middle ground between China's state mobilization and democratic imaginary form of civic organizing.

NGO, Civil Society and the Media in Authoritarian China

In this section, I will frame the ways in which I understand volunteering in relation to the non-governmental organization (NGO), civil society, and the media sphere, all highly controlled by the party-state in contemporary China. The Chinese Communist Party's political system could be called the 'perfect dictatorship' (Ringen, 2016) as the Xi Jinping administration regularly deploys fear to control; however, the majority of the population is found to be generally satisfied with the party's governance.

In 2014, Xi Jinping announced the ‘No to Seven’ directives. Among the seven topics the party discouraged everyone to speak about were ‘promoting civil society’ and ‘promoting universal values’. Yet civil society and non-governmental organizations not only exist in China, they have actually grown under the authoritarian regime. Moreover, municipal governments and officials have chosen to learn from various civil society groups in order to know more about social discontents and innovative methods of governance, a logic called ‘consultative authoritarianism’ (Teets, 2014). Scholars have also found that many local and grassroots NGOs can survive in an authoritarian state as long as they refrain from democratic claims articulating and addressing social needs, leading to a ‘contingent symbiosis of state and civil society’ (Spires, 2011).

At the same time, political control over the freedom of the press and media has been tightening. The targeting of investigative journalists might start with the notorious *Southern Weekly* incident, which concerns the censorship of a liberal-leaning and investigative newspaper in Guangzhou calling for the recognition of citizen rights promised in the constitution in its 2013 New Year headline. The headline was subsequently censored by the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department. Even though more self-media (*zi meiti* 自媒體) reporting has continued to appear on social media, it is also heavily censored (Cook, 2018; Roberts, 2018; Silva, 2019). Over the past ten years, the Chinese state has further tightened control on the media sphere and the notion of journalism has been reframed to carry ‘the family name of the Party’. The journalist is now given the responsibility of ‘dispatching positive energy’ (*fafang zheng nengliang* 發放正能量), meaning to glorify the goods of the society rather than criticize the government or related policies (*People’s Daily*, 2013; Wong, 2016). The government also banned onsite reporting in major social conflicts and disasters.² The number of investigative journalists decreased by 58 per cent from 2011 to 2017, with an increasing number of media reports banned and more journalists punished. Scholars have concluded that journalism in today’s China has been largely ‘harmonized’ or compromised under immense political pressure (Svensson, 2017). State surveillance of online information is also so omnipotent that bad news and injustices often disappear on official media platforms.³ Internet control is so strong that those who speak up about political problems are highly

² Onsite journalist reporting was banned from the 2015 Tianjin Chemical Exposure Incident (Mortimer, 2016; Tremblay, 2016), the derailing of the highspeed railway (Branigan, 2011; Buckley, 2011), the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, the massive incarceration and re-education of Uighurs in Xinjiang and the mass protests in Hong Kong in 2019.

³ Novelist Chen Guanzhong (2010) used the phrase ‘nothing had happened’ (什麼也沒有發生過) to describe the collective silence on ongoing repression. Cultural studies scholar Margaret Hillenbrand (2020) used the term ‘public secrecy’ to understand the lack of reporting and public memorials on the June Fourth Democratic Movement and Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

likely to be punished or have their social media deleted entirely. Mainstream online news media platforms such as Weibo and Weixin (WeChat) are also working very closely with the government on surveillance and monitoring.

While concurring with existing analyses that digital authoritarianism is real, my work resonates best with observations by media cultural studies scholar Jing Wang (2019) that it is important to understand China beyond the binaries of domination versus resistance, and state versus society. To understand China and its complexity, it is imperative to go beyond western liberal thinking that sees no street protests and media censorship in China as equivalent to no social change and therefore, no citizen action. This book engages a form of rights-consciousness, citizen actions and urban engagements beyond the traditional understanding of legal citizenship statuses and conventional street-level struggles. It resonates with recent scholarship that understands Chinese society as an unfolding urbanizing process where increasing mobility and urban infrastructure become the norm. Moreover, individual self-making, identity and place-making often motivate government responses and policy changes (Woodman & Guo, 2017).

I also concur with the observation that civic engagement in China is actually expanding and deepening, and that citizens with higher awareness of public accountability are acting stronger together to criticize policies and solve public problems, despite more severe repression and restrictions under the Xi administration. Disputing the dominant interpretation of civic engagement in China as suffocated by the authoritarian state, political scientist Fengshi Wu (2017) proposes using the concepts of '*gongyi*' (公益) and '*cishan*' (慈善) (translated into 'working for public interest' and 'charity', respectively) to replace a western centric concept of civil society, often read as having the tendency to resist and protest against the governing regime. Wu observes that Chinese society has witnessed an exponential growth of *gongyi* organizations and *cishan* activities in recent years, despite tightening political control. Individual citizens have deployed various Web 2.0 technological tools to join policy advocacy and processes of activism, transforming the paradigm of civic engagement and redefining the meanings of social activism in China (Yang, 2011). Volunteering, in particular, is often articulated to various *gongyi* and *cishan* practices in the cities. From officials within the party-state and scholars in universities to individual volunteers, they speak about volunteering not in the language of civil society but in terms of *gongyi* and *cishan* in order to gain legitimacy and expand the meaning of civic engagements.

Similarly, it is important to go beyond a liberal paradigm, narrowly defined by a control-resistance binary, to understand operations in media expressions in China. The truth is that citizens widely express opinions about structural inequalities and mistrust towards the government on online platforms of social media, news channels, gaming, microblogs and others. Digital technology and social media have

become a ‘core political resource’ for various advocacy movements. The young feminist volunteers discussed in Chapter 5 in particular, have consciously deployed volunteering, digital technology and social media to express new gender identity politics and non-normative bodily images (Li & Li, 2017). Concurring with recent media scholars’ observations that citizens deploy ‘digital masking’, a creative usage of social media intersecting with the formation of activist identities and rights articulation (Tan, 2023), I examine how volunteers deploy tools of social media, crowdfunding platforms and, most importantly, physical services to contribute to the working of *gongyi* in the public interest. Although mundane, repetitive and sometimes pro-government, the volunteers’ case studies in this book show that citizens’ actions can have surprising impacts. They have the capacity to expose the absurdity of top-down urban design and communicate new social concerns and innovative ideas to the public.

It is true that the authoritarian party-state continues to seek ways to secure state dominance and control over all aspects of social life. Yet, that does not mean democratic decision-making, self-governance, public advocacy and media expressions are impossible in China. In order to fight for continual existence and survival, citizens deploy depoliticizing tactics or what Tan Jia (2023) calls ‘digital masquerades’, the myriad ways of acting and doing with technology, to bypass political redlines and censorship. By posting pictures on social media, walking, running, telling stories in a museum, or helping the visually challenged, urban volunteers need not join any NGOs or any formal organizations. They can, however, provide resource allocation, public monitoring, and bottom-up forms of dwelling to change original top-down urban design or provide solutions to a public problem. While not necessarily counter-hegemonic, volunteer practices ironically articulate urban rights and civic imaginations, and connect socially marginalized groups in unexpected ways. At the same time, the book also highlights the emerging high-tech infrastructural networks in China, and their connections to discourse and practices of volunteering. It attempts to portray a complex ‘assemblage of mediation’, articulating citizen volunteer bodies, urban landmarks of infrastructure and various social and digital media practices, where the forces of surveillance and control, consumption, social media and civic experiments often come together.

Volunteering in ‘Mega-event’ China

The ten years from 2008 to 2018 were a golden decade, during which China hosted numerous mega sports events and showed off its economic and political muscle. Apart from the well-known Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, there were the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010, the World Expo in Shanghai in 2011,

the 9th Asian Girls Volleyball Championships in Chengdu in 2012 and the World Gymnastics Championships in Nanning in 2014. In 2015 alone, the country hosted the World Figure Skating Championships in Shanghai, the 41st World Cross-Country Championships in Guiyang, the World Table Tennis Championships in Suzhou, and the Asian Women's Volleyball Championships in Tianjin. The City of Wuxi hosted the Asian Table Tennis Championships in 2017 and then the World Fencing Championships in 2018. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing hosted the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. The list goes on. It is reported that China hosted the highest number of mega sports events during the 2010s of any country in the world (sportcal.com, 2022). Most importantly, many cities mentioned might not be well known in the western media. Regarded as belonging to the second or even third tier in the Chinese national setting, these cities hosted mega events to kick off large-scale infrastructure upgrades and urban renewal programs.

Volunteering is a major urban phenomenon in all these cities today, and is directly tied to the decade of mega-event hosting and organization. The Chinese government named the year 2008 'Year One' of volunteering in China, after its mass volunteering mobilization success during both the Beijing Olympics and the Sichuan Earthquake. Not only did the Communist Party Youth League, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Office of Spiritual Civilization and other state agencies roll out volunteer initiatives at the local, regional and national levels, various non-state institutions and corporates have made volunteering part of their organization strategies.

Even though the word 'volunteering' translates to *zhiyuan* (志願) in Chinese, with the characters meaning aspiration, of one's own accord, and carrying an independent will, the discourse and practice of volunteering are quite complex on the ground. In various media representations, the government likes to link volunteering to 'strengthening of party's ideological hegemony and cultivating the party spirit' (Hu, 2016). The party-state youth organization, the Communist Youth League, likes to evoke volunteering in its rhetoric in order to resurrect its revolutionary heroic figure Lei Feng, a fictional protagonist devoted to self-sacrifice in the Maoist past (Xu, 2012). In the latest legislation on volunteering at the Chinese State Council in 2017, the government said the goal of volunteering was to 'implement the core values of socialism', which on top of 'democracy' (*minzhu* 民主), 'liberty' (*ziyou* 自由), 'equality' (*pingdeng* 平等) and 'the rule of law' (*fazhi* 法治), also includes 'harmony' (*hexie* 和諧) and 'patriotism' (*aiguo* 愛國). Blending the rhetoric of volunteering with socialist values, the Chinese state is eager to engineer the discourse of volunteering for its governance purposes. In mega events and disaster relief efforts, for instance, the government deploys volunteering to channel civic spirit and altruism into event service and disaster relief. In the face of an emerging civil society, volunteering is also a tool through which the government asserts more

regulation and experiments with its technology of power (Fleisher, 2011), even turning volunteering into a ‘pre-emptive technique to create a state-mobilized civil society’ (Palmer & Ning, 2020). For example, thousands of altruistic volunteers who rushed to help at the site of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake found it painful that they were unable to speak about the relationship between corruption and the high rate of casualties among children when the government started arresting journalists and teachers who spoke up for the victims (Xu, 2014). This is also explicit in the case of local government deploying volunteers to conduct neighbourhood surveillance. In poor communities with higher unemployment, residents with economic needs are given ‘volunteer’ positions to patrol and clean up the community space in return for some subsidies. Luigi Tomba (2014) argues that the aim of mobilizing community volunteering among the lower class is to maintain the party-state’s continual management of social and political stability in less desirable neighbourhoods. At the same time, higher-income residential space is understood to mean more privacy and freedom, and hence less need for community volunteers. Both recent and older research has therefore demonstrated that volunteering constitutes a form of ‘neo-socialist governmentality’ that simultaneously enhances the space of civic freedom and promotes the continuous state desire to penetrate and control citizens’ leisure time (Palmer & Ning, 2020). In sum, the government has politicized volunteering as a mobilization infrastructure at two levels: at a symbolic level, the affiliation with the Party’s revolutionary heritage became more explicit in volunteering propaganda, and at an organizational level, the purpose of volunteer mobilization became oriented to counter the rise of independent NGOs and civil society organizations (Palmer & Ning, 2020, p. 314).

But the discourse and actual practice of volunteering are not entirely dominated by the party-state. It is also a field of fierce negotiations or encounters (Fleischer, 2011) among various stakeholders, such as local municipal governments, non-state sectors such as companies and individual citizens. These stakeholders like to invoke the discourse and practice of volunteering to conduct advocacy campaigns and social responsibility programs, emphasizing social participation and civic engagements. Research on this type of bottom-up volunteering, such as an NGO-organized beach clean-up event involving migrant children, often found more ‘individual motivation and aspirations’ (Rolandsen, 2010). Narratives such as charity (*cishan*) and public interest (*gongyi*) are often very prominent in such bottom-up initiatives (He & Li, 2020). Participants can build emotional connections with others and contribute to something beyond their own benefits (Spire, 2018). In these cases, volunteers are quite different from those at the top-down events featuring role-model patriotic citizens or neighbourhood vigilantes.

This book avoids using a binary perspective to categorize volunteers and related activities into pro-government and anti-government categories. The truth

is that citizens who volunteer at government-organized large-scale mega events are not necessarily patriotic subjects. On the other hand, those who volunteer in NGOs can be morally inclined individuals who just want to feel good about their class and social positions (Zhan, 2020). Most importantly, the book contributes to an understanding that Chinese citizens see volunteering as a multifaceted experience of simultaneously responding to a party-state mobilization, their own yearnings for a better society and, as this book emphasizes, fulfilling one's own desire to engage new urban spaces and practices. For example, the case study discussed in Chapter 2 concerns a group of elderly community volunteers who provide wayfinding services to visitors in the central business district of Beijing. Many see these elderly people as the 'eyes and ears' of the government as they also help with patrolling and surveillance in the neighbourhood. The government was happy to speak about these elderly as vigilant citizen subjects. After the Olympic Games, however, many of them asked to continue the wayfinding service at the same crossroads in order to better serve the millions of pedestrians, including migrants and visitors, in the capital. Like opening Pandora's box, mega events have not only mobilized national pride and citizens' patriotism, but have also unleashed civic imagination from a communal perspective. As I will show, residents-turned-volunteers could approach volunteering as a form of bottom-up dwelling, mutual support, and active ageing in an increasingly commercialized city space.

This book shows that many citizens become volunteers in order to participate in various infrastructures, old and new, in the cities where they reside. They enter new stadiums, become tour guides at museums, try out new park facilities and engage in public spaces that were either non-existent or much less accessible a decade earlier. Not only is urban volunteering seen as a ticket to join major events; it is also a major way to enact people's urban rights and assert a sense of urban belonging as a Chinese national. This is especially true for thousands of young people from lower-tiered cities, smaller towns and the countryside, who came to mega cities as college students and migrant workers. For the first time in their lives, many came to the major cities of Beijing and Guangzhou, which are equipped with first-class facilities. Using brand-new facilities or riding on new train systems have been some of the most salient experiences of their urban everyday lives, and the meanings of this have not been adequately teased out. Tie, the blind masseur from rural Sichuan, for instance, had been working in the capital for many years but it was his first time enjoying the sports and park facilities with a run volunteer at the Beijing Olympic Park after 2014. I have also found that many Chinese citizens see the subway, high-speed railway and shared bikes, and their access to cultural infrastructure such as museums, increasingly as a form of urban rights—even part of their urban identity. Such understanding and articulation of urban rights is quite different from the existing literature on right to the city, which focuses largely on the urban

poor fighting for residential rights in the process of urban renewal. Volunteering is one major means to understand how Chinese citizens experience the renewed city spaces and new infrastructures produced by mega events. *Infrastructural Urbanism* shows as much Chinese citizens are accessing new urban resources, projecting their sense of belonging, as they are making claims to their citizen rights to make changes.

Urban Transformation and New Infrastructure

In addition to fuelling a volunteering boom, hosting mega events has provided opportunities for municipal governments to budget for major construction projects and created jobs. Once mega events are over, the red carpets rolled up, the hundreds of subway lines, libraries, museums and parks constructed during and for the events stay. As a result, urban China has witnessed massive urban renewals and a complete makeover of the built environment in the last ten years. On the one hand, it is true that the Chinese governments orchestrated these mega events to boost economic growth and their ruling legitimacy. On the other hand, the transformation brought about by mega-event hosting and infrastructural constructions is providing millions with the right to new urban facilities—a form of access and mobility that was unimaginable in the mid-2000s.

The book joins the infrastructural or material turn in urban anthropology (Pilo & Jaffe, 2020) with the China studies field (Bach, 2016; Oakes, 2019) by looking at the more efficient and more evenly distributed infrastructure. When studying volunteering surrounding the subway transit, museums, stadiums and parks, the author sees infrastructure not only as a stable mechanical base or a mere technical environment, but as somewhere where complex social processes, urban life forms and various bottom-up appropriations are possible. By infrastructure, I adopt anthropologist Brian Larkin's (2008, pp. 5–6) definitions: 'material forms that allow the exchange over space'; 'creating the channels that connect places in wider regional, national and transnational networks'; and 'the institutionalized networks that facilitate the flow of goods in a wider cultural as well as physical sense'.

My analysis resonates with scholars who articulate urban infrastructure as 'a site both to make and contest political claims' (Appel, Anand & Gupta, 2018) and the ways in which that infrastructure gets taken up by people in their everyday life often spin off in different directions from those the state intended (Larkin, 2008, pp. 3–4). The introduction of cinema and radio broadcasts in the Kano state of Nigeria, for instance, not only brought new images and music, but created new urban spaces of mixed-sex activities, changed the technological set-up of domestic households and produced a new class of leisure and consumption (Larkin, 2008). Water pipes were not a mere service installation, but an intermittent and incremental network of

residents, plumbers, politicians and engineers, requiring constant negotiation with and redefining of citizenship identities in Mumbai, India (Anand, 2017). Similarly, the lack of toilet infrastructure and the colonial set-up of flushing meters in South Africa are not just a matter of service provision. They have been analysed as connected to the materiality of post-colonial citizenship, biopolitics and laws (Von Schnitzler, 2008). In Latin America, residents projected their aspiration and fear of exclusion on to new road and highway project constructions (Harvey & Knox, 2015). Infrastructure provision or the lack of it therefore provides a site of ‘dense social, material, and political formations critical both to experiences of everyday life and to expectations of the future’ (Appel, Anand & Gupta, 2018, p. 3).

In China, the question of infrastructure is not so ‘boring’ (Star, 1999), and its wide availability defies the problem of shortage or uneven distribution common in the Global South. In fact, research has shown that various Chinese city governments consciously practise mega-events hosting in order to achieve capital mobilization and to stimulate infrastructure-driven urbanization (Wu, Li & Lin, 2016). The Guangzhou municipal government, for instance, managed to deploy land sales and real estate revenues to expand debt, and obtain bank loans to foster urban restructuring. Through a series of financing platforms, it funded a wide range of infrastructural projects, including the construction of the public transport system, the improvement of urban environment, renovation of building facades, refinement of the sewage disposal system and dredging of waterways in the old city districts. About 86.2 per cent of the total hosting budget was spent on the development of supporting infrastructure that was *not essential* to holding the Guangzhou Asian Games. The amount was almost 56.6 per cent of Guangzhou’s total urban fixed asset investment from 2005 to 2010 (Yin, 2011). Statistics also show that about 43 per cent of China’s total investment went toward infrastructure in 2013. This amounted to 14 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), in comparison with about two per cent spent by the United States (Zhang & Barnett, 2014). As urban studies scholar Tim Oakes (2019) points out, ‘no other state spends more of its GDP on infrastructure construction, no other state pours more concrete, no other state wants to blanket all of Eurasia (and beyond!) with a shiny new web of railways, pipelines, highways, ports, power plants, and cement factories’.

The improvement in urban infrastructure is felt very much throughout the general citizenry. Many urban Chinese now regard the country’s infrastructure as ‘advanced’ (*xianjin* 先進) and quote what they refer to as the ‘Four New Grand Inventions’ (*sida faming* 四大發明), referring to the ‘high-speed railway’, ‘electronic payment’, ‘online shopping’ and ‘shared bikes’. Indeed, electronic shopping platforms such as Taobao, Jingdong, Meituan and Shunfeng, like Amazon in the West, deliver a range of goods and services within cities at great speed. Although not exactly invented in China, the extent to which these four types of infrastructure

give access to better standards of living, and the ways they network with each other—digital and beyond—are indeed powerful, considering the fact that they were non-existent in the country just 15 years ago. Customers' review functions on online shopping platforms also break down decades of both state-owned enterprise monopoly and rampant private company problems of fraud, especially in smaller towns and remote regions where access to information was limited in the past.⁴

Subway lines and high-speed rail are among the urban infrastructures with the most lasting impact following mega-event constructions. Most people outside China are unaware that while subway rides were largely non-existent in China before 2010, they became widely available in many cities after 2015. The 2008 Beijing Olympics increased the number of subway lines in the capital from two to 23 by 2022. The 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games increased the southern city's three subway lines to 16. By 2021, there were a total of 236 subway lines in major and medium cities in China and more are under construction. Similarly, high-speed rail is reaching out in all directions and extending to hidden pockets of the country; it has covered a total distance of 37,900 kilometres. The railway is not just a mode of public transit; it is also a new public space where one passes and sees billboards of environmental NGOs calling for a ban on the ivory trade, corporates advertising social responsibility and, of course, government propaganda posters. The elements of the quotidian—the banal landscape and repetitive routines of life—are a complex realm of social and visual practice, desires and demands of the urban everyday (Crawford, 1999), which this book examines.

It is now common for citizens to commute between cities on a daily basis with very efficient and affordable subways and high-speed railways. Today, if you live in Beijing and need to carry out a task in Shanghai (approximately the equivalent of a 19-hour Amtrak ride between New York City and Chicago), you can jump on the high-speed rail and get there in four hours effortlessly with every step of the way electronic. Pushing a few buttons on electronic platforms, riders get e-tickets and scan their phones before jumping to new destinations. It is also very common to see shared bikes in most cities in China. Millions of citizens scan a code on a shared bike, pay a few RMB and ride a short distance from subway to home. Hence it is not just the train and the bike itself, but how they are connected to a range of

⁴ Platformization also applies to governance. It is now a standard practice for provincial, city, even community governments to run their online Weibo or WeChat social media accounts to accept public inquiries (People.com.cn, 2020; Xinhuanet.com, 2019). Citizens can report hygiene issues, crimes, leaks and other problems online, and get individual government department responses. Not every problem can be solved—in fact, most structural problems cannot be talked about. But citizens actively use these platforms to push boundaries, which has opened up some policy transparency and government operations (Hu, 2016; *Nanfang Daily*, 2012).

digital platforms of electronic banking and payment and phone accounts that is significant in this new phase of infrastructural transformation.

Infrastructural changes also happen in museums, parks and stadiums. Urban volunteers give us a solid sense of how ordinary citizens engage with and embed themselves in these spaces as they give wayfinding services at subway entrances, offer guided tours at museums, and run with the blind in new parks. Many museums in the country have started to provide free access to the public since mid-2010. Moreover, they train volunteers to conduct guided tours for a better experience and education about content. But museum volunteering is not just about guiding; it is about opening up an interpretation of history that has been a party-state monopoly for many decades. The same goes with sport facilities. The Olympics, and particularly the Paralympics, have sparked media discussion about the right of disabled people to access physical fitness facilities in the city (Chien, 2022). In one of the chapters, volunteers as urban operators helped the visually challenged to navigate the use of park facilities that had not been previously accessible.

The Chinese government often talks about how content citizens are with these urban transformations. While existing research tends to see the techno-politics of China's infrastructural projects in terms of 'spectacle' (Wu, Li & Lin, 2016; Oakes, 2019), this book treats infrastructure as the catalyst background engaged by volunteers to stir up new social ordering and civic imagination. In the chapters that follow, the urban infrastructural background is analysed as having substantial effects on the ways communities connect and how top-down politics is reconsidered. Volunteers' engagement also shows that no matter how state planners may have intended the use of infrastructures, their designs are always repurposed by heterogeneous practices that subvert the original intentions (Mrazek, 2002).

Staying with the City and Looking Beyond the Discursive

My ethnographic research and use of media data provide a unique angle when it comes to understanding infrastructural urbanism in Chinese society. I first conducted in-depth interviews with more than a hundred volunteers in China in Guangzhou and Beijing from 2014 to 2018. With introductions from Chinese students who studied in Hong Kong but who previously served as etiquette volunteers in the Guangzhou Asian Games and Beijing Olympic Games, I started to interview a dozen volunteers using the snowball method. After the etiquette volunteers, I then moved on to talk to 'security or community volunteers', government officials and social workers at the *jiedao* (街道) level of government, who together operated a wayfinding service next to a subway station in Beijing. Through their introduction, I reached out to the NGO Hongdandan, which organized citizens to volunteer

for the visually challenged (*zhumang zhiyuanzhe* 助盲志願者). The NGO not only worked with local governments but also big corporates, including Starbucks, IBM, Microsoft, and giant pharmaceutical brands. Because of the NGOs' connections, I started to interview middle-class citizens and students who volunteered to take the visually impaired to museums and running sessions.

The period of my fieldwork gave me a close-up view of the rapid pace of urban change and development. In 2015, I started interviewing the 'feminist volunteers' who staged photo-posing with the slogan 'no to sexual harassment' at various urban landmarks in Guangzhou. When I stopped by those landmarks with similar slogans in 2017, I observed an urban landscape with the presence of numerous shared bikes and shared office spaces, where technology and innovative start-ups met. Later, when I held the same 'no to sexual harassment poster' in the Beijing subway, the capital had expanded to have 22 subway lines, with the most recent line, S1, operating on Maglev technology. The scale of the infrastructural upgrades that have surged across the country is stunning. Similarly, in the few years of my research, volunteering has changed and is no longer limited to government mega events. It spills over to various urban spaces and is connected to a range of heterogeneous practices and emerging public cultures. Corporate programs, NGO campaigns and social activists all like to engage volunteers in their operations.

The sampling of volunteering forms in the book corresponds to my chapter ordering: from a state-centric, top-down emphasis to a more bottom-up one. That is why I went from the state-engineered etiquette volunteers serving at the mega-events to the local government-organized community volunteers. Then I moved on to museum-organized volunteers who offer free guided tours, and subsequently to NGO-organized volunteers for the blind. Chapter 5 ends with the feminist activists who were widely addressed as volunteers and whose actions concern bringing out new ideas of gender equality in the urban space. The conclusion wraps up everything by telling the details of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which millions of citizens became volunteers or urban operators to make living possible under severe state restrictions and lockdown policy.

My approach to combining ethnography and media analysis aims to understand the gap between narratives of volunteers in media representations, especially by the government, and the complexities of the practice on the ground. For instance, when I first interviewed the elderly volunteers, they were already widely portrayed on news media as government agents, even 'spies'. The elderly volunteers with whom I talked, however, did not agree with the dominant understanding influenced by the media that they only worked for the police and would get monetary rewards for their service. I received a similar response when I interviewed the ceremonial volunteers and museum volunteers, who were so widely covered in the media as 'patriotic' citizens, but who were really just seeking fun and learning experiences.

Teasing out the multiple layers of representations in each chapter allows me to analyse the tension and gaps between official discourse and actual practices.

Last, attending to field photographs, related visual and video data allow me to analyse various volunteer practices in the context of a transformed urban landscape and changing city cultures. Urban infrastructural improvements abound: new stadiums, new subway lines and stations, free museum access and exhibits, new park facilities and mega shopping malls. New urban habits have emerged: coffee tasting, museum touring, cinema going, attending mega events, and marathon running. Following volunteer practices in both state-engineered and bottom-up initiatives, I show how citizens temporarily ‘make strange’ the highly controlled and infrastructurally improved urban space and expose its potential ambivalence and contradictions. Most importantly I show how volunteering articulates a new form of understanding of urban rights, city experiences, and access.

Overview of the Book

Every chapter of this book documents my ethnographic encounters with compassionate volunteers and their ability to negotiate the delivery of urban rights and services with ongoing repression and exponential urban transformation. Their service often shows bottom-up appropriation of rationally controlled spaces and built environments and reveals alternative moments that raise unnoticed forms of knowledge and care.

Chapter 1: Ceremonial Volunteers, Mega Events and the Making of Role Model Citizens features the young and attractive etiquette volunteers who served in the Beijing Olympics and the Guangzhou Asian Games. It examines the government media campaign that featured the tough training process of these young ladies as simultaneously modern and militarized. I argue that the image of these etiquette volunteers is emblematic of the contradictory images and vision the Chinese nation perceives itself as representing, and its projection on its role-model volunteering citizens. My interviews nevertheless showed a different understanding of volunteering by these young women. Their desire to become part of the mega events and to be the first few to enter the new stadium venues spoke of a new sense of urban belonging and embodied mobility that is often evaded by either the official discourse of nationalism or its critique.

Chapter 2: Elderly Vigilantes? Wayfinding Service or Surveillance in the Capital focuses on elderly volunteers who offer neighbourhood patrols and wayfinding services in central Beijing. In the context of a highly monitored city, the role of these volunteers seems obvious: to reinforce the party-state security control and make surveillance in the panopticon society even more seamless, akin to the new

military urbanism evoked by Stephen Graham (2010) in *Cities Under Siege*. Yet this chapter suggests a different way of seeing them. First, I ask how various media representations of these volunteers speak of a new discourse of security in China, one that is gendered, racialized and moralized. In the second part of the chapter, I share my ethnographic observations and interviews with the elderly volunteers over the last few years. I argue against a simplistic stereotype that these volunteers recall a Maoist type of vigilantism for more surveillance, despite the Chinese state attempting to shape such an effort in its propaganda and its practice. Instead, I show that the elderly residents and the municipal-level governments have been caught up in a rapidly developing urban space and a new governing direction that has exceeded the previous relationship between the omnipotent state and docile subjects. Last, I show how elderly residents hold on to the wayfinding volunteering to bond with those who have been relocated through urban renewals and to serve a pedestrian community outside of their comfort zone.

Chapter 3: Museum Storytellers, National Treasures, and Critical Guided Tours joins the discussion of museums as arenas of ideological power and nation-state control of historical narratives. It examines museum volunteering by comparing it with the historical figure of the storyteller and his disappearance in Walter Benjamin's (1968) critique of capitalist modern life consumed by news information. If storytellers are capable of restoring the profane dimensions of history as internet, television and smartphone technology dominate our vision and senses, one might consider how the museum volunteers take it at a much larger scale in contemporary China. By following museum volunteers in media representations and in actual museum tours, I have found that volunteers' service does not necessarily follow the official narrative of making the representation of artefacts an automatic medium for the party-state to speak as an 'unselfconscious lineal descendant' of a glorious Chinese civilization. Instead, I show how volunteering provides a different experience of the museum. It reveals that museum volunteering enacts a new form of urban storytelling practice, which ironically motivates citizens to come up with narratives that both decentralize the party-state narrative and destabilize the linear nationalist imagination.

Chapter 4: Stranger Companions in the Dark: The Biopolitics of Sharing the City with the Visually Challenged examines the role of volunteers for the blind in making a city and its urban resources shareable. Volunteering for the blind changes the ways in which the visually impaired experience the cityscape and its culture. I invoke the encounters between strangers in software capitalist America depicted in Zygmunt Bauman's (1999) *Liquid Modernity* to consider public spaces, segregation and disability movement in the non-democratic capital city of Beijing. Through following urban volunteers and their activities with blind citizens, I have found not just micro volunteer practices that present 'a common good' within the strict

regulation of Chinese civil society but a range of new park and digital facilities that make these strangers' meetings possible. Last, I show how volunteering practices with disabled citizens subtly transformed the dominant concerns about biopolitics in understanding Chinese modernity.

Chapter 5: The Pink Flâneur: Feminist Volunteering in Urban Transits and Landmarks features feminist volunteers and the various ways in which they mark urban infrastructures with creative digital images and new imaginations about a gender-friendly city. The chapter starts with Zhang Leilei, who transformed herself into a walking billboard in Guangzhou by wearing a poster reading 'no to sexual harassment' as part of her daily routine. To attract attention, she cycled, walked and rode the subway with her poster, in her pink hair, pink outfit, and pink plastic shower slippers. Zhang Leilei's action was soon emulated by hundreds of other volunteers, who printed out the same poster, held it up in different cities and posted their pictures on the microblogging website Weibo with the hashtags #IAmABillboard and #WalkingAgainstSexualHarassment. The chapter examines both the feminist message and the urban landscapes and environments against which the message was posted, especially the new transit hubs and the ways they are connected to digital media and technology. By describing the performative feminist as the 'pink *flâneur*', a figure of the city explorer in Walter Benjamin's writing, the chapter examines feminist volunteering, civic ideas, and identities within a larger urban materialist network. The chapter argues that feminist volunteering shaped a gendered counter-public in the urban renewal space that grew with urban consumption and state surveillance.

The Conclusion documents some media reports on how volunteers made interventions in the urban everyday during the severe lockdowns as China adopted a zero-COVID policy. It was a nightmarish time when thousands of citizens could hardly leave their homes to acquire food, medicine, and other necessities. The chapter highlights how volunteers performed the tedious labour of coordination and communication at the local residential level. The book concludes their transversal practices as reimagining the tightly monitored neighbourhoods and making people's survival possible. By bringing small, relational or social change to such a lockdown setting, volunteers operated in the massive middle ground between China's state control and democratic imaginary form of grassroots organizing.

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Ceremonial Volunteers, Mega Events and the Making of Role Model Citizens

Abstract

This chapter features the young and good-looking ceremonial volunteers who served in the Beijing Olympics and the Guangzhou Asian Games. Through in-depth interviews, I examine both the government media campaigns that highlighted the tough military training process of these young ladies as well as the volunteers' experiences of etiquette. I show that the state-engineered volunteering at mega events aimed to project and represent a type of role-model citizen who is simultaneously modern, respectable, collectivist and militarized. My interviews showed a different understanding of volunteering by these young women. Their desire to become part of the mega events and to be the first few to enter the new stadium venues spoke of a new sense of urban belonging in the upgraded city space and embodied mobility that is often ignored by both the official discourse of nationalism and its critics. Last, this chapter looks at the scandal of volunteers' outfits as those 'moments of unmanageability' that point to the unintended consequence of such a large-scale mobilization effort.

Keywords: ceremonial volunteering, mega events, military training, socialist collectivism

The years from 2008 to 2018 were a golden decade during which China hosted numerous mega sports events and showed off its economic and political powers. Apart from the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, China hosted the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010, the World Expo in Shanghai in 2011, the 9th Asian Girls Volleyball Championships in Chengdu in 2012 and the World Gymnastics Championships in Nanning in 2014. In 2015 alone, China hosted the World Figure Skating Championships in Shanghai, the 41st World Cross Country Championships in Guiyang, the World Table Tennis Championships in Suzhou and the Asian Women's Volleyball Championships in Tianjin. The City of Wuxi hosted the Asian Table Tennis Championships in 2017 and then the World Fencing Championships in 2018. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing hosted the Winter Olympic Games.

Similar to mega events in many other countries, gendered narratives and images of national progress, unity and economic achievements have been prominent in China's mega events. Sports events in particular are major sites for scholars to examine the self-fashioning of national image and identity, national unity and modernity (Joo, 2012; Tomlinson & Young, 2006). From flag-raising soldiers to torch

relay runners, male bodies are integral parts of major rituals in these sports events and are seen as symbols of national power. In some of the opening ceremonies, men perform synchronized routines to demonstrate the power of male warriors while infusing militarism into nationalist narratives and events (Kim & Choi, 1997, p. 20). As Simon Creak (2015, p. 243) puts it, ‘Major sporting festivals have saturated state spectacle with muscular, athletic, and at times, aggressive forms of the male body.’ In contrast, female bodies are often associated with cultural ritual representations and viewed as objects of beauty. At the Laos National Games in 2000, for instance, women were dressed in traditional attire according to ethnicity as defined by the official system of national ethnic classification, while at the Incheon Asian Games in 2014, 300 young women talented at playing musical instruments, singing and dancing were sent by North Korea to serve as cheering squads. Featured in news headlines as ‘the army of beauty’, the cheering squad reinforced the role of women as custodians of traditional culture at these mega events (Reuters and Agence France-Presse, 2014).

The same could be said of the presence of women at the many mega events in China, where ceremonial volunteers—or Miss Etiquette (*liyi xiaojie* 禮儀小姐), as they were called in the popular media—appeared in the form of sweet-faced, slender-bodied, young, well-groomed, uniformed women. From 2008’s Beijing Olympics to 2022’s Beijing Winter Olympics, the female teams captured national and international attention because of their elegant manners in greeting guests, serving as ushers and holding ceremonial ribbons, bouquets, and trays. These hostesses are supposed to embody and demonstrate *liyi* (禮儀, translated literally as ‘etiquette and ceremony’), which are Confucian values of ritual and propriety that make China ‘a nation of civilization’. It is therefore a popular interpretation that the ceremonial volunteer is a feminine symbol of Chinese national tradition and cultural virtues.

Looking more closely at the ways in which these women and their volunteering are represented in the media, however, I show that their presence is more than just about using women’s bodies to mark national cultural boundaries and identity. As I will show, the etiquette classes these women are required to take consist of a lot of physical and deportment training, disciplinary exercises and even militarized lessons. Serving as ceremonial volunteers in mega events on the one hand articulates discipline and physical training, and self-sacrifice for the collective, thus reflecting values epitomized in earlier communist discourse in the new national body. On the other hand, ceremonial volunteering is associated with the state initiative that encourages more citizens to be volunteers in mega events, highlighting market-related values of self-actualization and continuous improvement.

This chapter focuses on the bodily practices of these volunteers and related media representations to lay the foundation for the book by focusing on the



Figure 1.1. Ceremonial volunteers rehearsing at a venue of the Guangzhou Asian Games. Photo courtesy of Miss Wang.

intersection of gender, top-down state intentions, and citizen-making (Brownell, 1995; Creak, 2015). In China, as well as other countries, women are often construed as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation in both colonial and postcolonial contexts (Chatterjee, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997). At the same time, a nation's representation of women can be reflective of class, sexuality and racial hierarchies within the nation (Heng & Devan, 1992; Mohanty, 2003; Stoler, 1995). Women's bodies, sexuality and ethnic or educational backgrounds have played pivotal roles as territorial markers, keepers of class and racial respectability, and reproducers of nations and national narratives (Kim & Choi, 1997; Mosse, 1998; Parker et al., 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Bodily practices in mega-event rituals are also key to the production of national consciousness, and even the making of the state. This chapter joins these analyses to show that the staging of gender and bodies is one of the most important 'strategies of substantiation' through which abstractions such as the nation and citizens are not only imaginable (Anderson, 1991) but also materialized and practised (Creak, 2015, p. 9).

In the following sections, I discuss ceremonial volunteers in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 People's Republic of China Sixtieth Anniversary, and the 2011 Guangzhou Asian Games. I analyse the process of selecting ceremonial volunteers, the details of etiquette training classes and ceremonial volunteers' participation in these mega events using media representations of these processes, ethnographic observation of etiquette lessons, and in-depth interviews with volunteers and

coaches involved in their training. I interviewed college women who had served at mega national or international event settings as ‘volunteers’. These volunteers were recruited directly from colleges through each school’s Communist Youth League, which is a major Communist Party-sponsored social organization that specializes in youth work and political mobilization. The League arranges leave for selected volunteers so they could skip classes to enrol in training and serve at the Games. A working committee, managed directly by the Games organizing committee, arranged for instructors of dance, music, art and language to provide a training program for the volunteers. Ceremonial volunteers did not receive any payment, only some meal and transportation subsidies. After the event, every ceremonial volunteer was awarded an honour certificate that acknowledged her efforts. The volunteers I interviewed were proud to have gone through the experience and many viewed the etiquette training part of their career preparation (see Figure 1.1) positively. Following their training, I found a complex set of values and practices surrounding self-improvement, urban participation, class and gender identities as well as physical compliance with state authority, discipline and collectivism.

Events and Ceremonial Volunteers

The use of women’s bodies and labour to symbolize a nation’s hospitality is not specific to China and has been common in a range of countries for many years. The business sectors, for example, has adopted a similar practice of deploying young women in feminine uniforms to appear at awards presentations and official gatherings to promote events or conventions. It was, however, only at the 2008 Beijing Olympic that these women were given the title of ‘ceremonial volunteers’ and their appearance and training were extensively promoted on news media. Indeed, these volunteers’ outfits and physical training have been major talks of the town for months preceding the launch of mega events. After 2008, the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress also deployed ceremonial hostesses to promote their annual meetings, prompting news headlines such as ‘Posture Training for the Miss Etiquette at the Two Meetings: Keep a Piece of Paper in Between Your Knees’ (禮儀小姐備戰兩會, 雙腿夾白紙不丟地上) (People.cn, 2015).¹ The use of ceremonial volunteers has also spilled over to academic events. It is now common to see a team of female college students serve at academic conference openings or seminars. One of the most ironic situations I encountered was when I was greeted by a group of female volunteers serving

¹ Training details are available on YouTube (see Zhongtian News, 2015).

as ceremonial hostesses at a university seminar at which I was talking about the gender politics of the ceremonial hostess!

One can easily read the phenomenon of ceremonial volunteers under an explanatory framework that sees the national deployment of feminine beauty and bodily labour as resonating with the dominant gender ideology and consumer culture, one that commodifies and sexualizes women's bodies, youth and beauty. Women's bodies have certainly become a large part of the beauty industry, consumerist culture and male hegemony in today's China (Brownell, 1998; Hanser, 2008; Yang, 1999; Zheng, 2009). Meanwhile, the state has played a crucial role in shifting gender ideology from the Maoist position, which focused on a woman's labour, to one that now focuses on a woman's body, cosmetics and consumption (Yang, 2011). In engaging these analyses, I show in this chapter how the figure of the ceremonial volunteer complicates this dominant way of understanding gender politics in China. The ceremonial volunteer is as much about showcasing a new type of woman citizen subject who is militarized and dedicated as it is about the woman hostess as a target of consumption. Despite the dominant understanding that the Chinese state is no longer meddling with the image of women, the state is now involving itself heavily by juxtaposing diverse traditions of gender practices and discourses (Balogun, 2012) in different historical contexts of China to shape its contemporary role-model citizens.

I argue that the Chinese state grooms the elegant and deferential woman by reinterpreting the Confucian tradition of *li* while simultaneously reasserting the militarized and empowered woman of the Maoist mobilization campaign. The volunteer simultaneously represents a sexually conservative image of women while also recalling a history of state mobilization that stresses women's liberation from the domestic family sphere. Volunteering at state-engineered mega events therefore reveals a new governing strategy to exert productive control over its citizens. I also found that volunteer governance is not simply a type of Foucauldian 'technology of power', which uses productive rather than repressive means to shape citizens' bodies and behaviours (Chong, 2011; Fleischer, 2011; Hoffman, 2013); instead, ceremonial volunteering places a heavy emphasis on bodily discipline and strict physical lessons. Requiring woman citizens to embody and perform competing discourses of China as a grand historical nation and as an urbanizing society with socialist characteristics, however, is not easy. Last, this chapter will look at both those 'moments of unmanageability' that are in tension with the state's intentions of a shaping a new socialist citizen.

The Selection of Ceremonial Volunteers

To qualify as a ceremonial volunteer at the Olympics, one must go through a rigorous selection process. According to media reports, as many as 5000 high school and college students came to the interview site in Beijing, but only 337 were accepted. The basic requirements were being slender and good looking, being aged between 18 and 24 years, and being between 1.65 and 1.78 metres tall. Candidates also had to be from only Beijing or Shanghai. The government did not explain why only students of these mega cities were chosen, but it was clear that an urban upbringing and a first-tier city education were deemed important. Right before the mega events, there were media rumours that the Beijing Olympic Games Organizing Committee had a stringent aesthetic standard that dictated a specified ratio between nasal width and face length, and between mouth width and eye length. Later, a government press conference explained:

Selected women are about 168 to 170 millimetres tall, and have a friendly and amicable character, upright and balanced body figure, elegant manners. They also need to have good political awareness, a spirit of giving and teamwork, and the will to discipline and take everyone's interests into account. The last requirement is basic English speaking and listening ability. (China.com.cn, 2008)

Officials explained that the body and personality specifications were meant to make sure that the selected volunteers possessed 'youthful, energetic, healthy and aspiring qualities'. In turn, these qualities would 'demonstrate the good images and ambience of Chinese people's civility, etiquette, friendliness, unity and hospitality' (China.com.cn, 2008).

The reality was that tall and beautiful women did not automatically get in. Individuals' will to serve the nation did not mean they would automatically be selected. According to my interviews with volunteers who got the chance to serve, those who got in actually needed recommendations from their college Communist Youth Leagues. This means their political records and performance were reviewed to ensure that in the past neither they nor their family members had participated in any protest movements considered subversive to the government. The recruitment procedures for both the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the Guangzhou Asian Games in 2010 were similar. The tension between volunteering and such top-down political vetting is intriguing, but it also shows how the party-state was particularly careful in recruiting citizens serving at state-organized mega events.

Etiquette Exercises and Military Lessons

I interviewed a group of volunteers who were selected to serve at the 2008 Olympic Games, and at the Guangzhou Asian Games. Both groups underwent the rigorous 40-day, closed-door training, including essential body movement protocols and strenuous etiquette sessions. The training was held in July and August when these young women had summer holidays, and in a venue large enough to accommodate the entire group. Trainees followed a strict schedule, waking at 6am and having nine consecutive class sessions every day. These sessions covered various topics, from English oral conversation to music education to physical exercises, including smiling, posture training, walking and standing. Some of the training sessions equipped the trainees for on-stage jobs, such as holding national placards for athlete representatives, holding medals or flowers at the award presentations, and leading VIPs into the venues. Other sessions were more about conveying a proper, cosmopolitan, friendly image of China. Most sessions were widely reported and mass broadcasted on television and the internet as a series of promotional previews of the Games.

First, the smiling lesson. An ‘amiable and natural’ smile is the foremost important feature of a ceremonial volunteer. The volunteer’s main role is to make sure that guests always see smiling faces around them. But such a smile can only come from assiduous practice. Not only must the gentle smile come across as natural; it has to live up to certain standards, specifically the quantification of exposing four to six teeth. This smiling standard, according to etiquette coaches, is to make sure that the volunteers’ mouths lift upward but never open too wide. The requirement for the number of exposed teeth is to ensure the overall aesthetics of smiling. To attain this most desirable smile, the young women are taught to bite on a chopstick for hours while practising smiling. They also giggle to themselves in front of the mirror, then to one another, face to face, correcting each other in terms of the number of teeth exposed (Lan, 2008). A ceremonial volunteer told me that her perfect smile was hard earned at the cost of flowing saliva and trembling facial muscles for hours at a time during and after training sessions. Another volunteer who served at the Guangzhou Asian Games three years later, however, said that the smile training required for them was less harsh and that the required number of exposed teeth was not as strict as at the Beijing Olympics. In the latest media reports on etiquette volunteers, the girls also talked about how they had to conduct smile training in the cold. All batches of trainees said they could now turn on a ‘natural and lasting smile’ spontaneously without having to feel happy.

Second, the standing lesson. Standing posture matters a great deal in order for ceremonial volunteers to look upright and spirited, thereby effectively conveying the officially expected qualities of being ‘healthy and aspiring’ (China.com.

cn, 2008). Media reports have covered how the trainee has to stand with her chin slightly tucked in, a book placed on her head and a sheet of thin paper held between her knees to attain the most ideal standing posture. Neither the book nor the sheet of paper is supposed to fall, and this is to be achieved while standing in high heels for an extended period of time (Lan, 2008). The purpose of using a sheet of paper for standing training is to make sure trainees keep their knees as close together as possible. Ceremonial volunteers told me that in the actual training lots of papers fell and people could not maintain their balance all the time. Young women born with very thin legs or legs bending outwards found it particularly hard to hold the paper between their knees. The practice lasted for about one hour and may take place indoors or outdoors. Those who served at the Beijing Olympics said there were no bathroom or water breaks during the two hours of standing training. They also mentioned scenes of fellow classmates fainting after standing for too long due to poor blood circulation. However, fainting was not the most dreaded part; the worst thing was that the coach would secretly record the number of fainting episodes, which could serve as justification for that trainee's ultimate ousting from the program.

Third, the ballet body shaping (*balei xingti* 芭蕾形體) lesson. This is a form of posture and movement training using elements of ballet dance. In this class, trainees put on tight bodysuits and practise walking on tip-toes, jumping and stretching. The purpose of this training, according to my interviews with coaches, is to enable trainees to improve their muscle tone, sense of musical rhythm, aesthetic movement, coordination and flexibility. All the young women I interviewed liked this session the most because it was much more fun than other posture exercises. They got to move around and try various movements and stretching. Ballet lessons are costly in China and getting to learn a bit of ballet for fun was a bonus for many.

Fourth, weight carrying. This is the most practical part of the entire training course, as ceremonial volunteers have to endure long hours of standing while holding heavy placards and trays of medals and flowers in award presentations. Each day, trainees hold metal trays, each loaded with six 500-millilitre bottles of water, for an hour. They have to do so while keeping their bodies steady. Meanwhile, constant attention has to be given to their walking pace. In the actual ceremonies, volunteers must ensure that the trays do not hit the award presenters. The specifications for how to move while carrying the trays are determined down to the centimetre. A trainee must make sure there is a fist's distance between her arm and her waist, while the thumb must not stick out beyond the tray when the tray is being carried. My interviewees complained about this part of the training because it was very tough and their arm muscles quivered badly after a day of training.

Last, military training. Towards the final phase of training, all ceremonial volunteers are sent to a military barracks in the suburbs to undergo a week (for

the Guangzhou Asian Games) or two weeks (for the Beijing Olympics) of intensive training. At the camp, trainees wake up at 5am every morning, make their beds according to a specific standard and start the day with jogging. The major training elements of the day are military-style standing (*zhan junzi* 站軍姿) and marching (*ti zhengbu* 踢正步). Military marching involves raising arms and kicking legs at right angles in a synchronized manner. When asked why military training was necessary, both the coaches and trainees said they believed it helped to ensure obedience and improve team building. Many of them also talked of marching as improving the team's overall morale.

Candidates have to practise all the bodily movement protocols repeatedly during the 40 days of training until they are performing them naturally, skillfully and gracefully. If they are successful, they will officially be accepted as ceremonial volunteers. In general, all the exercises described above are meant to help trainees attain a spirited, upright and elegant composure. Some do not make it through all the sessions and eventually drop out. In the Beijing Olympics, some received the heartbreaking news that they were disqualified one day before the opening ceremony and could only serve at the much less-watched Paralympics held afterwards. For the Guangzhou Asian Games, all the selected trainees made it to the opening ceremony.

Reinvention of Traditional Etiquettes

The volunteers at both the Olympics and the Asian Games who I interviewed said their job was to demonstrate China as a 'nation of etiquette' (*liyi zhibang* 禮儀之邦). This phrase refers to a popular idiom of describing imperial China as a civilized nation in which people adhere to elaborate sets of Confucian ritual obligations, moral rules and cultured behaviours. Interestingly, if one looks up the word *liyi* in a Chinese dictionary, its classical meaning has little to do with popular understandings of etiquette. Instead, the terms *li* and *yi* refer to systems of law and philosophy in ancient China, which govern social morality, hierarchy, proper behaviours and social justice (see Baidu.com, 2015). Philosophy scholars understand *li* as a site of propriety, ethical values, rules and constraints that govern social order and cosmic process (Feng, 1985, pp. 337–39). Cultural historian Angela Zito (1995, p. 106) defines *li* as 'finely differentiated practices that created a network of relationships within which situated subjectivities came into being'. Respecting one's subjective position and confirming the hierarchical relations of ruler, subject, father, mother, son and daughter, for instance, were embodied practices of *li*. Similarly, Tani Barlow (1995, p. 260) refuses to see *li* as mere bodily qualities or practices, rather viewing them as behavioural 'protocols' that constitute naturalized, normative and gendered

relational subjects. Observing *li* is not just about practising proper behaviours, but also about acting in ways that maintain hierarchical relations, such as that between emperors and subjects, or fathers and sons.

The staging of ceremonial volunteers to demonstrate Chinese etiquette or the Confucian discourse of *li* is therefore a rather superficial process of translating and reinventing Chinese Confucian tradition. By calling a ceremonial volunteer ‘Miss Liyi’, the state links women’s outlook and bodily practices to a past filled with imagined civility and rituals. However, ceremonial volunteers do not actually recreate the subject positions of virtuous women or pious daughters-in-law that the late imperial discourse of *li* intended to prescribe within the kin structure.

Quite ironically, the modern re-enactment of etiquette practices communicates rather distinct gender and class ideologies, a point I will elaborate further in Chapter 4, in which contemporary museums and museum television deliberately build similar ideologies in the historical narratives of the nation. The college background of all selected volunteers means only young, educated, unmarried women are selected because they are believed to be more flexible, more civilized and more sexually proper. Their uniform of *qipao* (旗袍)—a modern invention of traditional dress for Chinese women (Chew, 2007)—as well as high heels and long hair, prescribe that they move in a restrained and graceful manner. The training sessions in which they stand while keeping a piece of paper between their legs are quite explicitly linked to proper feminine deportment and disciplined sexuality. The same goes for sitting training, which requires hostesses to close and bend their legs to the side to avoid potentially exposing their underwear.

While the majority of women liked the ballet body-shaping lesson and thought it was fun, the female coach I interviewed in Guangzhou said it was intended to ‘fix the problem of tall girls giving others an impression of domination’. I did not get the chance to further inquire how ballet dancing could make women look less dominating. But the coach’s reply resonated with the ultimate mission of the etiquette lessons: to ensure that women walk, stand and move to express a respectable femininity and proper sexuality associated with a certain class standing and noble status. But even such a mission can be contested, as volunteers were also required to greet guests by bending their upper bodies while crossing their hands on the stomach, a posture some criticized as associated with the demeanour of household servants in premodern Chinese feudal families (Qin, 2008). Most interestingly, the training, which is based on ballet dancing—a Western art form—is articulated as helping trainees to attain the so-called ‘Oriental beauty’ (*dongfangmei* 東方美), understood as a form of beauty related to non-western mystery, charisma and pride (Baidu.com, 2017).

In the end, the media representations and physical training content of ceremonial volunteers convey conflicting meanings, which are not just etiquette-related

and ceremonial. The ceremonial hostess is simultaneously classy and deferential, modern and Oriental. She highlights concepts of class distinctiveness instead of equality among social classes. Her performance conveys the image of a nation no longer populated by the working-class masses inspired by egalitarianism but by a group of manicured women ready to show off their femininity and class respectability. She perhaps reflects the moral and cultural character of the Chinese nation today—a rapidly urbanizing country eager to reinvent traditional values and gender ideology to legitimize a national cultural identity (Yan & Santos, 2009). She also reveals the incongruence expressed in everyday life in Chinese society between the state narrative of upholding a proletariat collectivist dictatorship and the reality of a total embrace of wealth, individualism and status.

Sports and Etiquette Volunteering

In interviews, ceremonial volunteers' perspectives often reflected official state representations, but not without some tension. The 13 young women I interviewed said that the most memorable moment for them was maintaining the prescribed standing postures on stage and putting on the standard smile while holding the trays on which many metal medals were placed (as many as a dozen of them in the case of group presentations) for as long as an hour. In a tight *qipao* and high heels, and under a bright spotlight, it was a moment of high pressure for them to serve. All took very seriously the idea that the condition and performance of the team was equated with the nation's image. They were anxious that someone might deviate from the ideal posture or fall out of line. They believed that if the line were to fall apart, it would hurt the nation's reputation. Every single ceremonial volunteer with whom I spoke repeated the phrase 'I cannot make the nation lose face' (我不能給國家丟臉). The phrase was probably conveyed to them repeatedly during the training. They also linked their unified movements to upholding a sense of national virtue and pride. Trained like national athletes, ceremonial volunteers truly embody the status, shame and reputation of the nation.

Indeed, from the training to being 'on stage', ceremonial volunteers are not supposed to create a self that stands out as unique. Their training is not provided for candidates to appear in a beauty pageant, but rather to demonstrate a set of professionally prescribed movements collectively. Their aim is never to compete to be the most beautiful, or to draw attention to one's best presentation. As a team in ceremonial service, however, volunteers perform much more than just an attentive presence. In particular, they turn the daily bodily practices of everyday life—smiling, walking, and standing—into a performance. They make their smiles amiable, their standing spirited and their walk graceful. In the broader context of sport games,

ceremonial service is in many ways part of the display of the national body, in which the individual bodies of young athletes and citizens are linked with the national character and impression of the nation's strength (Tomlinson & Young, 2006).

The more I asked about the bodily discipline required of ceremonial volunteering, the more I found it was reflective of a much more general disciplinary form required of young Chinese citizens in many other sports events, and everyday activities. One of these activities is the military training that is compulsory for college freshmen at many universities (see Figure 1.2).² Another is mass calisthenics, which is a daily sporting exercise practised by many Chinese students in schools.

Sport events celebrating the body and physical culture have long been driven by political and ideological motives, in both Western and non-Western societies (Tomlinson & Young, 2006, p. 1). Gymnastics, for instance, was a well-known representation of the Aryan racial spirit in the form of mass rallies to express military discipline and the popular endorsement of the dictatorship in Nazi Germany. Gymnastics in Eastern Europe was a major means by which the new socialist nations linked body-training sports and young people to the nineteenth-century revolutionary movements of democracy, equality, and national renewal. Symbolizing unity, collectivity and equality, sports of the masses such as gymnastics and mass calisthenics have always played a major role in the building of the new socialist culture in the Soviet Union. Petr Roubal (2003, p. 14), who studied gymnastics and the mass of display of bodies under communism as an ideal symbolic system, said that 'The strong, beautiful and young bodies of the gymnasts displayed under communism were testimony to the strength, beauty and youth of communist society in its entirety.'

The sport of body training has an equally important role in the history of the People's Republic of China. During the Maoist period, shows of mass calisthenics were accompanied by slogans such as 'uphold the revolutionary torch', 'the People's Commune is great' and 'expressing people's passion for and aspirations on behalf of the nation' (Chen, Lu & Li, 1990, p. 631). Gymnastics were a popular exercise promoted in many state-owned enterprises and in the People's Commune to express the positive feeling of community and social solidarity, class struggle and the power of the proletariat (Roubal, 2003, p. 4). 'Broadcast gymnastics' (*guangbo ticao* 廣播體操) was an ingenious Maoist invention that deployed open air broadcast music to mobilize the masses into collective exercise, with 'the aim of training people's

² Quite a few mainland Chinese students shared their experience of practising mass calisthenics and thought it was a significant way for schools to cultivate a sense of collectivity and nationalist commitment at the daily institutional level. A few ceremonial hostesses also told me that all students had to go through military training when entering college. They therefore did not find it special that the etiquette training also required the same kind of training.

physical health for the national economy, development and defence' (Chen, Lu & Li, 1990, p. 610). Chinese scholar Lu Yunting (2011) calls broadcast gymnastics a 'national collective ritual' because they were the most effective means of enabling an immediate—albeit ephemeral—feeling of equality among citizens across differences of sex, status, and class in a public space. In today's China, when young students move and dance in mass callisthenics expressing themes of great aspiration, their coordinated movements often demonstrate 'an example par excellence of the synchronization of the rhythms of the social body' (Brownell, 1995, p. 146).

In this historical context of sports events, ceremonial volunteers' bodily performance is not just a form of volunteer service, but also part of a bigger training and performance to strengthen the nationalistic spirits of collectivity and uniformity. Through a series of mass-mediated recruitments, trainings and displays of ceremonial volunteers' etiquette performances, then widely circulated in news media, the state includes and appeals to the general citizenry—especially the younger generations—in the making of the ideal national social body. Emphasizing the collective and synchronized bodies is particularly relevant to mega events in the national context. The next section tells how ceremonial volunteers also participated in the National Military Parade in 2009.

Ceremonial Volunteers in National Military Parades

The 2009 national military parade gives a better context for how the notion of etiquette as used by the Chinese party-state is intermingled with communist discourse and practices of the militarized body. In national military parades, China's inspection of servicemen and military weapons emphasizes the demonstration of military strength and the ideological outlook of the national army. Chinese soldiers salute state leaders and demonstrate their adherence to military discipline by synching their movements. Their height, hairstyle and the degree at which their head, neck and eyes rotate fall into a neat pattern, without the slightest variance. Similar excellence was demonstrated at the 2009 parade by the militia women, who were selected from among qualified college-level women in Beijing. In uniform skirts and long boots, they showed the same exuberance as their male counterparts with a neat pace and consistent rhythm.

Perhaps the most eye-catching were the two captains of the marching team, Zhang Xiaofei and Zhao Na. These two women first served as ceremonial volunteers at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008. After the Games, they were specially selected to lead the militia women's team as captains in the grand military parade in 2009. Both women, standing at 1.78 metres and sweet-faced, were fresh Beijing university graduates who had majored in advertisement modelling and image design.

News reports characterized their participation as leading ‘the female soldiers to go through Tiananmen Square “beautifully”’ (*Global Times*, 2015). I did not get the chance to interview the two volunteers and was only able to review the extensive journalistic reports on them. Interestingly, related reports were largely the same and were probably scripted by the government-sponsored Xinhua News Agency. They unanimously focused on the tough training process the two ceremonial volunteers underwent, as the following excerpt shows:

Since Zhang Xiaofei and Zhao Na came to the camp much later than others, they took extra hours and made extra efforts to make up for their training. While other team members carried two pounds of sandbags, they carried four pounds. While other members took their breaks, they pushed on with extra exercises; and whereas other team members held their leg up for five minutes, they would hold their leg up for 15 minutes. ‘I must consider myself a male soldier,’ Zhang said ... Zhang’s perseverance in training impressed the coach, who recalled, ‘One afternoon, I saw her kicking the left leg, for I don’t know how many times. Eventually, her right leg couldn’t hold up and was shivering badly. My tears started to run.’ (*Liberation Army News*, 2009; Xinhuanet.com, 2009) (author’s translation)

In the news media, the ceremonial volunteer is evaluated on the basis of her level of perseverance in pushing through tough physical training and her ability to endure pain. Phrases such as ‘sandbags’, ‘holding legs up’ and ‘kicking’ present an image of the female body that is strong, even militant. The expression ‘I must consider myself a male soldier’ reveals the identity and body after which the women volunteers model themselves. The male coach was reported to be so impressed with their toughness that he shed tears. Government officials would confirm the sought-after ideal after ‘the two ceremonial volunteers gracefully led the women militia team through the Tiananmen Rostrum’ and ‘honourably received inspection from the party-state leaders and fellow citizens of the whole nation’ (He, 2010).

Featuring the pretty ceremonial hostess as a militia team member is a smart state media effort. It strategically juxtaposed femininity together with militancy to attract viewers and provoke discussions (Xue, 2009). Scenes of beautiful women kicking sandbags invited considerable media attention and public discussions on what the militia teams were responsible for and where they came from. These reports motivated thousands of viewers to understand the perseverance, physical pain and adherence to strict discipline required for all military personnel. In the end, it is not only the tough images of women militia captains that remain in the minds of the audience, but also their militarized bodies and their will, and their pride at serving the nation. The story of the hostesses-turned-militia-captains was clearly a media marketing campaign filled with enthusiasm, fantasy and marvels, all of which—via continuous reappearances in and rebroadcasts by the news,

television and online media—made the military parade, volunteering and related state propaganda much more interesting for the national audience to follow.

The emphasis on a strong and militarized body as emblematic of a patriotic mind and nationalist commitment is not an exclusive Chinese national phenomenon. But placing such emphasis on women as the embodiment of these ideals is a unique part of Chinese modern history. The figure of the ‘iron maiden’ was a state-engineered role model during the Maoist period of the 1960s and 1970s to encourage women to become physically strong and motivated to join the labour force in order to hasten the pace of national industrialization. In China, the quest for independent nationhood and modernity has been intertwined with the ‘woman question’.³ Although the status of women has been interpreted in anti-colonial struggles as a vital signifier of national progress and social modernization, the ways that status has been implemented are quite different in China and other Asian countries, such as India. Starting in the early 1920s, Chinese nationalist intellectuals considered many customary practices, such as arranged marriages, chastity and bound feet, as signs of male dominance and cultural backwardness. They identified ‘women’s oppression as symptomatic of a Confucian culture built on patriarchy’ and hence considered making women participate as citizens in the public sphere a major means to uproot a Confucian feudalist culture (Seth, 2013, p. 284). Accordingly, when the Chinese communist state under Mao Zedong came into power in 1949, it attempted to achieve national progress and cultural modernity by encouraging the use of female labour in economic production (Gilmartin, 1995; Gilmartin et al., 1994; Rofel, 1999). The Communist Party-state invented the new subject position of *funü* after 1949 to promote the image of a woman citizen who is politically active and who places national collective interests above the interests of the family (Barlow, 1995). The *funü*, healthy and strong, would enter into employment that previously had been considered men’s work. In short, the Chinese communist opposed the ‘ritual etiquette of the feudal society’ that subjected women to suffering (Barlow, 1995, p. 276). The iron maiden spearheaded a communist mobilization campaign to promote women’s employment and participation, especially in heavy industries such as coal mining, transportation, fishing, and lumber production (Jin, 2006, p. 618). With slogans such as ‘women hold up half of the sky’ and ‘times have changed—now men and women are the same’, women were also recruited in the quasi-military style production farms and many were engaged in physically

³ Sanjay Seth (2013) has brilliantly shown the divergent ways in which ‘tradition’ is associated with feudalism, and therefore has to be annihilated in China, and the ways tradition is seen as the inner, spiritual domain, and hence has to be revived and preserved in India. Seth argues that this has to do with the radically different ways in which colonialism figured in anti-colonial thoughts and the ways in which ‘the woman question’ was signified in nationalism in each country.



Figure 1.2. Ceremonial volunteers posed for a group photo at the end of the military training camp before the Guangzhou Asian Games. Photo courtesy of Miss Wang.

demanding positions. The campaign eventually set off a popular social movement at the everyday production level that challenged traditional gendered divisions of labour and promoted a lifestyle of militarized principles and discipline (Jin, 2006, p. 622). Although the push for women's liberation was inherently flawed in making male attributes the yardstick of competence, the campaign successfully rejected many traditional gender stereotypes. Further, it fought against the hierarchical Confucian traditions, including the discourse and practice of *li*, which prescribes that a proper woman is only positioned within the domestic boundaries of household and family. In the end, the Maoist campaign was revolutionary and progressive in promoting an anti-Confucian, tough, militarized and empowering womanhood, which complemented the nation's demand for industrialization.

Putting the Maoist context back into contemporary party-state discourse and media representation of ceremonial volunteering, it is interesting to see how the Chinese state today juxtaposes opposing traditions of gender discourses and practices. It simultaneously highlights Confucian etiquette, a feminine manner, and modern military training. The result is that etiquette training is understood in terms of not only grooming and nice manners, but also discipline and dedication, as exemplified by Zhang Xiaofei's and Zhao Na's leader positions in the militia parade. It promotes the elegant and sexually conservative woman by reinterpreting the Confucian tradition of *li* while simultaneously reasserting the militarized, liberated and empowered woman of the Maoist mobilization campaign.

Looking closely at the ways etiquette and military training are combined for mega events therefore defies the simplistic understanding of ceremonial volunteering as merely a form of deploying women's bodies and beauty for a nationalist purpose.

First, it involves the element of military training in ensuring that volunteering is also physical and disciplinary, collective and repressive. The military training shapes citizens' sense of perseverance and obedience, and their ability to attain 'the demeanour of a socialist person', which is making oneself as a vehicle of the collective interests, 'a model of an exemplary citizen who stands in complete subordination in front of the party-state leadership' (Roubal, 2003, p. 7). Moreover, by making the ceremonial hostess a volunteering position, even for the national military parade, it uses soft or productive techniques, a Foucauldian technology of power, to shape citizens' mind and practice about self-improvement and continuous learning in the market era. This way, the Chinese state effectively articulates the traditional discourse of etiquette and the modern Maoist discourse of women's empowerment with the state's desire to convert civilian bodies to military and nation-serving principles.

Individuals' Voices

None of my informants, mostly aged in their early twenties, shared the zealously patriotic sentiments expressed in the state-sponsored media. Most were ambivalent when expressing patriotism. None cared about the contradictions of putting together Confucian values and the Maoist mode of mobilization in the contemporary practice of volunteering. All valued the training process as a way to equip themselves with etiquette knowledge and manners considered necessary in future job applications. Most of my interviewees who served in the Guangzhou Asian Games also came from the elitist, tier-one colleges; they were already self-motivated and competitive in planning for a broader social purpose, and wanted to actualize themselves through participating in grand events.

Almost all informants expressed excitement about having the opportunity to 'participate and be present' in such a mega event when studying in Guangzhou. Most students I interviewed were from outside of Guangdong province and did not speak Cantonese. The volunteering became a great opportunity for them to participate in the Asian Games in person without being an athlete. They told me that specialized volunteering such as providing first-aid or translation would recruit students directly from respective departments of medicine and translation. Since most interviewees were students in the humanities or social sciences, such as Chinese language, history, anthropology or business management, they found themselves only qualified for the etiquette volunteering. One student, Mandi, proudly told me that she had been an athlete in the past. Her joining of etiquette volunteering in her final year of study was 'to enter the stadium once again'. The majority of my interviewees also mentioned that their parents were very proud of their volunteer participation in the grand event in Guangzhou.

Moreover, in general many derived quite a lot of positive feelings from the training. Feeling refreshed and stronger from the physical exercise, many did not consider the military training strict or excessive. Two of the trainees who joined the day-and-night training for the military parade in 2009 thought the standing exercise was helpful in giving them better composure. To my surprise, many also rated the military training positively, saying it generated a better team spirit. One informant, Sarah, said, 'It is necessary to have the [military] training because we were too relaxed (*sanman* 散漫). The military standing, the slogan shouting, the marching and the tidying exercises can help us to be more serious.' Another informant added, 'I know that some companies also use military training in staff training to ensure the staff's obedience. I personally do not think it is necessary but I think it can help us to be more focused.' When asked whether they thought the training was too mechanical and restrictive, some responded that uniformity was good as their stage performance would become a 'symbol of the nation'. Interestingly, many saw such physical training as a means to 'improve oneself' (*tisheng ziji* 提升自己) and linked the perseverance training with increased levels of responsibility (*zerengan* 責任感). It is also important to understand that these young ladies from elite colleges are all products of the nation's one child policy, which means that they grew up without siblings and have been focused mostly on studying. Attending this training camp and spending time collectively was actually one of the few fun things they genuinely treasured. Last, they all told me that the training on the ground was much more relaxed than that shown on state-sponsored media.

While most regarded the military training experience rather positively, some had reservations about its arrangements, especially the design of the dress uniform. The Guangzhou participants, for instance, were not very happy about their dress uniform design during the Asian Games, as it raised the controversy of objectifying women's bodies. Entitled 'passing clouds and flowing water' (*xingyun liushui* 行雲流水), the outfit was designed to communicate the culture of freedom and flexibility in Southern China. Its ultra-thin swimwear material, however, resulted in a see-through effect, which excessively revealed the wearers' body shapes, including the shapes of their pelvic bones. Various media captured how male guests and athletes inappropriately fixed their gaze on the tightly wrapped bodies, and particularly buttocks, of the volunteers on stage. This caused much controversy and online questions about whether the uniform design was proper (Renren.com, 2010). A Chinese sport website ran a feature entitled 'Who was pissed off by "passing clouds and flowing water"?' The website also included news reports from Korea that athletes felt 'provoked' by seeing the flimsily dressed volunteers (Wangyi, 2010). After the incident, netizens widely criticized the design as indecent. Some went so far as to critique the design as 'making the volunteers look like nightclub girls' (Wangyi, 2010). When asked about such public outcry, my informants did not elaborate much.

All said that the dress was too tight and many recalled having starved through the morning in order to look good in it. Sally was the only interviewee bold enough to blame the dress for ‘sexualizing women’. She recalled an embarrassing incident of a male audience member who photographed the buttocks of her team members; that person was taken away by security.

The controversy reveals a ‘moment of unmanageability’ (Highmore, 2002) in the top-down state effort to promote ceremonial volunteers, despite all the meticulous training process and media staging. In fact, training coaches have tried to ensure that the images of these girls do not easily fit into the stereotype of weak and docile female figures. The training coaches with whom I talked often emphasized the concept of a ‘healthy beauty’, which is related to the idea of modern femininity achieved through sport training and physical strength (You, 2003). Nonetheless, the way these volunteers were dressed to accentuate their feminine body inevitably made them targets of the male gaze—or, more broadly, targets of visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). The unintended controversy over their uniforms reveals that even the Communist Party-state engineering and mobilization of volunteers can be complicit in the dominant gender ideology, which commodifies and sexualizes women’s bodies, youth and beauty, undermining the official making of a role-model citizen. Lastly, if the original idea of having volunteers go through intense physical training is to promote a patriotic and modern citizenry with socialist characteristics, their sexy uniforms ultimately expose the gender bias that is inherent in the process of such top-down mega-event management.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Chinese national values of discipline and collectivism are imparted to and through the mobilization of the discourse and practice of volunteering, starting with the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The ceremonial volunteering, in particular, provided a platform that integrated the party-state’s lofty slogans of self-sacrifice and patriotism with individuals’ aspiration of upward mobility and self-enterprising in the mega-event setting. Although the woman volunteers were portrayed as embodying Confucian ritual values and the practices of propriety that define China as a nation of civilization, they were also about staging official performances of socialist discipline, collectivism and the status quo, as well as desirable values of gender, class and urbanity. In this chapter, the ceremonial volunteer’s role as an urban operator works less to connect people of different abilities and backgrounds in the public spaces, as I will elaborate in other chapters, and more to ensure prize presentations go smoothly and to facilitate guests’ passage and movement inside the new infrastructural space of the stadiums.

Ceremonial volunteers are nevertheless active agents negotiating their way through competing discourses and practices. Proud of joining the training, they did not necessarily conform to the patriotic values and socialist ideals embedded in the training lessons. Many viewed it as free etiquette training to strengthen their portfolios for future career development in the highly-competitive cities. Some insisted that their participation was solely about getting a ticket to the grand events and in a city where they had come to acquire a college education. But all were dedicated to putting on a good show as China hosted these grand events. This sense of pride and belonging also came with their residing and studying in city spaces that were being upgraded. Witnessing spectacular stadiums shooting up, new subway lines being launched and international guests visiting, many of my interviewees viewed this volunteering experience as part of joining the big city and living cosmopolitan lives in the most positive way. It is in this context that volunteering at mega events has since become so popular and successful in Chinese society. This chapter has described the mega game events as an inciting moment for state mobilization of volunteer labour. The chapters that follow will feature the urban infrastructural backgrounds more, showing all the ways in which non-state institutions and individual citizens deploy volunteering to exceed or push back against such top-down and state-centric intentions.

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Elderly Vigilantes? Wayfinding Service or Surveillance in the Capital

Abstract

This chapter focuses on community-based elderly volunteers who offer neighbourhood patrols and wayfinding services in Beijing, China. In the context of a highly monitored capital city, their role seems to reinforce the security control and make surveillance in the panopticon society even more seamless. Yet this chapter suggests a different way of viewing them. First, I examine how various media representations of these volunteers speak of a new discourse of security in China, one that is gendered, racialized and moralized. In the second part of the chapter, I share my ethnographic observations and interviews with these volunteers, which show their everyday and transversal engagements within the transformed urban space and infrastructural changes. I argue against a simplistic stereotype that these elderly volunteers recall a Maoist type of vigilantism for more surveillance, despite the Chinese state, police and media attempting to shape the effort in such a direction. Instead, I show that the elderly residents and the municipal-level governments have been caught up in an expanding urban space and a new governing direction that have exceeded the previous relations of the omnipotent state and docile subjects. Last, I show how elderly residents hold onto the community volunteering to bond with those who have been relocated by urban renewals and to serve a pedestrian community outside of their comfort zone.

Keywords: community volunteers, elderly citizens, wayfinding services, surveillance and vigilantism, Beijing

In 2015, the Beijing Police arrested a dozen celebrity singers and actors, including Jaycee Chan (son of the Hong Kong Kungfu star Jacky Chan), allegedly linked to substance abuse at home. In their press conference, the authorities praised the neighbourhood elders for providing clues that helped uncover the celebrities' misdemeanours and other criminal cases, such as bike stealing and street-level tricks. Some media reports said the monetary award given to community volunteers for reporting petty crime was as high as 560,000 yuan (around US\$80,000) (*Beijing Youth*, 2015). Not long after, the Beijing Police launched a cartoon poster on their official Weibo social media account to promote police and citizen collaboration, which went viral online (He, 2015; Rudolph, 2015; Sina.com, 2016). Three figures dominated the poster design: a uniformed male police officer in the middle, titled Safe Beijing (*ping'an Beijing* 平安北京); a young man wearing a monocle connected

to a microphone on one side, titled Chaoyang Masses (*chaoyang qunzhong* 朝陽群眾); and a middle-aged woman wearing a red armband on the left, titled Westside Mama (*xicheng dama* 西城大媽) (Sina.com, 2016).

Today, the ‘Chaoyang Masses’ and the ‘Westside Mama’ are household nicknames for elderly community volunteers, the majority of them retired women, who help with maintaining law and order at the neighbourhood level in the capital. By 2017, it was estimated that the total number of these community or security volunteers had grown to about 200,000 in the capital (Zhang, 2018) and they are organized under the Residents’ Committee (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委員會), a grassroots-level government-led social organization funded by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*Beijing News*, 2016). Both Chinese and western media representations like to equate these volunteers and their street patrolling with neighbourhood watch groups in other countries. In 2008, when Beijing hosted the Olympic Games, the government mobilized hundreds and thousands of elderly people as community volunteers to patrol various corners of the capital to watch out for ‘suspicious elements’ (Broudehoux, 2012; Xu, 2008). Most volunteers with whom I spoke nonetheless differentiated themselves from those volunteers who were given a monthly stipend to help out with street patrolling and street clean-up. Stressing how they serve tourists and migrants through offering wayfinding service in an ever-growing urban development, my informants told me, ‘We are not those volunteers. We are the *real* volunteers.’

This chapter focuses on the elderly community volunteers, their wayfinding services and their relationship with the expanding urban space. On the one hand, I examine how various media representations of these volunteers shape a new discourse of elderly volunteers, which is nationalistic, moralized, gendered, even racialized. On the other, I share my ethnographic observations and interviews with them that show their everyday engagements within the urban space. I argue against a dominant and easy stereotype that the elderly volunteers recall a Maoist type of vigilantism for more surveillance, despite the Chinese state attempting to shape such propaganda effort in the media. Instead, I show that these volunteers, the capital residents and the neighbourhood-level governments are all caught up in a rapidly shifting urban space, changing governance and infrastructural development that exceeded the previous relations of the surveillance state and docile subjects. My analysis focuses on volunteers’ horizontal or transversal practices with their surrounding landscape, public spaces and transit infrastructure facilities, instead of their vertical relation to a state power above them.

There is much discussion about China as an omnipotent surveillance state. Borders, biometric surveillance and military parades are ubiquitous features in the capital. Security checkpoints are now installed in almost all subway stations in major cities and closed-circuit cameras are everywhere in any public space.

Surveillance and control are even tougher on the internet and there are discussions about digital authoritarianism. In terms of these elderly volunteers, this chapter could easily join a discussion on the ‘securitization or militarization of urban life’. By securitization of urban life, I refer to urban studies scholar Stephen Graham’s (2010) argument that there is a surge in security, technological surveillance and military control in American cities’ infrastructure, and their communal and private spaces, and that militarized policing, war and anti-terrorism have become part of normal urban life.¹ In urban China, government deployment of surveillance technology to screen suspicious citizens, political dissidents and migrant others reached a new level after the 2008 Beijing Olympics (*China Daily*, 2003; *China Labour Bulletin*, 2013; Hand, 2009; Teng, 2013; Zhu, 2006). Heightened security measures have been routinized and are targeted at ordinary citizens (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009, 2011; Chong, de Kloet & Zeng, 2016; Fan, 2008). The ethnic conflict involving ethnic Xinjiang Uyghurs since 2009 has meant that the authorities have extended technological surveillance, police controls and ethnic profiling to country’s frontiers (Stephens, 2018).

At the same time, urban surveillance has been aggregated and normalized by the extensive use of biometric devices in travelling, shopping, banking, and social media among citizens. The joint effort of state and capital monitoring has therefore made it very easy for police to track people’s whereabouts, correspondence, and opinions. China is also infamous for its all-pervasive internet censorship system through the Golden Shield project (commonly known as the Great Firewall of China) and the deployment of millions of ‘internet commenters’ (fifty-cents party 五毛黨) to advocate the party line on any issues online. The result is a strictly controlled physical and online space, where surveillance technologies, ‘multi-layered and multi-faceted’ (Tai, 2010), complement each other in the monitoring and reporting of any content and behaviour considered subversive in the name of national security.

The elderly volunteers and their activities inevitably appeal to a panopticon society where the government deploys older residents to ensure all-encompassing surveillance at the grassroots level. Michel Foucault (1977) used the panopticon to examine a form of power he called disciplinary, which works by inducing a population to conform by internalization of the idea that they are being watched. In a disciplinary society, individuals are not so much repressed by the social order but ‘fabricated in it’. If Jeremy Bentham (1995) was thinking about the architectural design of prison, factory and school with the concept of panopticon or ‘all seeing’

¹ Graham traces the phenomenon of heightened security to the post-9/11 attacks in Euro America, where a rising ideology of conservative Christian right and military culture is constructing the racial and sexual diversities in cosmopolitan centres as the ‘threatening others’. Graham’s analysis is certainly very specific to the complex phenomenon of urban inequalities combined with immigration challenges, the urban–rural divide and problems of gun control and police violence in the United States.

in eighteenth-century industrializing England, the concept could be well applied to the design of socialist state-owned enterprises that controlled workers in enclosed spaces of work units and housing compounds during Mao's planned economy. Nonetheless, the ways in which urban China has developed after the economic reform have been rather different. The rapid economic and infrastructural developments have posed numerous challenges to the panopticon social structures. Moreover, I found that the community volunteers are not necessarily serving the surveillance interests of the state but instead finding ways to connect with and reach out to other groups in the endlessly developing urban centre.

After a brief history of contextualizing state mobilization of elderly volunteers in the next section, I analyse media representations of these volunteers to examine how the government mobilizes the figure of volunteers to heighten the securitization of society and to reinforce the authoritarian status quo. In the mass media, elderly volunteers are always represented as constantly searching for new objects of monitoring, implying the wide and popular dissemination of the power of surveillance. In the second section, I show my ethnographic observation of volunteers giving direction services to passers-by at a major crossroads in Beijing. After a few summers of talking to both volunteers and related *jiedao* (街道) level government officers, I started to look closely at how these volunteers related to the new urban landmarks and transit infrastructural transformation in the area.

My finding is that community volunteers have missed their local embeddedness in the process of urban renewal and rapid commercialization. No matter how much the government engineered the image of community cohesion and neighbourhood knowledge, many of the volunteers I interviewed had moved out of the city centre. Many of these elderly residents willingly return to their previous neighbourhoods to serve as volunteers and offer wayfinding service in the central business district of Beijing. Elderly volunteers operate to help ordinary people navigate in a sprawling network of new subway lines, new urban landmarks, new museums and office buildings. I argue that community volunteering becomes a means for elderly residents to auto-construct and re-familiarize their previous communal space, which has been engulfed by intense urban development and commercialization. By auto-construct, I borrow a concept from urban studies scholar Teresa Caldeira (2016) to refer to the ways marginalized citizens conduct place-making and build homes on the urban periphery step by step according to the resources they are able to gather at each moment. I show that these elderly residents in Beijing similarly auto-construct their ownership and sense of belonging in an altered and hyper-urbanized city centre through the wayfinding services. Last, while media representations of community volunteering continue to stick to the perspective of a surveillance/control society, the actual implementation of a more service-oriented government in a changing urban space deserves more attention.

The Community as a Panopticon: A Brief History of the Residents Committee

Community volunteers have everything to do with the history of strict state control and vigilantism at the grassroots level in modern China. This goes back to the setup of the Residents' Committee (*juweihui* 居委會) in government-built, state-owned enterprise-based residences during the 1950s. When the new party-state was established in the early 1950s, policing was not mature enough and the socialist state was dependent on residents monitoring each other. Although the government claimed that the residents' committees were about managing community issues, one of their major purposes was the implementation of state surveillance at the local level. In the name of reporting the 'bad elements' (*huai fenzi* 壞份子), residents' committees asked the unemployed, the majority of them elderly women, to sniff around residents for private details. It was believed that during Mao's regime, some grannies asked about residents' visitors and the food they consumed to check whether there was a foreign influence or capitalist tendency. Residents' committee grannies also checked on women workers' menstruation and their birth control measures to implement the One Child Policy in the 1970s. As late as the early 1980s, it was said that these old ladies 'checked on lovers who walk together' and 'punished young people for wearing tight and flared jeans by cutting them short' (Legal Daily, 2016). Even today, many people tease the community volunteers by calling them the 'bound feet detectives' (*xiaojiao zhenji dui* 小腳偵緝隊), with the metaphor of 'bound feet' referring to a generation of uneducated women from the pre-modern period who were deployed by the Maoist state to infringe on citizens' rights. The derogatory title certainly evokes a popular and stereotypical image of the residents' committee people as largely a group of uneducated and nosy women abusing their power in urban China under the communist party-state regime.

During Mao's China, the residents' committee workers implementing orders from above and communicating with their neighbours could be controversial, such as the way that they monitored and reported residents' daily habits for more social control. And since the residents' committee positions have historically been unpaid, or very poorly paid until recently, they have been filled by less-educated people and working-class retirees, particularly grannies. However, as state-owned sectors privatized, and *danwei*-based residences gradually disappeared during the economic reform starting in the 1980s, the residents' committee has transformed and its old monitoring function has weakened. In recent years, the residents' committee, renamed *shequ* (社區), continues to be a base unit of all urban administration under the *jiedao* level of government.² Today, residents' committees are shifting roles to help with

² The governance structure in urban China starts from the lowest level, the *jiedao* government. The next level is district government and the highest level is the municipal government. The provincial government also administers the rural areas with a different governing structure.

welfare applications, negotiate neighbour conflicts, care for the left-behind elderly, and organize street clean-ups. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has also provided more funding to create proper positions and encouraged young people to join the residents' committees (Audin, 2017; Audin & Throssell, 2015; Heberer & Gobel, 2011; Tomba, 2015).

A considerable body of research has analysed the elderly-led community volunteering as a major mode of grassroots activism, a site of political mobilization and a space of state-building in Chinese cities (Audin, 2017; Parris, 2012). The panopticon concept has been a major way of thinking about grassroots community governance in China. In particular, the role of elderly volunteers has been analysed as disciplining residents into shared values of 'self-government' (Bray, 2013) or forms of 'controlled authoritarian communitarianism', in which the party-state creates space for residents to participate in order to enhance state control over society (Heberer & Gobel, 2011). Most recently, Luigi Tomba (2015) has argued that the party-state seeks 'political consensus' through the residents' committee, specifically organizing the urban poor into groups of 'community volunteers' (*gongyixing gangwei* 公益性崗位) and co-opting them to perform surveillance tasks such as street patrolling. In the existing research, the role of community volunteers seems obvious in the context of a highly monitored society: they are intended to reinforce the securitization of society and make the panopticon society even more seamless. Older female volunteers seem to perfectly complement, even giving a warmer and human face to, the inhuman closed-circuit television camera and parades of plain-clothed, uniformed and armed police. As a legal scholar said, 'mobilizing community volunteers was intended to normalize the idea that there are hundreds and thousands of "eyes and ears" around and is evidence of the Xi Jinping administration restarting 'mass reporting institutions' (Jiang, 2020). The Chinese community volunteers seem to be the perfect state-sponsored 'vigilantes', whose responsibilities are to reinforce community policing, and whose roles resonate with a new type of citizen-police subject being implemented in the authoritarian Erdogan government of contemporary Turkey (Akarsu, 2020). This chapter's ethnography provides a different perspective on the services of these elderly people. In the next section, I turn to the way the state reinforces this idea of community surveillance through media representations.

Media Representations of Elderly Volunteers and the Making of the Vigilant Subject

There are hundreds of media representations of the 'Chaoyang Masses' and 'Westside Mama' on the internet. Various media companies produce professional animation and high-quality manga-style videos to make the image of elderly volunteers alive and popular. In what follows, I have selected a few examples ranging from online



Figure 2.1. Screen capture from the video, featuring community volunteers having super eye power. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZr2Kimr5Po> (note that the video is no longer available). Author's screen capture.

videos to newspaper media to show how the elderly volunteers have been talked about. It is next to impossible to verify the source and production background of these media stories, and whether they are produced directly from government sponsored channels or not. Given that the media space is tightly controlled and censored by the government, it is not surprising that many non-government or private media companies produce stories to glorify or to align with the official policy line in order to survive. Media representations in China therefore show that the authority's voice and their view of law and order is often blended into the popular media, making the boundaries between state and society almost impossible to draw.

The first example, with the cartoon video titled 'Finding out the Mysterious Chaoyang Masses' (揭开神秘组织朝阳群众的面纱) (Figure 2.1), largely captures the officially endorsed and mainstream images of the elderly volunteers. Produced by iQIYI, the largest and most popular Chinese subscription video on-demand streaming platform, the video addresses current affairs and hot social topics with comical visual effect and amusing commentaries. First, the two volunteers in the video are in titanic proportion, standing metres taller than all the city structures. Second, even though they appear with grey hair and wrinkled foreheads, they stretch their eyes with fingers and their eyesight is so strong that they shoot out long yellow beams of light, which penetrate the streets and buildings. Last, their targets of screening include common places such as the 'supermarket', 'wet market', 'public toilets' and 'residences' (in the bubbles from left to right in Figure 2.1). The narrative

is what makes the video really funny. A male voice first lists all the secret agents in the world, such as the Mossad, the CIA, MI6 and the KGB. He then says the BJCYQZ (*Beijing Chaoyang Qunzhong* 北京朝陽群眾 or Beijing Chaoyang Masses) is the most mysterious one and this video is about lifting that veil of mystery.

The male video voice then reveals how community volunteers are not just elderly people from the residents' committee, but 'those ordinary doormen, the dancing grannies in the plaza, those shopkeepers, the housewives, even the old man taking a rest under a tree'. The video praises the volunteers' ability to 'gather intelligence' 24 hours a day from the dark corners of various public spaces. It jokes with exaggeration their abilities 'to know who among the celebrities just got married, who just got pregnant, even where they had dinner!' At the end of the video, it highlights how the community volunteers provide clues to the police on celebrities using escort services and taking drugs at home, resonating with the police press statement on the high-profile arrest of Jaycee Chan for allegedly possessing illegal substances.

Portraying citizens as informal militia in animation videos such as this not only constructs elderly residents as vigilant citizens; these videos aim to portray monitoring of people's daily activities as part of the law and order enforcement of the capital. Similar to the poster design mentioned in the opening vignette, the video is rhetorically interpellating residents' activities, such as strolling on the street and grocery shopping as efforts of 'intelligence collection' (Althusser, 1971). Highly aware of its role as part of the ideological state apparatus, the media in China are simultaneously doing the work of subject-making and creating urban myths.

The process of interpellation also works through residents speaking about volunteering in militant rhetoric in media interviews such as the following: 'Granny Fang, 74-year-old, talked about her patrolling experience, "I seldom sit down but walk around a lot. If the volunteers are around, criminals won't dare!"' The same report covered 81-year-old Grandpa Zhou, with the title of 'Community Lookout' (*shequ liaowangshao* 社區瞭望哨) for being always vigilant when patrolling. He passed out while carrying out his duty one winter, and the first sentence he uttered after waking up to consciousness was, 'Sorry I did not fulfil my responsibility' (Hu, Ci & Zhang, 2016). Published in an official magazine titled *Beijing Story* (北京紀事), funded by the government-sponsored organization China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the news report depicts everyday happenings in the capital. It is impossible to figure out whether these volunteers actually expressed those words, or they are scripted by the government-sponsored media. Either way, media stories about volunteers who are passionate about their service are both abundant and popular. They interpellate elderly citizens to be vigilant residents, sometimes socialist and militant subjects, who are always ready to serve the nation and the imagined law and order, defying age, weather, and health conditions.

Another less prominent, but occasionally seen, media story line about volunteers features their conduct of class and gender profiling, which involves volunteers taking the law into their own hands. The narrative of singling out migrant women as criminals goes like this:

If [we] observe that girls in the neighbourhood come back home after midnight on heels and in miniskirts, and with men of different faces, we would have to run a background check on her. It is a process of evidence finding. We get suspicious if she does not have a regular living schedule. For instance, she does not go to work during the day and man who come to see her stay only for a short while. If we don't find enough evidence, we would ask the public security to contact the landlords and put pressure on her. For us, her leaving means taking away potential security issues. (Fazhi, 2017)

Featured in a story in the Communist Youth League news media *Beijing Legal Evening News* (法治晚報), representations of residents speculating about their neighbours, such as the above example, can be found in different versions on the internet.³ In fact, *jiedao* level government also sends out similar guidelines. 'Eight Findings and Eight Reports' (*Ba Faxian Ba Baogao* 八發現八報告) was meant to encourage residents to observe and report suspicious elements, including men on drugs and women in sexy outfits. Again, whether residents actually acted on such extrajudicial power of chasing away a tenant based on her outfits or work hours cannot be verified. It is also hard to tell whether these media stories are fabricated by the government. Authentic or fake, these media reports are problematic because they link residents' patrolling activity to explicit gender, class and racist (native vs migrant) profiling. The wide circulation of these media representations therefore shapes community volunteering as reminiscent of the Maoist policing in which residents report about each other's behaviours. Community volunteering is understood as being interested in interfering in others' privacy in the name of law and order. At the same time, the popular media are also complicit in allowing vigilante and xenophobic violence by subscribing to the sexist and racist discourse of 'blaming the slut' or 'it is the migrants' (*waidiren* 外地人). In the end, these media reports construct the citizen subjects as moralistic vigilantes but also label certain groups as internal enemies of the city.

Another popular video about a white American man who became a community volunteer in Beijing approaches the community volunteers from a different angle. Featuring a 60-year-old American man nicknamed Lao Gao, who had worked and lived in Beijing for more than 20 years, the video, entitled *Western Westside Mama*

³ A similar media story about volunteers conducting class and gender profiling was told through an online video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6xJWYv4Eac>

(*xicheng yang dama* 西城洋大媽), came out in 2017 as part of a popular TV documentary series called *Foreigners in China* (外國人在中國) (2017). The story went viral and has since been rewritten and retold in various online news media, including the CCTV News, Xinhua News, Sina News, Sohu News, QQ news, even on YouTube. In the video, Lao Gao, wearing his red cap and red armband, is a community volunteer who provides wayfinding service market in fluent Mandarin Chinese to visitors at the Houhai Lotus tourist market. He patrols the old *hutongs* (胡同) together with a group of grannies and gives warnings to random street vendors, sounding like an urban management officer (*chengguan* 城管). The video features Lao Gao learning Mandarin Chinese and learning to make Chinese noodles while returning the favour by offering spoken English language lessons to Chinese friends and neighbours. The background of the video showcases the beautiful *Houhai* Beijing, serene lake scenes, lotus flowers, and retirees chatting in the sunshine. The video concludes with Lao Gao's coming to terms with the perception of community volunteers: 'I thought they were a group of gossipy women. Now I understand they are here to help with the society, safety, public security, and the people. It is actually really fun [to patrol the neighbourhood with them]. I get to know a lot of friends. My biggest wish is to become a Westside Mama!'

As much the *Western Westside Mama* video wants to legitimise the function of the community volunteers, it is also about promoting a peaceful and beautiful Chinese capital to both domestic and foreign audiences. Beijing is represented as such a wonderful capital city that even foreigners are hoping to stay and become part of its harmonious community fabric. Interestingly, it takes a white American male to appraise the Chinese system of community safety and urban management and to right the wrong stereotypes of elderly volunteers as nosy retirees having nothing else to do but sniff around.

Gender and class are conspicuous elements in all these media representations of the community volunteers. There are the energetic, native Beijing grannies, the hardworking male police officers, the white American male, and the invisible but corrupted migrant women. The hierarchy is obvious. The men are educated and respectable—especially the foreigners—and their job is to uphold law and order, and certainly, to defend the status quo. Among the women, there are the vigilant grannies and the prostitute underclass. The former's job is to watch out for the potential threat from the latter in order to keep the neighbourhood clean and safe. The effect of these media representations is not just to turn ordinary residents into vigilant citizens. They simultaneously produce conservative urban legends, normalize gender and class hierarchies and reinforce stereotypes about the divides between Beijing natives and migrant workers. In these media stories, vigilantism is not an effect of state failure or neoliberal outsourcing of law and order. In contrast, state-sanctioned articulations of vigilantism in the tightly controlled media space

of China blur the boundaries between state and non-state policing and between responsible citizens and vigilantes (Akarsu, 2020, p. 12). Finally, the figure of the elderly volunteer appears to perfectly complement the recalling of a Maoist society of total control in which the state adopts the method of an ‘all-pervasive surveillance apparatus’ conducted through ‘people watching people’ (Los, 2004; Wood, 2005).

In contrast to these media representations, however, my time with actual elderly volunteers revealed something quite different. While the complicity between citizens and policing certainly exists, their relationship with changing urban spaces is seldom investigated. I have found that community volunteering is way more than just being a neighbourhood watch within a bounded residential community, as projected in the media. In contrast to the popular understanding that these volunteers are old residents, many volunteers with whom I talked no longer live in the community they serve. Their volunteering is very much about going back to neighbourhoods where they used to live in the past, but getting to learn about new public and commercial spaces and infrastructural facilities that now exist, and sharing this information with strangers.

Wayfinding at the Orange House

‘Where is Fenglian Mall?’ ‘Go straight, cross the bridge and you will be there.’ ‘Where to take the 112 bus?’ ‘Turn right, walk for 500 metres, and then cross the street using the tunnel walkway. You will find it once you come out of the tunnel.’ ‘Where is Galaxy Soho?’ ‘See the building that looks like a spaceship across the street? Go down the tunnels to cross the boulevard.’ ‘How can I do the subway no. 6 transfer?’ Once the curtains of the Orange House got lifted at eight in the morning, passers-by come by and ask lots of questions. People even queue to ask questions. The Orange House space where community volunteers serve is always noisy and full of information.

For the few hundred elderly volunteers in Happy Lane, reporting for duty at the Orange House at the cross-section of two main boulevards in central Beijing every other week for four hours has been an immensely satisfying experience. Through a glass window, they provide directions to hundreds of people who ask for specific buildings, transfer directions, locations of malls and companies in the busy commercial area on regular weekdays. When several pedestrians, up to four and five of them, approach the window and asked questions at around the same time, the two volunteers have to compete with each other to be heard. The Orange House booth also provides water, a first-aid kit, a cycle pump and, most importantly, several battery phone chargers. Some people simply stop by and stand for 15 minutes to charge their smartphone batteries. I have seen people stop by for a quick cup of

water during the hot summer weather. One volunteer shared that she once gave a painkiller to a woman who felt sick in the heat, who came inside to rest before moving on. In the official narrative, the Orange House is reported as a space where senior citizens serve and helped passers-by, and where ‘their smiles communicate warmth and light’ (Jintai Zixun, 2020).

Volunteer sites of direction-giving (*zhilu* 指路) or wayfinding, such as the Orange House in east side Beijing and the Blue Cube in west side Beijing, as well as many others now located in major cities in China, are becoming popular community volunteering spots, designed to engage local residents—mainly retirees—to serve an ever-growing busy urban development (bj.wenming.cn, 2018; wenming.cn, 2015). The Orange House is served by about 200 volunteers living in the seven *shequ* close to the Chaoyangmen subway stations.⁴ Serving roughly twice a month since 2013, the few hundred retirees are organized into a roster by the Chaowai Jiedao (朝外街道) government in the Beijing CBD. Specifically, the ‘Chaowai Jiedao Community Service Centre (朝外街道社區服務中心)’ sponsors the basic operation of the Orange House. The Community Service Centre was set up in 2006 after the Sixth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee meeting on social management innovation (社會管理創新), which started the building of a more service-oriented government and involving non-state actors in neighbourhood governance (*China News*, 2006).

Many volunteers with whom I talked engage in this wayfinding as part of their bi-weekly social gatherings. They take pleasure in both serving the community and meeting friends new and old. They shared with me the challenges of memorizing new and old buildings in the area and learning numerous new transport routes. Volunteers not only have to keep up with rapid changes of the new buildings and transit lines proliferating in the area, they have to come up with immediate answers about such rapid development for the eager public. Once a question is thrown, there is an expectation that a correct and prompt answer will be provided. No wonder so many volunteers joked with me that they had to study the constantly changing maps in order to fulfil this volunteer work. Underlying their service is a common purpose: to provide hundreds and thousands of people with orientation in a rapidly growing and changing central business district of the capital.

Auntie Zhao told me, ‘We started under a big umbrella when the Beijing Olympics began! It was burning hot during the Games but we all fought the heat and insisted on serving the people.’ The same group of volunteers, comprising about 200 residents from seven communities (*shequ*), proposed that the *Chaowai Jiedao* government make the volunteer station permanent after the Olympics. The

⁴ These *shequ* are Fangcaodi (芳草地), Tidong (體東), Jiqingli (吉慶裏), Jixiangli (吉祥裏), Sanfengli (三豐裏), Yabaoli (雅寶裏) and Tianfuyuan (天福園).



Figure 2.2. Volunteers in their uniform posing outside the Orange House, Beijing. Author's photograph (2015). Author's photo.

jiedao government proceeded to remodel the original police kiosk into a volunteer station in the colour of orange. Subsequently, the government equipped this station with air-conditioning in summer and heating in winter (Figure 2.2). Over the last seven years, the Orange House has acquired a water dispenser, uniforms for the volunteers and more. Schools and companies in the area also send their students and staff to help out with the service roster.

Once the long line of passers-by with questions is gone, the two volunteers can sit down and sip some water. They shut the glass window to better insulate the space and wait for the next round of inquiries. I conducted my interviews with more than 15 of them, mostly during these brief breaks in the summer of 2015 and 2016. At the beginning, most of them recited media lines to me when asked about their motivations. Some of the most common responses were, 'We have nothing to do at home. It is nice to get out and talk to people.' During the interviews, I often heard them repeat official party-state slogans, 'I am happy when giving' (*wo fengxian wo kuaile* 我奉獻我快樂), 'radiate remaining heat and improve oneself' (*yao fahui yure, tisheng ziji* 要發揮余熱, 提升自己) and 'catch up with the tempo and fulfil oneself' (*gengshang shidai bufa, shixian ziji* 跟上時代步伐, 實現自己). When asked how they could keep coming to serve on the hottest and coldest days, they often said, 'We are determined and have awareness' (思想覺悟高). Once we know this is

a good deed, we will keep doing it.’ The best response I got was, ‘Always Follow the Party!’ The longer I sat, the more complicated their chatter became:

We fought to become volunteers for the Olympics. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. First we were told to be tourists in the newly built Olympic Park. Our job was to stroll in the park so the park would not look too empty for the cameras (保證不是人太少). Then later we were told that we had to play audience in the Paralympics (*dang guanzhong*) because there was not enough audience. If we go, it will be better for the camera (我們去, 比較好看). During the Olympics, we were also told to stroll in the Ritan Park because there were many foreigners. Then, in the later campaign to ‘build civilized city district’ (創文明城區), we were to hold a flag at major traffic points and make sure there was no litter on the street. I remember we even chased after a flying plastic bag [all laugh]! All these works were so tiring and there was no remuneration. This direction giving [in the Orange House] is nice! No rain and no burning sun! It is a good job here (這裡幸福). We are to ensure safety, and to report to higher authority if we spot some suspicious people. Some foreigners came over and ask if we support the government. We all said we do. Money? Absolutely no reward. We do this at our own will. Sometimes they (the residents’ committee) hand us small gifts, such as a piece of soap or some liquid detergent. Last year it was a small package of green beans. But it was not even fresh. I think they make us take away those expired stocks [laugh]!

This excerpt from the interview reveals something quite interesting. First, community volunteering is neither just about neighbourhood surveillance within a bounded residential community nor giving directions inside a fixed station. In fact, elderly volunteers were given responsibilities (*renwu* 任務) or opportunities to visit various newly built spaces, including parks and stadiums, for all kinds of official events and media coverage. Whether it was for the state news media coverage or for government clean-up city campaigns, these grannies went out a lot! Also, even though they sometimes are instructed to patrol the surrounding neighbourhoods, none of the volunteers with whom I talked had ever spotted any ‘suspicious elements’ in the last few years of service. None did the sexist and class profiling like the grannies reported in the media cited above. In fact, all were critical about those news and media reports about the Chaoyang Masses having superpowers and insiders’ knowledge about the celebrities’ activities, not to mention getting monetary rewards. All insisted to me they had never been rewarded with any money.

The truth is that many aspects of a neighborhood community have changed in the capital since the Olympics. One major change was urban renewal. Many old *hutong* neighborhoods were torn down and rebuilt into new commercial buildings. Second, many older residents rented out their *danwei*-associated apartments and moved to new apartment housing outside the city centre. In fact, quite a few

volunteers at the Orange House no longer lived in the seven *shequ* mentioned above. They only came back once a month to serve at the Orange House for reasons of nostalgia and to rebuild a sense of community. One 70-year-old man told me specifically that he missed his courtyard housing in the old *hutong* very much, although it had been demolished during the last round of urban renewal. Coming back to serve, he could only see a multi-storey commercial building but he loved walking around it. Volunteering was a way for him to be nostalgic and remain part of the community. Another volunteer, Li, a retired English language teacher, commented on the class bias she had about volunteering:

I used to think that volunteering was associated with those residents' committee people who are low culture and low *suzhi* (素質). I thought the volunteers were those unemployed people who needed to 'work for the dole' in exchange for subsidies [funded by the municipal labour bureau]. It is the biggest barrier for me to identify with them [the residents' committee]. But this wayfinding [managed by the Community Service Centre] is a good thing. I have moved out of this part of the city but coming back here means learning about so many things and reaching out to new people. Many friends are shocked when they heard me giving directions to foreigners in English!

Similar to Li, many informants at the Orange House differentiated themselves from those community volunteers who were given a monthly stipend to help out with street patrolling and street clean-up. They said, 'We are not those volunteers. We are the *real* volunteers.' They also emphasised to me how they could help migrants (*waidiren* 外地人) through the wayfinding service at the Orange House. Although they never quite articulated their service as a form of civic participation or extending the rights to a certain marginalized group, the ways in which they understood volunteering were already quite different from the media representation of volunteers conducting classist and sexist profiling within a bounded neighbourhood.

In the Happy Lane community, there was a second Orange House about 1000 metres away from the one where I did most of my interviews. The second Orange House had been served by lawyer volunteers, providing basic legal consultations to residents, since 2013. The *Chaowai Jiedao* Community Service Centre contacted interested law firms in the area and asked for free legal consultation provision. These lawyer volunteers came twice a week in the morning to answer people's queries about setting up a will, conflict resolution with tenants not paying rent or putting together a notarized document. The service was very popular among residents due to its practicality. The lawyer volunteers offered free consultation at a preliminary level of inquiry. Additional services were charged if residents wanted to pursue matters further.

The story of lawyer volunteers almost never appeared in dominant media stories of community volunteers. Some official media would paint this legal volunteering as a way to build the rule of law at the community level (Chaoyangqu Wenminban, 2013a; Renmin Zixun, 2021). The lawyer volunteers, however, saw their work as a means of upholding the public interest at the grassroots level. Until recently, they have held talks about the rights of platform delivery workers and school bullying (Dentons, 2021). In popular media and government discourse, however, both the lawyers and the wayfinding grannies are lumped together and simply grouped as ‘community volunteers’. Even though the two groups of volunteers understand their service quite differently, either could easily fit into the surveillance effort advocated by the party-state or the media.

Last, by talking to the director of the Community Service Centre that funded the two Orange Houses, I gained the sense that the *jiedao* government had been trying to find new solutions to emerging social problems in the residential community. The director was aware that the old model of the residents’ committee led by retiree grannies no longer really functioned. Promoting the new concept of ‘social management innovation’, the central government decided to set up the Community Service Centre to carry out professional and proper social work services. By ‘social management’, the central government hopes to slowly shift local governance from the previous model of control increasingly towards a more service-oriented one (*fuwuxing zhengfu* 服務型政府) that involves non-state actors, market forces and professionals for practical problem-solving. In fact, *jiedao* governments nationwide have gradually started to build community service centres. For instance, instead of relying on the residents’ committee’s grannies to reach out to family members with mental health problems, which was the way in the past, the community service centre would now send in professional social workers and psychologists to these families in need. The services and associated personnel would be paid for (*goumai* 購買) by the *jiedao* government.

The community service centres first assess and target social groups in need and subsequently engage experts in different ways. The free legal consultation volunteered by law firms was one way of satisfying a high level of demand for all kinds of legal inquiries among the aging population. At the same time, the community service centre was collaborating with social work service providers when I interviewed the director: one provided training to grassroots residents’ committee members and volunteers; one built corporate and government relations on social responsibility; one provided youth services; and one targeted the aging population. This new direction of governance has been noted by scholars (Heberer & Gobel, 2011; Tang, 2023) but related discussion continues to be framed around whether or not China has an authoritarian state structure. Little attention goes to residents’ horizontal relationships with urban transformation and emerging concerns. Most

ironically, the official or dominant media story of community volunteering also tends to reinforce the stereotype of community volunteers as a form of social control instead of an innovation of these governance changes.⁵

Chaoyangmen and the Changing Central Business District

After weeks of sitting with the grannies and listening to pedestrians' questions, I started to venture out to some of the most asked and mentioned venues and subway lines. I figured that even though wayfinding might have been useful for tourists during the Olympics because they were unfamiliar with the city, it is needed far more afterwards because of how rapidly the urban landscape is changing. First, the Orange House is located right outside of the Chaoyangmen subway station on the East second ring road, at the crossroads between Chaoyangmenlu and Chaoyangnei and Chaoyangwai Dajie, in the Dongcheng (Eastside District) of Beijing. The crossroads are one of the most politically iconic, commercialized and culturally crucial intersections in the capital. The northeast corner of the crossroads is where the Sinopec China Building and the Ministry of Culture are located. Across the road in the northwest corner are the China National Offshore Oil Building and the China Telecom building. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Justice are in the southeast corner. On the southwest corner is the Galaxy Soho office and retail complex designed by Zaha Hadid.

Two to three big blocks radiating from the Orange House contain the following landmarks, for which many people asked for directions: Beijing Fuhua Building (where the World Bank China office is located), the Beijing Workers Stadium (where lots of concert and sport events are held), the China People's Insurance Company and China's Agriculture Bank, China Airlines Building, the Poly Building (the office building owned by the People's Liberation Army), the Nanxincang Culture and Leisure Street, and the Swiss Hotel Beijing Hong Kong Macau Centre. Many people specifically asked about the China Guangda Bank and the China Communication Bank because they are located inside the China Insurance Tower, east of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. People also asked about the Chaoyang District Government for ID card applications, licences and all kinds of permit

⁵ The *jiedao* government once launched an online policy platform called *Wangluo Wenzheng* (ask policy online) but it has been shut down. Its aim was to facilitate residents to voice opinions on their daily needs and suggest related policy changes. The online platform allowed residents to reflect issues and propose solutions online directly. It could also track government responses for specific cases. The idea was to make sure departments at the *jiedao* take residents' comments and suggestions seriously (Chaoyangqu wenminban, 2013b; *Gongyi China*, 2013). Although this online policy suggestion platform is no longer operational, it reflects how local government was eager to respond to new issues and problems.

documentations. Many asked about the Chaoyang Hospital, the Military Hospital, the major secondary school, and the Fangcaodi primary school. The area is packed with banking and insurance services, municipal facilities, supermarkets, shopping malls, KTV, cinema, restaurants, and cafes. Major five-star and embassy-related hotels, including the Crown Plaza, St Regis, Kerry Hotel, Regent Beijing, Marriot, and Raffles City Beijing, are located right alongside shopping and eating options such as the Fullink mall, the Nandao Building, the Huapu supermarket and the Bainaohui. Another much-inquired after landmark in the area is the Ritan Park, where Chinese emperors performed rites at the Temple of the Sun in the dynastic past. Surrounding the Ritan Park is an embassy district where foreign diplomats congregate and reside. Many tourists and families asked about the park and many passers-by asked about these embassy offices for visa applications. The embassies of 14 countries, including the United Kingdom and Singapore, are all located in this area. Although the area is heavily guarded by uniformed soldiers, it is also filled with numerous non-Chinese eateries and shops, high-end hotels, and international schools. In short, the Orange House where the grannies are posted is where major government ministries, national state-owned enterprises, foreign embassies and top-level transnational finance and banking offices are concentrated. Since the Olympics, the area keeps expanding with major companies and hotels providing jobs to thousands of people.

Apart from the above destinations, many at the Orange House asked how to transfer to subway line no. 6 in 2015. The no. 6 subway line was planned much more ambitiously around the Beijing Olympics. The very first subway line no. 1 in Beijing was an east–west line constructed in 1971, with only a few stations. The Chaoyangmen subway station was originally on the subway no. 2 circular line, consisting of 15 stations. By 2013, subway line no. 6 was added. Parallel to subway line no. 1, the horizontal line no. 6 connecting the east and west of the capital now stretches 52.9 kilometres and has gained 33 stations along it in the last 10 years (with two more to be added). What is so impressive about subway line no. 6 is that 10 out of its 33 stations are transfer stations. And because some of these transfer stations overlap with two other subway lines, line no. 6 could potentially take passengers to as many as 23 directions. Today the line has an average carrying capacity of 600,000 people every day. No wonder so many people asked questions about it!

Another landmark about which many people inquired at the Orange House was the newly constructed Galaxy Soho (Figure 2.3), just a five-minute walk from the subway station. Designed by the world famous Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid and built from 2009 to 2012, Galaxy Soho is an architectural wonder in the old capital centre. The commercial space consists of four domed towers of a special asymmetric and curvilinear design, with towers connected by bridges and



Figure 2.3. Galaxy Soho and its open public space in the middle.
Source: <https://journey.tw/galaxy-soho>. Author's screen capture.

platforms, creating an open and fluid environment. Hadid once described Galaxy Soho as a reinvention of the classical Chinese courtyard, which generates an immersive and enveloping experience in the heart of Beijing. What is particularly interesting about Galaxy Soho is how it is used by local residents, in a way that is radically different from the developer's expectations. Many with whom I talked said that residents liked to flock to Galaxy Soho open space for open-air plaza dancing and to hang out in the area in the evenings, instead of for shopping and business purposes. Granny volunteers unanimously liked it for attending plaza dancing, a free activity allowed by the property management. Galaxy Soho forms a big contrast to all the other major ministries and state-owned enterprises just across the major boulevard in the area, which built high walls and block the public and residences from viewing and using their spaces.

I could spot Galaxy Soho immediately beyond the China Ministry of Foreign Affairs when sitting inside the Orange House. However, it was not until much later in 2017 that I attended a book event inside the Galaxy Soho and learnt more about it. The book event was attended by many NGOs in the capital and we were discussing waste management. I was surprised at how the commercial space of Galaxy Soho gathered voices from the learned public of the city. Later, I found that the Swanspot Café (Hongzhi Café 鴻芷咖啡) inside Galaxy Soho was a nationally famous charity café advocating for the environment, education, disability, organic agriculture and poverty alleviation. Funded by various charity foundations, the café had hosted

thousands of book events and seminars, while at the same time promoting fair-trade coffee.⁶ In short, the Galaxy Soho provided a much-needed commercial and public space in the highly politicized capital centre.

The Beijing CBD has undergone many changes. Before 2000, the area was dominated by state-owned enterprises and thousands of old courtyard *hutong* houses. The municipal government's large-scale urban renewal plan demolished them all to build commercial buildings and multi-storey apartment buildings, with proper plumbing, electricity, bathrooms and toilets. With the urban renewal plan accommodating more and responding to commercial needs, this also means existing residential communities have forever changed. Residents are no longer bound to just one state-owned enterprise or one *danwei* housing area. People have moved around so much that they no longer know their neighbours. At the same time, urban renewal plans and the improvement in public transit mean older residents who have moved out of their previous neighbourhoods could easily come back to the city centre to engage in service. Many community volunteers with whom I talked came back to the service primarily to reconnect with old friends socially. Also, with this part of Beijing filled with foreign embassies and highly internationalized social spaces, it is no longer realistic for volunteers to watch out for foreign or 'suspicious elements' as the panopticon media angle claims. At the same time, both the *jiedao* level governments and community volunteers need to shift gears. Instead of doing conventional street patrolling in the bounded neighbourhood, elderly volunteers serve by providing information on changing urban landmarks, visiting new public spaces and trying out new subway lines in order to respond to the most updated orientation needs. Professional lawyers are also recruited to become community volunteers to offer legal consultation for the public good. As urban operators, community volunteers have connected the millions of people to an upgraded capital centre with new spaces, transit facilities and new social problems popping up at an unprecedented speed and scale.

Conclusion: Wayfinding as a form of Bottom-Up Dwelling and Auto-construction of Community

In many ways, the presence of elderly volunteers and their wayfinding booths is symbolic of the rapid commercialization and urbanization that is occurring in cities all over China. The truth is that people need help with brand new subway lines, the latest urban landmarks, newly built museums and office buildings in

⁶ Although the café was a dynamic 'public sphere' in the capital, the rental cost and diminishing profit ultimately crushed the business in 2018 (Han, 2018).

the expanding city. The capital's constant hosting of international events has also meant that the service industry, high-end offices and shopping malls are pulling in more tourists and migrant workers domestically and from overseas. This chapter has argued against a top-down perspective of seeing community volunteering as merely part of a panopticon society, despite that sometimes being what the party-state and related media propaganda has intended to achieve and shape. I suggest we need to position these elderly volunteers in the context of the ever-expanding urban experiences, infrastructural improvement and governance that are changing the city, the city government and relations between the state and society. While dominant media continue to feature the granny volunteers against the backdrop of an old Beijing *hutong*, or a close-knit community, this chapter situates them in the extended infrastructural networks, consumption spaces and governance reform of a mega city's modernity. It pays attention to the transit transformation, city building and the material use of public spaces that plugged people into systems of new urban provisioning (Collier, 2011). It shows the urban spatial changes surrounding the Orange House—the postmodern architecture, the embassy areas and the concentration of skyscrapers of banks and super state-owned enterprises have forever changed the material setup of the 'bonded community'. Older residents can easily be sidelined—even alienated—in such a top-down process of state bureaucratic planning and market mechanism. Many have also been relocated to far-away satellite residential districts in the process of urban renewal.

In this context, volunteering could be a way for elderly residents to auto-construct and re-familiarize themselves with their own altered communal space. By auto-construction, I borrow a concept from urban studies to refer to the ways citizens conduct place-making and imagine a better future step by step according to the resources they are able to gather at each moment (Caldeira, 2016). In urban China, elderly residents insisted on the duty shifts on a bi-weekly basis. They kept the Orange House operational over the years by requesting and adding equipment such as a water dispenser, air-conditioning, and later, uniforms. Gradually gathering resources, they claimed their sense of place ownership, and belonging in a hyper-urbanized neighbourhood where they had once lived and worked for decades. In this process, they improvised upon and participated in national campaigns, therefore re-engaging community, meeting socially and resisting the isolation of both the urban relocation and empty nesting. By the time this chapter was being finalized, a few new landmarks were set to be launched in the Beijing CBD, including the Z Generation Urban Innovation Centre, the Dongyue Temple Cultural Plaza, and a new shopping centre called the Box. Whether these new consumption spaces alienate older residents from using the neighbourhood or whether they would be modelled after the Galaxy Soho, which allows more public participation and bottom-up use of space, remains unknown.

At the same time, it is in the meticulous practices of studying the changing city maps, introducing landmarks to passersby and pointing to new directions that these older residents partially forget how the spatial violence of urban development subsumed their lives and memories. It is perhaps only when we pay attention to these unspectacular practices of place-making and auto-construction that we can get closer to the authentic and non-ideological experiences of infrastructural urbanism in China. At the same time, these volunteers do not reject—in fact, they even partially accept—the official propaganda of shaping residents into surveillance agents, therefore making their spatial occupation or bottom-up dwelling more legitimate and aligning with the official discourse. Finally, wayfinding services such as those offered by the Orange House are not limited to the capital city. Before the pandemic, there was a country-wide initiative of organizing retirees to serve at direction-giving booths in many cities (Hu, 2017; Pan, 2019; xkb.com.cn, 2019).

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Museum Storytellers, National Treasures and Critical Guided Tours

Abstract

This chapter joins the discussion of museums as arenas of ideological power and nation-state control of historical narratives. It examines the museum volunteer by comparing it to the historical figure of the storyteller and his disappearance in Walter Benjamin's critique of capitalist modern life consumed by news information. Following museum volunteers in television program representations and in actual museum tours, I share two findings. First, museum television speaks of museum volunteers as cultured, respectable and nationalist. Second, the actual practice of museum volunteers does not necessarily follow the official narrative of making representations of artefacts an automatic medium for the party-state to speak as an 'unselfconscious lineal descendant' of the grand imperial China. Instead, I show how volunteers give a different experience of the museum from the one presented on television. I reveal museum volunteering as a new form of urban storytelling practice that ironically motivates citizens to come up with counter-narratives that destabilize the linear nationalist imagination. This chapter examines the meaning of cultural volunteering associated with the phenomenon of China's museum fever. I investigate how Chinese citizens experience national treasures and imagine the nation in an expanding national museum landscape and related urban cultural infrastructure.

Keywords: Museum volunteers, museum television, museum fever, nationalist imagination of artefacts

There were two extraordinarily long queues at the National Palace Museum (NPM, *Gugong Bowuyuan* 故宫博物院) in the Forbidden City of Beijing in 2015 and 2017. They stemmed from the NPM's special exhibits showcasing the original handscrolls of two ancient paintings: *Along the River During Qing Ming Festival* (*Qingming Shanghe Tu* 清明上河圖) by the Song dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145) and *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* (*Qianli Jiangshan Tu* 千里江山圖) by the Northern Song dynasty artist Wang Ximeng (1096–1119).¹ The line to get to see the first paint-

¹ Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During Qing Ming Festival* (*Qingming Shanghe Tu*), Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), ink and color on silk, height: 24.8 cm, width: 528 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing, <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228226.html>. Wang Ximeng, *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, 1113, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), ink and color on silk, 51.5 × 1191.5 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing, <https://en.dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2015-03-27/843.html>.

ing in 2015 was a shocking average of six to eight hours' wait in rain or shine, from morning to midnight. The long queue came back when the second painting was displayed two years later in 2017. Locals got up at 3am to start lining up at the Forbidden City for a number. In both exhibits, the number of people admitted to see the paintings was over 10,000 daily and the NPM extended its opening hours to after midnight to accommodate everyone with a ticket.

The significance of these two exhibits is paramount in terms of the number of visitors and the accommodating capacity of the museum as a cultural infrastructure in the capital city. The extensive nature of the public discussion and media coverage related to these exhibits was also a record since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. News headlines of the two exhibits covered not only the aesthetic details of the handscrolls, but also elderly people fainting while waiting in queues and ambulances called in to rescue art lovers. In the end, not only were the exhibits a major talking point in the country for months, but the queue itself also became a collective experience and memory among the hundreds and thousands of visitors. People who were once in line have formed special spatial, temporal and virtual connections with each other. Their experience of waiting and the pleasure of taking selfies with the paintings were subjects of sharing on social media during and after the exhibits. Since then, an 'imagined community' surrounding museum visits and experiencing ancient history and culture has formed.

But artefacts are not only collectively gazed at in museums; they are also visually consumed on the nation's most popular medium: television. In the wake of these exhibits, a new genre of museum television production arose, such as the programs *Masters in the Forbidden City* (*Wo zai Gugong Xiu Wenwu* 我在故宫修文物) (2016), *National Treasure* (*Guojia Baozang* 國家寶藏) (2017) and *Every Treasure Tells a Story* (*Ruguo Wenwu Hui Shuohua* 如果文物會說話) (2018). TV museum programs had often been boring in the past, but these are entertaining, attractive and captivating. With some episodes ranked top of all national documentary shows of the year, the television programs raised enormous interest among the public about the history of museums, their collections and artefact conservation in the history of China. Clearly, the television shows, viewed by billions, reinforce such imagined community of the Chinese nation.

These shows also affected the number of people applying to become museum volunteers all over the country. When I visited in 2018, in Beijing alone, the annual number of applicants spilled over 10,000. Citizens fought through rounds of assessment to qualify as a museum volunteer. Museum volunteers do not just recite official scripts when offering a free guided tour. They mediate and elevate the experience of museum exhibits by providing extra background information about artefacts. They teach the audience how to look for certain details and tell interesting stories. Their interpretation is often historically informed and their narratives

weave together the randomly placed objects into an attractive story. This chapter examines the meaning of cultural volunteering associated with the phenomenon of China's museum fever. Through looking into the ways citizens conduct museum practices, it investigates how Chinese citizens experience national treasures and imagine communities in an expanding relics context, national museum landscape, and related urban cultural infrastructure.

The chapter joins the discussion of museums as arenas of ideological power and nation-state control of historical narratives. 'For museums, and the museumising imagination, are both profoundly political' (Anderson, 1991, p. 178). Benedict Anderson has long argued that the museum is what allows the nation-state to appear as the guardian of an ancient antiquity and tradition, and therefore, its right to govern. This form of political museumising, by which Anderson refers to ways the secular state displays desacralized monuments of the natives in the cause of its own legitimacy, with references relating to both the colonial and post-independence states in Asia, is highly relevant in China. In the recent wave of museum fever in the country (Shan, 2019), artefacts of heterogeneous imperial and spiritual meanings have entered into what Anderson (1991, p. 182) terms the 'profaning processes' and become a 'general logo' of the nation-state. Museum artefacts, and their numerous replicas, have become the 'infinite quotidian reproducibility of its regalia that revealed the real power of the state' (1991, p. 183).

Museums have been arenas of ideological battle in China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (Denton, 2014; Hamlish, 1995; Mitter, 2009; Varutti, 2014; Watson, 1995). For a long period after coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prided itself at being a modern revolutionary force, challenging and even destroying the old and traditional culture of the dynastic empire. After 1949, historical artefacts were preserved, but museum development was not yet on the priority list of Mao's national agricultural, industrial, and later economic development. Even during Deng Xiaoping's reforms of China, many museums in the country were poorly curated and sparsely attended. They also charged entry fees that, although small, the majority of the population could not afford. With the new emphasis on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中華民族偉大復興), associated with the Beijing Olympics and a series of mega events (Vickers, 2007), a change in both the older narrative and government's museum management gradually occurred. First, the party-state claims the CCP is the direct successor of a glorious imperial Chinese empire (*tianxia* 天下), including its culture, tradition and political organizations, such as the Confucian hierarchy and the Legalist discipline (Qiang, 2008, p. 149). With a political discourse embracing the past and a huge budgetary input, the entire museum industry has since taken off. The number of exhibits has exploded, thousands of new museums have been built and massive numbers of citizens have been recruited as museum volunteers.

Second, many museums across China began to upgrade venues and adopt the new policy of free admission, starting in 2008. It was a turning point for many museums, becoming open and reaching out to the public, admitting millions—many of them uneducated or migrants born in rural villages—often for the first time. At the same time, museums started programs of recruiting and training volunteers, and started to offer free guided tours to visitors regularly. The multiple guided tours I joined during fieldwork were all packed with audiences eager to get further behind the glass display. If the representations and reproducibility of museum artefacts in its various forms are the vital ‘social grammar’ in nationalist imaginations (Anderson, 1991, p. 185), this chapter shows how museum infrastructure, museum television, and museum volunteering further reinforce such social grammar in today’s China. Together, they form a major drive to promote an economically and culturally prosperous China.

Museum volunteering, I argue, is a rather new and urban experience associated with an expanding museum urbanscape and increasing numbers of exhibits that demand more communication. Museum volunteers fill that huge gap between more museum space, exhibit contents, and a more educated public eager for history education. I show that the museum volunteer might be akin to the figure of the storyteller in premodern society. In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin (1968) uses the work of nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov to illustrate the role of storytelling in society, the danger of its disappearance, and how it shapes our relationship to truth and memory. At the turn of the century, Benjamin lamented industrial modern life having a collective delusion of mistaking news information for truth and meaning. He saw that print media of newspaper bombarded citizens and commodified people’s experience. Being nostalgic, Benjamin regarded storytellers as having the ability to rescue unofficial versions of history. One might predict how museum volunteers take on such ability and practice on a much larger scale in today’s China. Between a state-monopolized historiography, the influx of information, vision and senses from the internet, television and smartphones, Chinese citizens-turned-museum volunteers operate on a unique ground to offer vernacular versions of knowledge and perspectives.

Following museum volunteers in media representations and in actual museum tours, I have found that their service does not necessarily follow the official narrative of making representations of artefacts an automatic medium for the party-state to speak as an ‘unselfconscious lineal descendant’ of imperial China. I show how volunteers offer experiences of the museum different from that presented on television and in standard museum scripts. If the party-state is bound to explain artefacts in an eschatological orientation, the museum volunteers do it in a profane way, giving a worldly view of the course of things, just like the storytellers

of the past did. Thus, museum volunteering is destabilizing the narrative of descent in the official nationalist version of history. In the official narrative of history, the emperor is always the force moving the nation forward; in the volunteers' alternative version of history, the emperor symbolizes a legacy of corruption and periods of stagnation for the Chinese civilization—a lesson that should be learnt and avoided in the future.

Theoretically, I engage the notion of bifurcated history by Prasenjit Duara (1995), who argues that the modern nation-state often normalizes a narrative of 'discent' by privileging a particular hyper-nationalist narrative over a range of heterogeneous historical and cultural practices (Duara, 1995, p. 66). Duara created the word 'discent' to understand the porosity of the two words 'descent' and/or 'dissent' in order to reveal how the tracing of official history is often linked to differentiating the self from an 'other', such as the ethnic minority, or racialized indigenous people. My fieldwork reveals that museum volunteering deviates from such an official narrative of discent; instead, it has become a new form of popular urban practice that responds to controversies of access, inequality and corruption. The volunteer opportunity also motivates citizens to come up with counter-narratives or narratives of dissent that could destabilize the linear nationalist imagination of artefacts-as-nationalist.

In this chapter I discuss my visits to museum exhibits and attendance as part of museum guided tours led by volunteers in Beijing from 2015 to 2018. In these three years, I had the chance to engage a few museums deeply, built good relations with museum staff and listened to multiple tour narratives by museum volunteers. To protect my informants' identities, I anonymize the names of these museums. I have joined more than 15 tours in different exhibit halls, and at different times listened to the same tour offered by different volunteers. I have also conducted over 20 interviews with volunteers of different ages, genders, and careers in both Guangzhou and Beijing. I also talked to staff concerned with volunteer training, management and museum scripts.

This chapter is presented in two parts. The first looks at a new form of museum television and examines the associated rhetoric and representation strategies. I show how museum television affirms the values of the imperial past, the tradition of patrilineality and the nation as a subject of linear history. The second part follows museum volunteers who appear on national television shows, in popular media, and at museum venues. By putting the multiple representations and actual practices of museum volunteering into the bigger context of the museum fever, I show a complex making of volunteer practice that emphasizes vernacular knowledge and a more civic-oriented historical memory amidst an expanding museum urbanscape.

The Museum Fever

It is not an exaggeration to say that for the first time in the history of the PRC, museum artefacts inside the Forbidden City are becoming increasingly available to the public. Even after the republic was established and the Forbidden City Palace turned into a national museum in 1925, most Chinese nationals could visit the Palace only through walking on a restricted pathway. It was not until around 2015 that the National Palace Museum (NPM) started to vastly increase its exhibit area. Many Chinese attributed the effort to the museum director, Shan Jixiang. Previously unseen royal treasures are now available for public consumption at unprecedented scales and speeds. The museum reform is not limited to the NPM in Beijing, but has spread to the thousands of museums all over the country.

While museum fever peaked around the time of this 2015 expansion, several shifts beginning in the last twenty years laid the foundation for this boom. First, the National Museum of China in Beijing started to recruit its first batch of volunteers in 2002 and made 2002 the founding year of museum volunteering. In a way, museum volunteering started way before most urban forms of volunteering, many of which only grew out of mega events such as the Olympics. In the next few years, construction of new museums began. Approximately 100 new museums have opened every year since 2002. In 2001, there were 2,200 museums in China. This number shot to 3,589 by 2011 and to 5,772 by 2021. In 2011 alone, 349 new museums opened. This means almost one new museum was constructed every day in China. Not only has the number of museums grown by 60 per cent, and the number of exhibits by 114 per cent, but the number of visitors has increased by 119 per cent in the period 2011–21, according to Baidu (cnr.cn, 2022; Xu & Le Guay, 2013). By 2022, 3,500 new museums have been built since 2001.

Second, new state policies and funding reinforced museum development. In 2010, the Chinese State Council proposed a blueprint for the ‘Twelfth Five-Year Plan’ for the development of the National Cultural Artefacts Museums (國家文物博物館發展事業‘十二五’計劃). Among numerous suggestions, the policy encouraged government support for the maintenance of private museums, constructions and collections. It stipulated that every city with a population of one million people should have at least one major museum and the government would provide the related budget in the 292 cities with that population level. Government funding for museums has since become very generous. From 2011 until 2015, around 140 billion yuan (US\$19.58 billion) was allocated to cultural heritage protection (Bollo & Zhang, 2019, p. 21).

Third, spectacular and major exhibits also contributed to the growth of museum culture. From 2009 to 2010, the Beijing National Palace Museum and the Taipei National Palace Museum had a historical collaboration to put together pieces

of an ancient painting, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain* (富春山居圖), separated across the Taiwan Straits. They also started to exchange artefacts for exhibition. At the same time, the Shanghai Expo was held in 2010, attracting over 73 million visitors, making museum visits a new public culture (Lu, 2010). With the policy of ‘Internet + Chinese civilization’, museums actively turned to digital exhibits, museum games, mobile applications, education tools, and virtual reality to attract audiences. Together, museums and exhibits have redefined new urban landscapes. In fact, the high numbers of museums have allowed the Beijing government to recently mark the capital as a museum city (Ma, 2023).

Sofia Bollo and Yu Zhang (2019) consider museums in contemporary China to be undergoing a radical reconfiguration of policies, not only to adapt to the market economy but also to establish Chinese cultural diplomacy and a form of national soft power. They argue for a notion of the ‘musealization of China’ as museums now operate to extract everything from the country’s natural, cultural and historical environments. While curating new exhibits, museums countrywide also revamped museum shops and product creative designs, kicking off a new trend of museum consumption. In 2017 alone, not only did the exhibit of *The Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* painting generate a record number of visitors, but the income sales of related design products reached a record 1,500 million yuan (about US\$20 million) (Xinhuanet.com, 2019). This chapter continues this discussion of the musealization of China and examines the museum as a new urban experience within the context of urban infrastructure and cultural productions (Lord et al., 2019). The next section on museum television programs is part of the broader cultural industry of the new museum urbancape.

Mediating Artefacts: History and Gender Through Museum Television

From 2016 until 2018, a series of museum television shows forever changed the way artefacts would be seen. First, in 2016, China Central Television (CCTV) launched a documentary television series entitled *Masters in the Forbidden City* (*Wo zai Gugong Xiu Wenwu* 我在故宫修文物), featuring craftsmen mending artefacts in the NPM. The show had the highest possible viewership of over 100 million. On the youth-oriented online platform Bilibili alone, the *Masters* had a click rate of over two million (Xu, 2017). The program shifted the spotlight from the conventional grandiosity of royals to ordinary craftsmen. The show starts with a male voiceover: ‘They see themselves as ordinary staff at the museum. The truth is they are the best conservation experts-doctors who cure disease for artefacts at the highest-ranking museum in the country.’ The first episode features a repairman at the Ceramics Team who went on to study *tang sancai* (唐三彩, a-thousand-year-old tricolour glaze

pottery method) in order to repair a broken *tang sancai* horse sculpture from the Tang Dynasty; how one workman from the Lacquerware Team went on dangerous hiking trips to harvest a type of tree resin in order to mix an organic type of oil-based paint; and how a female staff from the Textiles Team had to master traditional silk weaving with a giant *kesi* loom in order to repair a silk tapestry of calligraphy. Through close shots of these individuals mending artefacts and capturing their testimonies in the tree-lined courtyards of the 400-year-old Forbidden City Palace, the documentary ‘featured workers as akin to philosophers having dialogues with a living civilization’.

CCTV did not stop there, but quickly launched another show, *National Treasure* (*Guojia Baozang* 國家寶藏) in late 2017. The show was equally well received, scoring 9.3 out of 10 on the online rating platform of Douban. A week after its broadcast, the number of views on the Weibo hashtag #cctv guojiabaozang reached 700 million, and the number of comments was over 800,000 (CCTV, 2020). Most interestingly, *National Treasure* is a variety show. Showcasing celebrities and telling stories of 27 artefacts from nine major museums over nine episodes, the show claims to ‘make artefacts live again’ (*rang wenwu huoqilai* 讓文物活起來). It deploys the country’s famous actors—all males—to role-play historical figures of emperors, painters, calligraphers and high-ranking officials on stage. Conservation experts were invited to share their technical knowledge. It is entertaining because it mixes genres of variety show, theatre and reality show on a stage of virtual backgrounds and stunning lighting. It also skilfully mixes celebrities and history into a new kind of edutainment (Huang & Luo, 2017). Many in the Chinese media dubbed the program ‘innovative’, ‘informative’, and ‘fun’. My analysis will turn to how these shows naturalize a discourse of linear modes of historical conception and male-dominated hierarchical order. I also attend to the high visibility of volunteers in the show to understand how a certain kind of citizen respectability is marked.

The first episode of *National Treasure* adopts the perspective of the emperors and officials to tell the past and present of three artefacts: the painting of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*; ‘the Mother of Porcelains’; and the Stone Drum.² Audiences watched how the Song Huizong emperor during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) indulged the young artist Wang Ximeng to use the most precious stone colour in the masterpiece. Then we learnt how the Qianlong emperor in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) insisted that craftsmen make the *Large Vase with Variegated Glazes* (各種釉彩大瓶) or the ‘Mother of Porcelains’ (瓷母), which involved firing 17 glazes representative of five dynasties, with each glaze requiring different temperatures and times to be coated successfully. Last, we watched how Si Maguang, an imperial

² I limit my content analysis to Episode 1, which is about artefacts at the National Palace Museum, since it is one of the most talked-about episodes.

state official during the Northern Song dynasty, taught his son the determination to gather the missing artefacts of stone drums. In the end, the show was as much about these three artefacts as it was about the self-gratifying emperors, the kow-towing officials, and the tradition of patrilineality. These themes are exacerbated by the introduction of artefacts conservation expert Liang Jinsheng on the television stage. Liang's grandfather, great-grandfathers and great-great-grandfather all worked as officials in the Royal Palace. His father and brother, now in Taiwan, had committed their lives to protecting the Stone Drums through wars and diaspora.

National Treasure exemplifies the perfect coming together of promoting museum artefacts as a sign of nationalist identity and as a form of popular entertainment. It infuses artefacts with modern nation-state understandings, yet through the ambiguous Chinese rhetoric of nation/empire such as *jiangshan* (江山 territory), *jiaguo* (家國 country as nation and family), *jingxiu shanhe* (錦繡山河 marvellous rivers and mountains), *wansui liuchuan* (萬歲流傳 lasting for thousands of years). On the other hand, it uses contemporary terms that are fashionable to appeal to a young audience. For instance, it describes the painting *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* as being akin to a 'documentary of national image' or a Song Dynasty version of 'Drone Images of China'. Through metonymical transference, and evoking imaginations of a premodern China with beautiful landscapes, imperial wealth and a glorious civilization, the show speaks of conserving artefacts as equivalent to protecting the modern nation-state concept of territory and sovereignty.

Second, by referring to artefacts gathered in premodern China as continuous with artefacts conservation today, the show speaks as if an unchanging Chinese sovereign national subject/territory actually exists and simply evolves through a linear teleological mode of time (Duara, 1995, p. 4). In such a linear perception of history, artefacts are upheld as 'treasures from our ancestors' that contemporary Chinese should preserve, erasing questions of racial, cultural, linguistic and dynastic differences. For instance, the inscription carvings on the Stone Drum have been seen as preserving the earliest version of Chinese characters, with many words resembling the ancient *dazhuan* (大篆) style and hieroglyphics. Yet historians have not entirely decoded the inscriptions and many symbols remain unknown. By weaving together the stone drum, the historical character Si Maguang, who gathered these stone drums about a thousand years ago, and the performance of a pro-Beijing Hong Kong movie star, *National Treasure* puts together diverse historical periods, spaces and characters as if they really cohere to say something about the continuity of Chinese culture and language.

The truth is that, between the Qin dynasty and the Northern Song dynasty alone, the territory of the Chinese nation was broken up, occupied by various races and ethnicities, shrunken and expanded by the fall and rise of different emperors and dynasties. The last imperial dynasty, the Qing, originated from a Manchu ethnic

community, which modern Chinese nationalists such as Sun Yatsen regarded as a foreign invader. By celebrating the Stone Drum as the ancestor of the Chinese language, and erasing ambiguous meanings of territory, culture and ethnic groups in premodern China, the show is at best legitimizing a linear history conception of the Chinese nation. At worst, it covers up such conception of history as a ‘discourse enabling historical players’—such as the party-state in this case—to deploy its resources to occlude, repress, appropriate and sometimes negotiate with other modes of depicting the past, and thus, the present and future (Duara, 1995, p. 5).

Gender representation is at the core of the show. Artefact conservation is narrated through the hierarchical and patriarchal relationships between emperors and officials, fathers and sons, brothers and brotherhood. CCTV, as the party-state’s mouthpiece, is not shy in narrating the national past through nostalgia of imperial extravagance, royal narcissism, and patriarchal arrangements. The show reinforces a dominant understanding that artefacts are about emperors, their male egos, and their patrilineal authority. In fact, not only all the actors, and all the artefacts’ guardians, but all the craftsmen and artists featured in the first episode, are males. All the museum directors on stage are males, except one from the Zhejiang Province History Museum. The scene of male domination on the stage matches well with that in the current party-state leadership. One can perhaps predict how women actors will be featured in later episodes, often as empresses or mistresses, and as symbols of decay, desire or décor.

Nonetheless, the show has been a great success, considering how boring museum programs were before. With the function of ‘bullet screen’ (*danmu* 彈幕), which allows viewers to post intuitive comments on screen directly while watching it online, these shows stirred enormous interest and internet discussion among young people (Li, 2016). Netizens literally ‘bombed’ the screen with thousands of comments while watching the episodes online. The result was the creation of an online community where viewers gazed at the artefacts, imagined their national past, saw beloved celebrities, gained some knowledge, and posted comments together. Watching museum television programs, akin to the long waiting lines for the ancient painting in the opening vignette, has become a version of ‘homogeneous empty time’ for many Chinese viewers to experience the nation and related history represented by artefacts. This time it is not the newspaper that makes such a sense of time possible, but the virtual and intense responses of fellow nationals surrounding a television show.

One might have the impression that most Chinese television viewers are being ‘brainwashed’ into the ideology of history and the nation that is critiqued above. Indeed, television media production is taking away our ability to exchange experience, as Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 83) regarded it a capitalist form of media invading society at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet the ways in which history

is being talked about by volunteers at museum venues can be quite different from the television media. The next few sections cover the representation of volunteers on television, some of the lesser-known motivations of volunteering and volunteers' exchange with the public on actual museum ground.

Museum Volunteers: A Bridge Between Experts and the Public

The Chinese media like to feature museum volunteers and their testimonies because they are educated, cultured and willing to serve the people—possessing the valuable *suzhi* (素質) or good qualities of the role-model citizen. The first episode of *National Treasure*, for instance, features a 25-minute session of volunteers speaking on stage together. The volunteers all got a chance to introduce themselves and say something about museum volunteering at the NPM. Largely reflecting the demographics of volunteers I observed, the group on stage consisted of a few elderly retirees, who had served for more than 10 years, four middle-aged working professionals and three younger research postgraduate students. The older volunteers glorified the experience as a form of spiritual wealth (*jingshen caifu* 精神財富), even 'peak experience of the soul' (*xinling de gaofeng tiyan* 心靈的高峰體驗), whereas the younger volunteers spoke about it in more casual terms of taking pictures and playing with cats in the royal palace. The end of the session featured them swearing an oath of commitment together, which read, 'We are volunteers of the Forbidden City. We volunteer to guard history, and to guard national treasures.'

The episode specifically features a volunteer named Zhang Sheng, a tall man in his thirties who has served at the Gallery of Ceramics at the NPM since 2013. In the show, he gives an excellent speech or *jiangjie* (講解), explaining and interpreting on the craftsmanship of the vase 'The Mother of Porcelains'. Zhang first introduces himself as a corporate consultant with a postgraduate degree from overseas. He goes on to demonstrate his skill of interpreting, which he uses in his guided tours. He vividly recites the dozens of patterns and glazes on the vase, and the firing time and skill required for each glaze. Then he calculates the low probability of successfully firing all 17 glazes into one vase, all in technical and mathematical terms. He finishes his speech by reaffirming the Emperor Qianlong's determination to pursue such a fine production in English: 'Yes I can. I can do it and I did it!' Thunderous applause fills the stage afterwards. The television host praises his interpreting as an expression of 'true love' (*zhenai* 真愛) and 'enjoyment' (*xiangshou* 享受). Zhang responds humbly: 'All I want is to do something good to the society and to convey positive energy.' He explains further: 'Chinese culture is diverse and sophisticated (博大精深). We need people to safeguard and promote it.' Zhang's solo performance on the television stage of *National Treasure* might

be quite dramatic but his narrative is very typical of a dominant genre of Chinese museum volunteers. Hundreds of similar volunteers' stories and backgrounds can be found online. In the following, I share two excerpts from the media testimonies of museum volunteers, which again confirm the 'cultural capital and high qualities' of the role-model citizens.

Excerpt 1: Zhu Hong

Having taught chemistry in a high school all of his life, Zhu started a new phase after retirement: museum volunteering at the National Museum of China in 2002. 'I have found it the best way to keep learning.' Acknowledging his limited knowledge in history and art, Zhu started reading and going to seminars on the histories of ceramics and calligraphy. Zhu also travelled to more than one hundred cities of the 28 provinces in the country, looking for local museums in particular. 'I found it a must to see the artefacts in person in order to build a connection. That was why I must go to the Hunan Provincial Museum to see the scripts sculpted on bamboo strips in order to talk about ancient characters.' During one guided tour, he met a few college freshmen studying science, who were kids from outside of Beijing. He started the tour with the question of whether artefacts had anything to do with science and technology. Zhu then went on to talk about the ancient technology of Chinese Bronze wares, the development of ceramic pottery and related methods of casting and firing. The student visitors were pleasantly surprised. To impress these kids further, Zhu even gave an extra session on the history and culture of Beijing. (Li, 2019)

Excerpts 2: Gao Bingxia

Sixty-four-year-old Gao was a manager from the Capital Steel Corporation, responsible for technical safety. Upon retirement in 2005, he started volunteering at the Hall of Clocks and Watches of the National Palace Museum and has since finished over 1,000 hours of guided tours and received over 10,000 visitors. 'There was a written test and one has to pass to qualify as a volunteer at the NPM. The question asked of me was to run a chronological order of all the dynasties from ancient China all the way up to the modern Republican era. I did it fast and I passed!' During his service, he became obsessed with the mechanics of clocks and watches and had since collected numerous related books and titles on antique clocks, furniture, architecture and bronzewares. He would seek technical knowledge from special watch shops and related experts such as Konstanti, Omega, and Juvenia. 'I found it important to convey the craft and production of these watches made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to emphasize the value of this hall's collections at NPM. (Xu, 2014).

Several common elements stand out in these excerpts of the museum volunteers. From the ancient scripts on bamboo strips in Henan to the antique watches inside the National Palace Museum, these testimonies always pick up a little bit of the glorious Chinese history, precious pieces from the imperial dynasty and the country's extensive geography. Second, the volunteers who mediate such Chinese history and knowledge are often retired men with professional work backgrounds, and especially people in the field of science or technical know-how. Like Zhang Sheng, many have prestigious degrees, both domestic, and from overseas. The testimony always tells how much these men develop an amateur pursuit of Chinese history and culture outside of their expert careers. Also, most of these reports emphasize museum volunteers *not* modelling after 'Lei Feng', a fictional socialist nationalist hero devoted to sacrificing himself for others during the Maoist era. Instead, they are represented as independent minds, who run research on their own and who find sharing knowledge with the public meaningful and fulfilling. In these testimonies, the practice is often linked to a form of self-cultivation or lifelong investment in knowledge. Museum volunteers are also spoken of as the 'cultural software' that complements the physical built museum infrastructure of the nation.

Again, gender and class play key roles in defining respectable citizens in the popular testimonies of museum volunteers. While narratives about museum volunteers glorify educated, retired males, they form an interesting contrast to the media representations of community volunteers, who are predominantly older females who are less educated. The latter are often teased as noisy grannies obsessed with intruding into others' privacy in the name of 'monitoring suspicious elements' for the party-state. Museum volunteers' educated male identity is also quite different from the sweet-faced ceremonial volunteers whose bodily discipline and conformity symbolize the nation's reputation and sense of collectivity. Narratives of museum volunteers also like to highlight citizens' devotion in history, culture and education, relating them to the identity-building of the educated middle class. Certainly, Bourdieu (1984) has long argued that cultural capital, an embodied or inheritable competence akin to a form of lifestyle, is differentiated from economic capital associated with class positions.³ In fact, the museum volunteers I interviewed often quoted media lines at the beginning of describing their motivation, such as 'I am here to raise my *suzhi* (quality)'; 'I want to upgrade myself'; or 'my composition is different after coming here for a while'. When I first talked to them, I also took such responses at face value and thought volunteers were motivated

³ Bourdieu (1984, p. 166) emphasizes habitus as 'a structuring structure, which organize practices and the perception of practices; but also a structured structure, the principle of division into logical cases which organize the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division of social classes'.

by the pursuit of distinction or a sense of gaining privileges. For instance, my informant Aunt Ling once excitedly shared with me on WeChat that the then New Zealand Prime Minister John Key and the first lady, and later Angela Merkel and her cabinet members, had visited the museum she served. At those events, Aunt Ling and other volunteers were actually not allowed to enter the museum because it was closed for the distinguished guests. But volunteers had the ‘advantage’ of getting officially endorsed pictures of these guests to share on their own social media platforms. Sometimes, museum volunteers could also be assigned the task of giving a guided tour to specific groups. Aunt Ling once gave a guided tour to 50 leaders of ministerial and bureau levels from the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP (*zhongyang dangxiao* 中央黨校) at the museum. She shared pictures on social media with captions: ‘I have found extraordinary feelings in an ordinary life. Thank you my leaders and teachers at the museum for trusting me and encouraging me.’ This post received numerous likes.

The more time I spent with museum volunteers, however, the more I found that the discourse of distinction does not quite work the same way in China. Distinction might be understood as or related to getting the feeling of ‘advantage’ associated with special access to exclusive occasions, people of power or objects of prestige. Since museums—especially in the capital of Beijing—constantly host government figures from various countries, provinces, universities, and business sectors, volunteers might be given a sense of status mobility or a unique feeling from serving special guests. Yet such feelings are quite different from actual privilege or extra benefits. The truth is that museum volunteers are well aware that their service does very little to help them acquire any disposition, special perception and the practices—cultural capital—that are built into one’s social class background and family upbringing. Many of those I interviewed are conscious that only a few could afford to spend thousands of dollars on antique books and travelling extensively to museums, national or overseas. A management staff member once pointed out that museum volunteering is itself a special status for which only a certain class of people can qualify, ‘Those who can serve in museums like the NPM are people of wealth (*youqian* 有錢), time (*youkong* 有空) and leisure (*youxian* 有閒)’ (Interview with Gao, December 2016). Indeed, to indulge oneself in the details of artefacts is a costly habit, afforded only to those able to reinforce their habits—the unconscious bourgeois mode of behaving and thinking limited to the privileged class.

The majority of museum volunteers with whom I spoke do not belong to this class. Contrary to the television representation of volunteers pursuing cultural capital or middle-class social status, my field research reveals an intention that is far more complex: to rearticulate one’s position in relation to the nation’s history, and to possess the power of interpreting it. After months of interaction, Aunt Ling chatted with me as follows:

I came to volunteer because I was disappointed at the Red Cross and its corruption scandal a few years ago.⁴ I have decided to only offer my time and service direct to those in need instead of donating money to any charity foundation. I can practise volunteering and make myself useful. Before coming here, I knew very little about history. I started to read a lot more about modern Chinese history surrounding late Qing and the early Republican part since joining this position. Now I figure that our official history text is not very fair and objective. For instance, I have found that the Communists did not fight against the Japanese much during the war. Our education and government propaganda talked as if only the Communist Party was fighting, not even mentioning the effort by the Republican Party led by Chiang Kai-shek. We should be more objective when looking at history. I like this volunteering work and would like to pass the knowledge I have learnt along. Our younger generation has forgotten about history because they are not properly educated. I am willing to explain it in detail. We all should know that history is not necessarily what the party-state wants us to believe. (Interview, August 2014)

This interview reveals an intention that will not appear in any official or entertainment media representations. It concerns an individual and bottom-up, instead of a collectivist and top-down, way of approaching the state, state-sponsored institutions and the right to interpret history. Not all my informants told me the same thing that Aunt Ling articulated. Some of the younger mothers, for instance, spoke of coming to serve in order to match with their kids' recent school curriculum focusing on artefacts and museum education. Some expressed to me the stress of fulfilling the requirement of showing up for service every single week in order to keep their volunteer badge or identity. In short, the majority of volunteers are conscious that this practice hardly cultivated their distinctions. While some took the opportunity as a critical response to social happenings, some merely took it functionally and to fulfil educational responsibility. The next section provides nuanced ethnographic details on people such as Aunt Ling, who see their service of volunteering as a right to interpret history in a way that may challenge the official discourse. As I will show, museum volunteers are not only connecting between the expanding museum landscape and the eager public; they explicitly invite the audience to critically reflect the party-state historiography. Beyond just giving a counter-narrative to the official nationalist history, they also invite visitors to reflect critically on their own lives and habits.

⁴ When the Wenchuan Earthquake claimed thousands of lives in 2011, a woman calling herself Guo Meimei Baby faked the title of 'commercial general manager' of the Red Cross and boasted about her luxury handbags and car on the social media. Millions of citizens who donated money to the earthquake cause felt betrayed by the incident and the scandal plunged the Red Cross into a credibility crisis over its use of public donations.

Narratives of Dissent: Museum Volunteering on the Ground

The stunning Hall for Ancestral Worship (*Fengxian Dian* 奉先殿) at the NPM, which features over 82 clocks and watches from the museum collection's 1500 exquisite timepieces, provides a key example of the complexity of volunteer narratives. The giant ancient time devices and clock towers decorated with wooden sculptures are 3 metres tall and 2 metres wide. The hall specializes in Western chiming mechanical clocks with embellished figures from across Europe, displaying the excellence of craft in clockmaking. Special pieces in the hall include the *Clock Inlaid on a Lotus Pot*, where a bouquet of flowers in a gilded pot could blossom at certain hours, and the *Gilded Copper Musical Clock with the Decoration of Elephant-Drawn Chariot*.⁵ One of the famous pieces is perhaps the *Clock with a Writing Figure* (*xieziren zhong* 寫字人鐘).⁶ Placed in the centre of the Hall, the clock features an automaton in the form of a white young man in a Georgian court suit kneeling on his right leg writing on a table within a 2.31 metre tall clock apparatus. The eight Chinese characters the automaton can write is most eye-catching. It reads, '八方向化 九土來王' (from all directions they come and pledge allegiance. The lords of all the lands present themselves before the emperor).⁷

Standing in front of the clock, many visitors in the guided tour were amazed to see an automaton with a white male kneeling down and writing Chinese inside a beautiful clock. The clock fits well into a national imagination of a prosperous Qing imperial Dynasty when people of various cultures and places came to China and worshipped the Qing emperor. Such a nationalist imagination comes from many popular cultural texts and media representations in the recent official discourse of the 'nationalist rejuvenation of Chinese culture'. The discourse concerns China, an ancient civilization sabotaged by foreign invasions in the past, now coming back

⁵ *Clock Inlaid on a Lotus Pot*, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), gilded copper, height: 154 cm, diameter: 68 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing, <https://en.dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2010-06-30/1231.html>. Gilded Copper Musical Clock with the Decoration of Elephant-Drawn Chariot, 1770, height: 70 cm, length: 136 cm, width: 55 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing, <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/clock/232202.html>.

⁶ Timothy Williamson, *Clock with a Writing Figure*, 1770, gilded copper, height: 231 cm, stand diameter: 77 × 77 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing, <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/clock/234721.html>.

⁷ The male automaton or android is about 40 centimetres tall. The writing mechanism, independent from the timekeeping mechanism, comprises three brass discs, or cams, in a box beneath the right arm. As the cams are turned by the clockwork motor, steel fingers follow their irregular edges. Through a complex system of levers and rods, the movements of the cams are translated into movements of the android's hand from side to side (horizontal or *heng* stroke), front and back (vertical or *shu* stroke), and up and down (*ti'an*) to produce marks on the paper (https://www.orientations.com.hk/search-index-result/?art_id=8820&backissue_id=8813&article=detail (site discontinued)).

on track with its culture on the rise. The museum documentary *Masters of the Forbidden City*, for instance, largely resonates with such discourse, with narratives like this:

Wang (a repair staff) is repairing a clock entitled *Gilt Copper Clock with Country Music and Water Automation* (銅鍍金鄉村音樂水法鐘) whose original owner was the Qianlong Emperor. All the Qing Emperors, including Shunzhi, Kangxi and Qianlong, loved collecting timepieces. Missionaries started coming to China during the industrial revolution in the West. They brought in clock and watch masterpieces, knowing the emperors' taste for them. Over time, their gifts also shaped the imperial collection. (Episode 1 5: 20-7: 49)

The *Masters* show certainly wants to confirm a popular imagination of a culturally advanced imperial court filled with gifts from foreign visitors. No wonder *The Clock with a Writing Figure* has been packed with visitors. Nonetheless, some will be disappointed if they run into certain volunteers with critical views.

During an hour-long guided tour in the Hall in December of 2016, Teacher Lai told a much more complicated story. When we stopped by the clock, Lai said:

When this clock was manufactured at the end of the eighteenth century (in 1770), England had been through the Industrial Revolution for 20 to 30 years. In China, it was the late Qianlong period. There was a huge contrast between the two countries. Why? While technology and innovation were ascending in England, our country was in a condition of *'mangmu zida* (盲目自大 blindly arrogant), *biguan zishuo*' (閉關自守 self-isolation in a closed nation). Why do I say it? The Qianlong emperor regarded himself a super literati and saw all foreigners as barbarians with no means of catching up. He thought everyone else was backward and needed edification. It was not the truth. While others were rapidly developing technology during the Industrial Revolution, we were stuck and rolling backward. Although the Chinese had sophisticated weaponry in the Ming dynasty, they were banned in the Qing Dynasty. While the English was having speed canon, long guns and revolvers, we were just using *huochang*, a simple device that mixed gunpowder and iron sand together.

In front of a large and quiet audience staring at *The Clock with a Writing Figure*, Lai continued:

This watchmaker family came to China as part of the ambassador visit and took with them many new gadgets, including weaponry. Unfortunately, the Qianlong government did not understand the real intention of foreigners wanting to trade with us. As I said, the emperor saw China so highly that he did not think the gifting could be gestures of wanting more exchange but a group of barbarians wanting to rip him off. He also ignored the values of

the new technology. I think we all need to ponder on this. How do we understand ourselves and technology? I hope that this hidden story of the clock relic can lead everyone to more thoughts.

In 2017, I joined the same tour at the Hall of Clocks and Watches led by a different volunteer, teacher Chen. Like Lai, Chen opened the tour this way:

We often heard that the timepieces in the Royal Palace are gifts by foreign kingdoms to maintain the tributary relationship with the imperial Chinese court. This is simply not right. The truth is all the timepieces you see here come to China from five different sources. Which five? First, we the Chinese designed and made them in Guangzhou or Suzhou workshops. Second, we bought them. We acquired them through trading with watch makers overseas. Third, a few high-ranking officials put money together and presented these timepieces as birthday gifts to the emperors. Fourth, they are products of the mutual gifting rituals among nations at the time. For instance, other countries gave us these timepieces and in return, the Qing imperial courts had to give back, often at a larger scale. Fifth, they come from the imperial government confiscating properties from officials indicted for crimes. In fact, quite a few dozens of timepieces in the collection came from the corrupt Heshen family. In short, the concept of foreigners paying tribute is oversimplified.

In a later in-depth interview, teacher Chen told me:

The popular view that foreigners pay tribute to imperial China has mixed up with the concept of mutual gifting ritual which was an international practice. This popular view probably has to do with a dominant idea within the country that China had always been a grand nation or civilization (*yangyang daguo* 泱泱大國) while all foreigners were barbaric people (*manyi* 蠻夷) presenting gifts to appease us. Unfortunately, this is a very flawed and biased imagination.

Both teacher Chen and teacher Lai told me very similar reason for their motivation as museum volunteers:

I want neither fame nor reward. All I want to do is to give in the form of telling the truth. Many do not understand history objectively and fairly. You can only improve your knowledge with an objective version of history and reality. Without such reference, you have nothing to hang onto. I don't need my audience to agree with everything I said. All I am trying to do is to offer a relatively precise version of history, and what actually happened. You can make your own judgement. (teacher Lai, December 2016)

Museum volunteers practise critical thinking in their guided tours. They explicitly invite audiences to critically reflect the official way of history interpretation and encourage visitors to make their own judgements. Instead of reciting official scripts or functionally connecting the museum artefacts with a rich story, museum volunteers offer more than just the role of content operator inside the museum space. They offer moments of reflection, critical thinking and inquiry in order that the audience public might contest the mainstream media story of the linear nation-state historiography. In the end, museum volunteering goes far beyond just giving an exhibit tour. Volunteers are makers of new narratives. If the party-state is bound to explain artefacts in an eschatological orientation, the museum volunteers must do it in a profane way, giving a worldly view of the course of things, just as the storyteller did. In this way, museum volunteering is destabilizing the narrative of descent in the official nationalist version of history.

Conclusion: Urban Storytellers in Cities

Mainstream media, popular television shows, and volunteer testimonies all make it easy to think that museum volunteering is just one of many middle-class lifestyles, *suzhi* cultivation or cultural distinctions that Chinese people chase after. But some volunteer informants see their service differently from these dominant stereotypical pursuits. Many think independently and could have rather critical views of popular historical narratives. I argue that volunteers' work is akin to the way Walter Benjamin talked about storytellers in the premodern society. By that I mean the museum volunteer is offering a unique and alternative experience in a hyper technological, excessively monitored and urban society like that of Beijing. It is not only that we can no longer encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly in the modern era; it is also that information and various entertainment, now digital and virtual, have dominated the modern way of life in a fully developed capitalism. This is especially the case in today's China, where television, advertising, news information, smartphones, and social media all bombard us with information based on algorithms. The value of such television entertainment lives only in the moment of showing, especially with the bullet screen functions when hundreds and thousands of netizens exclaim at their celebrity idols playing emperors while also learning to appreciate the country's national treasures. Whatever is said and mediated is hard to verify and appears 'understandable in itself' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 89).

During the museum guided tours, however, the volunteers I tagged along with chose a style of storytelling that introduced a deeper version of modern Chinese history, one that was often radically different from the official or mainstream version, just as the storyteller's tale was so different from the history chronicler's

interpretation. Most interestingly, the practice of museum volunteering turns out to be a site where the country's cultural infrastructural project is located and where educated middle-class volunteers might not necessarily align with the party-state discourse of nationalist history and culture. In each city, the volunteers recruited are offering a localized version of history or storytelling that is different. If the storyteller offered counsel, truth and wisdom in the past—a comprehensive memory about the course of events—the volunteers are similarly disputing the linear nationalist view, imperial nostalgia, and patriarchal values inherent in the grand narrative structures. However, museum volunteers in today's China are conducting it on a daily basis, and in a whole new urban space where museum infrastructure and exhibits abound.

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Stranger Companions in the Dark: The Biopolitics of Sharing the City with the Visually Challenged

Abstract

This chapter features the role of volunteers for the blind in making a city and its urban resources sharable. I examine a wide range of changes in recent years that have increased disabled citizens' physical accessibility but also their sociocultural access to various urban styles—from tactile paving and expanding subway systems to the ability to attend movie narration events, coffee tastings, to being able to access digital infrastructures like audiobooks, and most recently, museum visits and marathon running. I invoke the encounters between strangers in software capitalist America depicted in Zygmunt Bauman's (1999) *Liquid Modernity* to consider public spaces, segregations and disability movement in the non-democratic capital city of Beijing. Following urban volunteers and their activities with blind citizens, I have found not just micro volunteer practices that present 'a common good' within the strict regulation of Chinese civil society but a range of new physical and digital facilities that made these strangers' meetings possible. Finally, I show how volunteering practices with disabled citizens subtly transform the dominant concerns about biopolitics in understanding Chinese modernity and citizens' experiences of the cityscape and public culture.

Keywords: volunteer for the blind, CDPF, Chen Guangchen, blind activism, biopolitics, sharing the city

My first time visiting *Xinmu Yingyuan* (心目影院 Cinema of the Mind) was on a Sunday in the summer of 2016. At the time, the NGO organization Hongdandan was located inside a traditional courtyard (*siheyuan* 四合院) in the Gulou neighbourhood in Beijing. The ambience of tradition changed once I entered the main room, featuring a 47-inch television screen, walls covered by hundreds of DVDs and a line-up of 50 chairs. About 30 visually challenged audience members, mostly in their fifties and sixties, were sitting and chatting. The organizer told me that while most of the older participants lived on government welfare, they loved to join the film screening event at the cinema; the younger participants were often busy at massage businesses during the weekend.

Zhao, the movie narrator of the day, was a store manager at a Starbucks. He had conducted similar movie narration with the NGO for several years. That day

the movie was a Hong Kong blockbuster, *Police Story* (1985), starring Jacky Chan. The plot follows the action-crime cinematic genre in the ex-British colony, with some bad cops colliding with powerful criminals while the good cop, played by Jacky Chan, risked his life to find the mole, while breaking out of various traps with his Kung Fu stunts. Zhao's audio description was fascinating as he led the audience through the various fast-moving fight scenes and car chases. Nuanced with numerous facial expressions, kicks and punches between Jacky Chan and others on escape and attack coordination, Zhao's audio narrative was clear about which character was fighting which. Apart from the actions, he also paid attention to the details of costumes, the setting of rooms and details of traps that communicated the film fully without the visuals. There were several scene changes that came without either conversation or sounds, but Zhao conveyed the events smoothly while still retaining the tension and suspense. The applause was strong at the end. Many shouted, 'Well spoken!' (講得好!).

Zhao was not the only volunteer of the movie day. A team of Starbucks staff members, aged in their twenties, came together to serve mooncakes and coffee to the visually challenged audience. The audience enjoyed the coffee and snacks enormously, sampling the several flavours presented. Many lingered and chatted with the NGO Hongdandan staff after the movie ended. Zhao shared with me that narrating a movie involved a lot of preparation but he enjoyed the process a lot. He also felt that developing a team of volunteers with an interest in movie narration across the Starbucks stores in the city made his job as manager more meaningful.

Since 2007, Starbucks and the NGO Hongdandan have built a long-term corporate responsibility collaboration to run this monthly movie session in Beijing. Starbucks agreed to send its staff, on a voluntary basis, to be trained as movie narrative volunteers while also promoting its products. In the last 10 years or so, the NGO's Cinema of the Mind has attracted so much social and media attention—both domestic and foreign—that many corporates, both national and foreign, have become eager to join. They have asked whether they can send staff to experiment with corporate responsibility at the Cinema of the Mind and conduct team-building with the blind citizens. Bayer Pharmaceuticals, for instance, was one of the early major sponsors of Hongdandan in 2008 and has since supported the NGO's rental payment for the movie space and other equipment costs.

This chapter examines how volunteering in the post-2008 Beijing Olympics era has further developed at non-state and corporate levels. It focuses on volunteering for the visually impaired and examines how this enables thousands of citizens to better understand the needs and challenges of a specific disabled group in the city. Through looking at related volunteering, it asks how citizens with different bodies and abilities can connect in ways that reflect urban development, city design, and the problems of the visually impaired.

Currently there are about 12.33 million people categorized as visually disabled according to China's Second National Sample Survey of Disabilities of 2006.¹ My fieldwork at the NGO Hongdandan included joining its volunteering events of movie audio description, marathon running and museum tours for the visually challenged. I also sat in on some of the NGO's planning meetings on volunteer training and recruitment, and conducted 15 in-depth interviews with both the NGO staff and volunteers of different age groups, genders and professional backgrounds. Chinese state institutions and non-state organizations alike have given Hongdandan awards for launching the 'best volunteering project' in the country. Its founders, Wang Weili and Zheng Xiaojie, have also been recognized as two of the '10 best social entrepreneurs', 'charity names', 'public interest representatives' and 'role model workers' in China.²

This chapter joins the discussion of biopower and disability in urban China by examining how the regime of health normalcy (Kohrman, 2005) is changing. Michel Foucault (1977) has shown that modern nation-states have deployed various techniques of power, such as public health practices and regulation of heredity, to control citizens' bodies and the population. Similarly, the republican and Maoist China states have made healthy and physically fit citizens, a state attained through sporting exercises and daily discipline, equivalent to the strength of a modern nation (Brownell, 1995). In contrast, people with disability in China have been called *canjiren* (殘疾人), with *can* meaning incomplete, damaged, defective and *ji* meaning sick, ill, diseased. *Ren* means people. Over time, the discourse on modernity and normality has developed into a form of pervasive biopower that commands citizen subjects to not just possess normal physical abilities, but desire certain norms, bodies and attributes of the educated, middle-class and competent individuals (Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2006; Lin, 2017). The result is that the popular contempt for and discrimination against the poor, the uneducated and people with disability—the ultimate 'embodied other'—consistently justifies the latter's isolation and discrimination (Kohrman, 2005).

Looking at volunteering for the visually impaired in Beijing, I examine a wide range of changes in recent years that have increased the group's accessibility but also their sociocultural access to various urban styles. I show how urban volunteers, along with improving urban infrastructures, have enabled and changed the ways citizens with disability experience the cityscape and its public culture. I examine

¹ According to the national survey in 2006, 20.04 million people had 'hearing disability', 1.27 million a 'speech disability', 24.12 million a 'physical disability', 5.54 million 'learning disability', 6.14 million a 'mental disability' and 13.52 million 'multiple disabilities'.

² See the 46 awards Hongdandan and its staff received from 2009 to 2018: <http://www.hongdandan.org.cn/intro/16.html>

how volunteering for the visually impaired comes with the introduction of certain urban styles of movie going, coffee tasting, museum visits, and marathon running. The movie narration event mentioned above, for instance, was beyond giving people more physical accessibility; it also involved social and interactive accessibility. Volunteering could be considered one of the occasions where strangers meet strangers. In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman (1999, p. 94) speaks about the alienating and non-engaging encounters of strangers in the wealthy and insecure American society ruled by software capitalism, even though public spaces such as airports, public transit, and shopping malls are abundant. In the non-democratic Chinese capital city of Beijing, hi-tech urban living and speedy transit feature similar public spaces where people have to learn qualities of civility in order to live with differences. Yet the ways of interacting, and abilities needed to interact, with fellow citizens with visual impairment are rarely mentioned. Following urban volunteers and representations of blind citizens, I have found not just micro volunteer practices that present ‘a common good’ (Bauman 1999, p. 96), but a range of new urban spaces and digital facilities that have made these strangers’ meetings meaningful. Even though volunteering encounters could be one-off, brief and superficial—a form of ‘mis-meeting’ in Bauman’s view—they have made disabled citizens and their conundrums publicly visible. These meetings also regularly expose various problems in urban design, and the ability-related unfriendliness of many urban resources. Mass volunteering certainly does not solve any structural problems of inequality and injustice; nonetheless, it has become an innovative operation in a changing cityscape equipped with improved transit infrastructures and people skilled with smartphone technology. Most importantly, volunteers become the operators who build a human connection between the needs of the disabled and the use of urban facilities. In the contemporary Chinese urban environment, these meetings between citizens of different abilities simultaneously highlight and challenge the dominant regime of biopower and present public spaces with new potentials and alternatives.

Between a Welfarist and Dissident Approach: The Volunteering Middle Path

People with disability might have been viewed and portrayed as infants, the grotesque, the humiliated or the exploited in traditional philosophical tradition and past literary imaginations. In the modern party-state narratives and artistic representations, however, they have become more heroic and self-sufficient figures, even though they remain liminal and precarious. Sarah Dauncey (2020) has shown the Chinese party-state both during and after the time of Mao-endorsed role model citizens with disability and promoted a ‘responsibilized para-citizen’

who is simultaneously marginalized but could also be considered included and even useful in the modern national projects. During Deng's economic reform China, there was an improvement in institutional status of the disabled even though the party-state's civilization campaigns continued to engineer the physically, morally, economically and intellectually fit role-model citizen. Entering the 1990s and the 2000s, the discourse of *suzhi* (素質) or quality, which was intended to improve the quality of the population through encouraging more education, became powerful (Murphy, 2004). As the discourse was popularized, the body of the educated middle-class single child became 'fetishized as a site of accumulating *suzhi*, while the body of the rural migrant exemplifies its apparent lack' (Anagnost, 2004). The discursive strategies of *suzhi* therefore do not just reinforce the sociocultural bias embedded in the rural-urban divide; the emphasis on social mobility and economic status has meant that ability has become more essential in post-Mao China.

Despite the dominant social discourse of *suzhi* and the general emphasis on individual socioeconomic success in today's China, there is progress both in the welfare development of the disabled and the public discussion of rights to the city of the disabled. It is therefore important to mention both the achievements of China's Disabled Person Federation, *Zhongguo Canjiren Lianhui* (中國殘疾人聯會 hereafter CDPF) and the blind activist Chen Guangcheng's activism in the early 2000s. This section shows first how the CDPF paved the way for a welfarist approach to people with disability in reform China after 1989. Second, it demonstrates how Chen Guangcheng's activism and the civic movement surrounding his forced disappearance presented a radical approach to the problem of disability. I then explore how NGO-organized volunteering as an urban intervention breaks away from the passive, welfarist approach of the CDPF and from the activist legacy that Chen left behind. I show how volunteering could open up a whole new world of urban experiences for citizens with different abilities.

The meaning and category of *canji* (殘疾), or disability, is never constant but rather constructed out of a complex historical and socioeconomic context. Since the 1990s, the CDPF has played a major role defining it. *Canji* has since becomes intimately enmeshed with state institution and welfare provision. The establishment of the CDPF was a result of China attempting to find a place within the modern world of technology, humanitarian ideology, biomedicine, and global economics while involving the bodies of the 'otherness' in the late 1970s (Kohrman, 2015). It was a messy task for the CDPF as China was still dealing with its traumatic Cultural Revolution past and a heavy rural-urban divide. At local levels, the CDPF has had to work at identifying the degree of disability based on Western biomedical models and filing for economic or socialist support in an increasingly market-oriented economy.

In the 1990s, it was the CDPF, headed by Deng Pufang—the son of Deng Xiaoping, who was tragically disabled after a suicide attempt during the Cultural Revolution—that focused on improving the welfare conditions of people with disability in the country. When the CDPF first became a party-endorsed social organization in 1989, it rapidly advanced the welfare, social and work status of millions of citizens with disability by setting up special needs schools, government-sponsored factories and disability-friendly facilities. At the same time, the CDPF actively propagates positive role model citizens with disability, while valorizing desires among them to be economically and socially productive as able-bodied citizens are, such as suggesting that the disabled are ‘broken in body but not in spirit’ (*shencan zhijian* 身殘志堅) and ‘disabled but not useless’ in various literary, cinematic and cultural representations. Zhang Haidi, for instance, is a paraplegic widely glorified as a role model for disabled people by the CDPF. Dubbed as the Helen Keller of China, Zhang first worked in radio broadcasting and later became a nationally famous writer and translator. Still a household name today, Zhang continues to be an example among disabled people and for Chinese youth in general.

In the three decades since it was first launched, the CDPF has grown into a major government unit that is built into the state administration at various levels, from village, county and city to province. The CDPF now directly administers 11 ministries, 16 work units (*danwei* 單位), 12 mass organizations (*shetuan* 社團) and five specialized associations (Baidu Baike, 2022). No wonder the anthropologist Matthew Korhman called the CDPF a ‘biobureaucracy’ in post-Mao China because of the way it interpenetrates various levels of government. The CDPF also works closely with state-owned enterprises, requiring them to hire a certain percentage of disabled staff members. Throughout the 1990s, the CDPF ran a national census on citizens with disability, identifying numbers, educational, career and health-care problems and needs. It helped with legislation to tackle discrimination against disabled citizens. In the early 2000s, the CDPF helped millions of people with disability to acquire prosthetic limbs and built rehabilitation service centres. The CDPF also works with its many associations, such as the China Association of the Blind, by running massage training centres for the visually impaired to acquire vocational training and job opportunities. Nonetheless, the CDPF continues the paradigm of ‘assisting the disabled’ without critically reflecting too much on the definition of disability or physical normality. Its vocational training for the blind, for instance, often reinforces social stereotypes and has made massage work ‘the default occupation of choice’ among the visually impaired (Dauncey, 2020, p. 139; Hallett, 2011). Some of the more educated but visually impaired informants I interviewed resonated with such a dilemma as they found few opportunities outside the massage industry.

Working within a welfare provision framework, the CDPF perhaps would never have expected that someone such as blind activist Chen Guangcheng would come

out and take the term ‘responsible para-citizen’ (Dauncey, 2020) to a whole new level. Chen Guangcheng was a latecomer to the special needs school built by the CDPF in the 1990s but he was openly defiant to the party-state institution and its laws. Chen entered his first formal education of primary school in rural Shandong at the age of 18 in 1994. Intelligent and determined, Chen quickly finished a degree in Chinese medicine after learning to read. Meanwhile, he self-educated himself in law at home to learn about the unfair taxation situation facing his own and rural villagers’ rights. He started to challenge local rural government over many injustices such as over-taxing the disabled and rural households (Chen, 2015).

In 2003, Chen became nationally famous when he sued the Beijing subway over its discriminatory practice. Chen was stopped at the subway entrance after the staff told him that only those with a travel card issued at the Beijing capital CDPF office could get a free ride, drawing a strict boundary between disability cards issued in Beijing and those issued outside of it. However, according to the national law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons (adopted 1990, amended 2008), all blind people in the country are entitled to use all public transport for free. Born and raised in rural Shandong province but travelling to Beijing frequently for work and education, Chen thought the requirement violated the spirit of the national law. He eventually won his court case, which took the public discussion of disability rights to an unprecedented level (BBC, 2012a, 2012b; Gao, 2004; GuangmingNet, 2003; Yu, 2012).

Chen’s luck ran out when he tried to legally represent a group of women forced to undergo abortion and sterilization in rural Shandong in 2006. The rural government put Chen into detention, and charged him with ‘inciting gathering’, ‘causing traffic problems and destroying properties’ (Yu, 2012), resulting in an imprisonment of four years and three months. In 2006, *Time* magazine made Chen one of the world’s 100 most influential people, along with the then China Premier Wen Jiabao. His international reputation, however, only gave the authorities more reason to crack down on him. In 2010, after he finished serving four years in prison, Chen and his family were placed under house arrest. Numerous surveillance cameras and guards have since surrounded his house, prohibiting him from stepping outside the door and barring the family from accessing wi-fi.

The authorities’ repression of Chen surprisingly generated a much bigger investigative journalistic and citizen movement in the country. Between 2006 and 2011, numerous individuals from all over the world and within China attempted to visit Chen but all were stopped, assaulted or deported.³ Despite this intimidation,

³ A team of four reporters from German television tried to interview Chen’s wife but they were stopped and intimidated by the local police (Coonan, 2010); a journalist named Wang Keqin, who tried bringing supplies to the family, was beaten in 2009. Some of the reported attempts included a

Chinese netizens did not give up. They started to virtually locate Chen with the launch of the website 'Free Guangcheng' in November 2010 (Wu, 2011). The website is no longer accessible but at that time it asked citizens around the world to send postcards or upload images of things to be sent as gifts to Chen's family, who were under unreasonable house arrest. The drama of Chen Guangcheng's life could potentially be turned into a movie as he miraculously escaped from the house arrest, allegedly with the assistance of other activists. His escape route from his home village, Dongshigu in Lingyi, Shandong province, to his final refuge at the US Embassy in Beijing spanned almost 400 kilometres. The US Embassy's decision to accommodate Chen also sparked a diplomatic crisis between China and the United States. The standoff was eventually solved by Chen being exiled to the United States.

Ultimately, Chen's story shows us the limits of direct activism in the current state of control in China. Chen had fled when I started field research at Hongdandan in 2015. His legacy remains and his impact was strongly felt; nonetheless, while talking to organizers and blind citizens, a few people lamented that his oppositional approach did not work. The founder of Hongdandan, Zheng, mentioned a few times how she had adopted a different approach from Chen's. Speaking to Zheng made me understand better how local NGOs must work very carefully with the Chinese authorities. Local organizers such as Zheng must speak carefully with researchers like me from outside mainland China, too. She never criticized the Chinese government and its harassment of Chen. In fact, she told me a few times that Chinese NGOs must make themselves useful so the government will allow them to continue to exist. Among the disabled people with whom I spoke, some held grudges about the CDPE, which in their view has become a pro-status quo social organization, or a GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization), that is overtly

netizen nicknamed Pearl, whose car windshield was shattered by unknown men in 2011 (RFI, 2011); two reporters from the French newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* had their recorders and ID cards confiscated, and their departures were followed by a car without licence plates (Reporters Without Borders, 2011). Later, a few reporters from the *New York Times* tried to enter the village but a few plain-clothed police broke into their cars and took their cell phones, cameras, computers and IDs (Jiang, 2011a). Another netizen who wanted to visit, claiming to bring Chen's favourite dish of mutton, was beaten and abandoned in the middle of nowhere. In the same month, reporters from the CNN and from Israel were respectively attacked and had to forcibly retreat (Ye, 2011a). One of the most courageous reporters was Shi Yu from the government-sponsored Xinhua News Agency in Beijing. Shi Yu claimed that his action did not represent the government but nonetheless resigned from his position thereafter (Ye, 2011b). Another equally controversial attempt was by Christian Bale, the Hollywood star who was promoting his movie in Beijing but travelled for eight hours to Shandong province to get close to Chen (Jiang, 2011b). Subsequently, Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders condemned the Chinese government for its persistent assaults on the freedom of the press. In July 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives had a discussion about the plea Chen had made regarding his difficulties. At the same time, Chen was given numerous human rights awards.

bureaucratic and lacking in innovation in engaging with the contemporary issue of disability.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the way civil society in China operates is quite different from the liberal paradigm of western society. On the one hand, the party-state government uses all means available to restrict, monitor and control non-governmental operations and activities. On the other hand, various non-government actors deploy de-politicising tactics and digital technology to advocate for policy changes, engage government units, and push for incremental changes. Against all odds, many persevere to solve problems and advocate for policy change. Hongdandan is one such case. Registered as a local NGO, Hongdandan has innovatively advocated the rights of the visually challenged by introducing them to cinema, book reading and even marathon running over the last 10 years. Not only were the founders and major organizers recognised and awarded by the government, the NGO also attracted collaboration from major companies, both transnational and local. Moreover, Hongdandan has attracted volunteers from all walks of life: corporate volunteers in its running program; student volunteers in its audio book recording program; coffee shop staff in its movie narrator programs. In other words, Chinese civil society works by citizens in NGOs, corporates and even government units finding ways to advocate for public solutions while gaining approval from the party-state. Innovative NGOs such as Hongdandan would successfully steer a new path by engaging ordinary citizens and company staff as volunteers while enabling the visually challenged to access public facilities and services in a non-confrontational way. Hongdandan's operations have in turn inspired the government and the CDPF to further improve their efforts to assist the disabled and changed their approach to the meaning of welfare.

Volunteering as a Form of Rights Advocacy

It was 8am at Beijing's Olympic Park. The sun was shining brightly and about 100 people were doing stretches by the runway to warm up. This mass volunteering event had been organized by Hongdandan, entitled 'Run for the Blind in the Dark'. This time, there were about 50 visually impaired people and about 100 volunteers. Before the event began, Hongdandan's founder Zheng Xiaojie gave a short briefing on the basics of assisting the blind. She asked the two groups to pair up and introduced themselves to each other. Then she asked the visually impaired to place their hands on either the elbows or shoulders of the volunteers. She demonstrated with a partner how to use specific words of 'right' and 'left' to give instructions and not drag the blind person over the curb. She also asked the volunteers to describe the surrounding so their blind partners could enjoy the run (Figure 4.1). Short



Figure. 4.1 Run volunteering at the Beijing Olympic Park. Author's photo.

and crisp, Zheng's introduction was a quick session about showing respect to and assisting the visually impaired.

The volunteer with whom I spoke after the event was a young female programmer named Jiajia from IBM. She had joined IBM's running club, which organized weekly practices in different parks. Since IBM had an agreement with Hongdandan, that Sunday she came to the Olympic Forest Park for the training. She and a visually impaired runner, Tie, were each holding onto the two ends of a short rope and they finished the practice that lasted for one hour. With practice, running partners should communicate through the slight movements of the rope to track changes of direction. However, Jiajia said it was her first time doing the run volunteering and she was still learning not to pull the rope too much. Tie was also much taller than her and ran much faster. Although the coordination was tough and the two runners did not talk much, both enjoyed the training session. On my way home with Tie, he told me he spent his whole day every day in a massage parlour and he treasured this outdoor running activity. He also said the audio movie session in the courtyard was mostly for older people, and it was not his cup of tea. At the end of the run, I asked Jiajia whether she would come again. She shrugged her shoulders and said she would see how the IBM running club made the arrangement. The Hongdandan organizers said although it was hard to coordinate two runners with different speeds, heights and paces, the many corporate responsibility programs at

various companies provided enough passionate volunteers to make the matching and training possible.

While the CDPF has run sports classes for the disabled for years, run volunteering really builds the bridge that has made the training possible for the visually impaired. Without the volunteers, it is almost impossible for non-professional blind runners to compete on a running track. Run volunteering not only connects bodies of different abilities, but also connects people across class and regional differences. Many citizens who initially join run volunteering have a corporate job and a good education background in the cities. In contrast, most blind runners are full-time migrant masseurs from less-prosperous pockets of the country. Some lost their sight because their families could not afford operations when they were young. Until today, most blind masseurs work long hours—usually working until late in the evening—to make ends meet. In other words, while run volunteering connects the two very different social groups in a sport they both like, it also exposes some of the largest income, status and structural inequalities in the country.

In Beijing, Hongdandan was just one of the local NGOs initiating such volunteering, bridging disabled people's need for physical training, and an urban population desiring meaningful engagement. Hongdandan organized its first 'blind running team' for the International Marathon in Beijing in 2013. At that time, it engaged only 16 blind participants and a team of volunteer runners. Zhang Caihua was a visually impaired masseur who participated in the race. Her participation was widely covered in various news media (Chen, 2015). Another NGO in Beijing that conducts similar initiatives is the He Yajun Run Volunteer Team (何亞君助盲團). Himself a migrant worker from rural Sichuan, He Yajun is a professional masseur in the capital who set up his own running team in 2015 after falling in love with the sport. Today, his team includes three groups of runners of different speeds and they meet twice a week at the Beijing Olympic Park.

At the time of writing, the number of run volunteers who have shown up at the practice of Beijing Olympic Park has reached almost 3000. About 200 visually impaired participants regularly participated (China Young Volunteers, 2022). In the last few years, run volunteering for the blind has no longer been limited to Beijing and has slowly become a popular urban phenomenon and means of social participation in many cities. The popularity has much to do with the increasing number of cities hosting marathons, the popularization of the sport, and the increasing number of urban running facilities. One NGO, Dialogues in the Dark, and its associated running organization, Running in the Dark (*Heian Paotuan* 黑暗跑團), have attracted large numbers of run volunteers in the major cities of Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing and Chengdu (Luo, 2016; Xu, 2021). In Guangdong, a similar run volunteer organization called SHINE has about 6000 college students enrolled (China Young Volunteers, 2022).

Media reports could easily put run volunteers' stories within the frame of a model citizen narrative, healthy national body, benevolent corporations and donations, all under the leadership of the Communist Party-state. Yet a deeper look at run volunteering reveals it as a rather unique set of elements connecting local NGOs' campaigns of rights advocacy, welfare improvement among people with visual impairment, and infrastructural access. Mass volunteering meet-ups can change the lives of both sides. The interviews with Fangfang, the female software engineer who lost weight through run volunteering in the Introduction, reveal that volunteers do start to pay attention to problems in existing urban planning and related disability-unfriendly features after the service. As Fangfang reflected in one of the interviews:

Although the Campaign of National Civilized City (which awards municipal governments that benchmark on urban management competences such as city hygiene, air quality and public transportation provision) was large-scale, even installing tactile paving to assist blind pedestrians in small towns, the reality is full of problems. Some tactile paving (textual ground surface indicators) leads to a wall, to a hole, or they are covered up by all the shared bikes. A friend with visual impairment said he would rather walk along the driveway because following the tactile paving might make him fall. (Yishushi, 2023)

Volunteering as a form of social advocacy also uses mild rhetoric such as 'care for the disabled' or 'sport together' to frame activities. Most of the volunteers I talked to said what they did was a kind of charity (*cishan* 慈善) to help the socially marginalized. The narrative of *cishan* (charity), often mixed up with the narrative of public interest, is also one that the government could not dispute. Such a narrative is also widely welcomed by companies for their corporate responsibility program. The NGO could also emphasize the event as sharing of new city lifestyles without critiquing the problems of existing urban design. Masking under these multiple narratives, however, the role of volunteering is effectively closing some of the huge gaps between disabled people's needs and the expanding urban facilities. At the same time the co-presence of the two types of bodies in the public space immediately make visible the underlying problems of access.

Volunteering therefore provides an even better avenue and language that are acceptable to citizens, the government and corporates because these are not organized campaigns. Volunteering sessions are often one-off meetings and volunteers are not tied to any NGO organizations. Citizens are free to join the activities that interest them. Moreover, the large scale and high frequency of these mass volunteering activities, often engaging hundreds of citizens at one time, often make them rather spectacular and festive. As these mass volunteering events now ripple across China's cities, and the number of volunteers increases, public discussion

about the visually impaired accessing urban facilities has increased. As much as these meetings between strangers are superficial and short-lived, they positively impact public interest, advocacy and rights articulation in the context of a restrictive civil society.

Urban Infrastructures and Shifting Biopolitics

Volunteers are certainly key to making the runs happen. Yet the changing urban space and facilities are equally critical. In the dozens of news media representations about run volunteering, most of them in Beijing, I have found not only the determination of runners, abled or disabled, but also transit infrastructures and smartphone technologies that have made things possible. All media reports about run volunteering mentioned the Olympic Forest Park, a man-made nature park built in 2008 for the Olympic Games, where blind runners and volunteers meet regularly. Covering 608 hectares and home to more than 200 wildlife species, the park is much less known than the Bird Nest Stadium but has been far more regularly frequented by locals after the Games. Official statistics show that the number of visitors annually has consistently topped 12 million in the last few years. Dubbed more recently as the ‘Mecca of Runners’, the Forest Park has attracted thousands of runners every day, including from outside of Beijing, because it features quality running tracks of 5 kilometres and 10 kilometres respectively. The 5K running track is a synesthetic track printed with distance signs, and lined with drinking fountains, bathrooms and vending machines. Not only is the park equipped with stretching bars, changing rooms and lockers; it is directly accessible by subway no. 8 at Olympic Forest Park station. It is now hard to say whether running has made the park a popular spot or vice versa. Hosting perhaps one of the biggest run volunteer events in the world, the park has gained its unusual reputation for diversity and inclusion in the country.

Many news reports mentioned how both blind runners and volunteers deployed the subway or train system in their own cities and beyond to get to the training. Even though some have to walk for 20 mins or take a bus transfer before reaching a subway station, the subway as a mode of transit is now one of the most important infrastructural elements in these volunteer meet-ups. The news representation of Yan Wei, the first blind masseur turned runner who joined the Boston Marathon in 2017, was an example (Fang, 2017). The Chinese news media focused on his frustration at having his tourist visa rejected three times by the US Embassy, preventing him from taking part in the race. Less attention is paid to how Yan travelled from Shandong province to the city of Shanghai to get the US visa (Ma, 2017). In mainland China at the time, there were only three US embassy office locations: Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu (the last

of these shut down in 2019). In the past, it took days for Chinese nationals on the train to cross several provinces to obtain a visa if they were not flying. In 2017, it took Yan Wei six hours to ride a high-speed train from Gaomi city in Shangdong province to Shanghai city, before taking a subway train to the US embassy on Nanjing Road. The high-speed railway connecting these two places spans a distance of 740 kilometres. In 2018, another female blind masseur turned runner, Zhou Ling, was reported to have flown to a marathon race in Nagoya, Japan, assisted by volunteers. During her training in Beijing, Zhou Ling also took a high-speed railway from Beijing to Hangzhou, a city in the south, in order to practise in a different humidity and temperature (Guo, 2022). To non-professional disabled athletes, the subway system and the high-speed railway have made possible their opportunity to join various regional races. The railroads have also dramatically improved their daily commuting experiences.

All blind runners talked about how they used workout software on a smartphone that voices and tracks training distance and speed. In China, the smartphone and 5G wi-fi system and associated software have significantly improved the ways blind citizens access information and knowledge. Blind participants said their 'older' way of spending leisure time was limited to domestic habits such as listening to radio or reading Braille or electronic books. Today, the blind runner Yan Wei, for instance, uses computer audio software to read news, watch films and documentaries, conduct online shopping and even trade stocks. With a smartphone, Yan Wei has also been able to conduct domestic travel in the country with a guide dog (Jiang & Hua, 2016).

When the blind activist Chen Guangcheng escaped from his rural Shangdong government house arrest in 2011, the national high-speed railway construction had just started. While western media focused on the local government's illegal detention and Chen Guangcheng as a dissident icon, the country-wide urban spatial and facilities upgrades, including the disability-friendly ones, were not yet widely available. The year 2010 was critical because China had just finished hosted the glamorous Olympics and was working on the Shanghai World Expo. The Beijing subway, for example, expanded from eight to 27 lines from 2008 to 2023 after the Beijing Olympics. But it is not just the number of lines that matters. There are more disability-friendly facilities in station and platform designs: tactile paving, ramps, elevators, and escalators. At the same time, internet technology has allowed netizens to be creative with various advocacy campaigns and sharing strategies. Although the 'Free Guangchen' website was short-lived and eventually banned, it showed how citizens could seize the internet platform to express their political views.

While in 2016, all the visually challenged attendees at the movie at the courtyard space in the old *hutong* neighborhood of Gulou had made several bus transfers, assisted by family members, because of a change of location, many can now take the subway train by themselves to attend the movie event independently. This is because, since 2018, the China Poly Group Corporation, a major state-owned

enterprise, has officially housed the Cinema of the Mind in one of the best-equipped theatres in the country, located right outside the Dongsi Shitiao station in Central Beijing. Recently, the movie narration for the blind has been taken one step further. The software giant Tencent came in during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and started to move the narration broadcast online, extending the audio movie entertainment to all visually impaired people with access to the internet in the country (Sun, 2022). When the Cinema of the Mind was launched, it was limited to a certain time and space in Beijing. Today, both its physical and virtual screening is accessible to thousands of people with a visual disability. In short, the last 10 years of urban infrastructural upgrades have changed Chinese cities and its citizens forever. They have made the meetings between strangers, the interactions between the abled and disabled bodies and the ways they understand access radically different.

Sharing Urban Lifestyles: Technology, Volunteering and its Limits

On top of movie narrating and run volunteering, Hongdandan's Heart Library (心目影院) has had considerable success in attracting committed volunteers. Operating the first independent audio books library in the capital, the NGO was the vanguard of providing the service in the country.⁴ From 2011 onwards, the NGO built up the Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) for digital audiobooks, with support from Microsoft. The technical system has advanced features that allow visually impaired listeners to search, place bookmarks and navigate the audio texts. At that time, about 2000 volunteers from schools and corporations had registered with Hongdandan to learn to use the system to input their audio recordings (Zhang, 2021). When I visited the venue in August 2016, many high school students were there fulfilling their service-learning requirements. They also liked the volunteering because it helped them to read the books they liked. All they had to do was show up at the time required, be prepared by going through the chapter first, then start recording.

The few volunteers with whom I had in-depth interviews came with different reasons and motivations. One young man, Thomas, who worked for Schneider, a German electric company based in Beijing, said he loved book recording because he wanted to make his voice, captivating and firm, useful. He told me that the most rewarding moment from volunteering at Hongdandan was when he was told that blind readers picked the books he recorded because they loved his voice. Another retired lady in her seventies told me she had developed the habit of coming to record

⁴ In 2017, the government started a national plan of promoting digital reading. It acquired 200,000 audio book machines for public libraries and provided visually impaired-friendly computers to the 100 educational institutes for the blind (Zhang, 2021).

books for the last seven years. She disputed the dominant view that she was doing a service for the blind. She insisted this was all about ensuring a good habit of reading for herself. Other interviewees mentioned similar reasons for reading the audio books: it was not so much about helping others as motivating themselves to read.

Like the audio movie narration, the audio library service is also slowly being replaced by digital technology. The Himalayas, the Chinese version of Audible, is gaining popularity among the visually impaired, but also everyone else. At the same time, Hongdandan also announced a collaboration with Microsoft's latest AI technology on recording, which has a text-to-speech (TTS) function to use an AI synthetic voice to automatically turn text into engaging audio books (Microsoft Customer Stories, 2021). One could predict that volunteering in book reading will gradually be replaced by technological advancement, AI or not.

In China, existing and new urban facilities still require more human-led volunteering in order for them to be more available to the disabled. I once attended a mass volunteer event entitled 'I Am Your Eyes' at a historical museum where 180 corporate volunteers in blue vests were taking 100 blind residents to tour the venue. It began in the museum garden, where the blind visitors were told where the lotus flower ponds, the bridges, a pavilion and a kiosk decorated with poems were located. Everyone had a great time, although about 30 minutes later we were told not to walk into the main exhibit building where thousands of valuable historical objects about Republic China were displayed. Although the corporate volunteers were given the standard museum scripts to talk, they could not fully communicate to those who could not visualize the details of the exhibits with small objects behind the glass panels. Instead, all 300 of us were led into a big open space at the back of the palace garden, where the event was then transformed into a singing and comedy show. There, pianists, singers and comedians, two of them also visually impaired, took turns to perform. News reports covering the event said that the visually impaired audience 'were excited and deeply moved' by mass volunteering (Sohu Music, 2014). I had mixed feelings after attending this mass volunteering event. While well-intentioned, it was more about fulfilling the service purpose of the corporate volunteers than actually engaging the visually challenged with the museum content. Audio technology that better fits blind citizens' needs might enable them to access such content in the near future.

Media Representations and Public Debates

In recent years, news reports and public discussion of blind people's rights to the city have become more prominent and visible. At the same time, news headlines about the blind show that the past association between disability and negativity

is slowly fading away. The themes of ‘broken in body but not in spirit’ (*shencan zhijian* 身殘志堅) and ‘disabled but not useless’ promoted by the CDPF have also been changing. Today, the news media speak less of the blind people living in the dark and waiting for others to show sympathy and assistance. Instead, they show more enthusiasm from ordinary citizens wanting to stand with or volunteer for the embodied others.⁵ When I first started researching the topic, I saw newspapers writing about encouraging the disabled to join running in order for them to ‘step outdoors, join sports and widen horizons’ and ‘enjoy life like other normal people’ (*Xiandai News*, 2013; *China Daily*, 2014). A headline that called for volunteers read ‘Are those of you who love running willing to become “Eyes of the Blind?”’ (Chen, 2015). Another said run volunteering was ‘a chance to enjoy the process and improve ourselves’ (*Renmin Zhengxie Bao*, 2014). One can see that the traditional understanding of citizens with disability having to integrate with the mainstream society or being responsible for overcoming difficulty remained strong. Seeing disability as a normal dimension of human experience, however, is now more common. Lately, media reports have changed, portraying running as an activity to which the visually impaired person is equally entitled (*Thepaper News*, 2017). The most recent coverage has even depicted the experience of a run volunteer proactively covering his eyes in order to better understand other sensory experiences of the blind people (Guo, 2022).

The same approach applies to public discussion of disability. As early as 2017, an online news headline that read ‘Judge the virtue of a nation based on its treatment of the disabled’ (Heizi, 2017) triggered considerable discussion. The city experience among people of disability was then called into question. Netizens immediately went online to challenge the official narrative that claims urban infrastructure in China is advanced and fully developed (Beijing *Xinwenguangbo*, 2022; Wang & Mi, 2020). In 2018, an incident involving famous blind singer Zhou Yunpeng being denied service at the Bank of China in Shenzhen was revealed. The singer posted his experience on Weibo, an online forum. The subsequent circulation and discussion of his post ultimately resulted in the Bank of China making a public apology (Song, 2018). In 2020, internet users continued the debate by uploading images of tactile paving that led to all kinds of obstacles and dangers in many Chinese cities, with a headline that read ‘Tactile Paving Obstructed’ (Wang, 2022). In 2021, a group of students who had completed their education abroad started an online discussion on the general invisibility of the disabled on the streets of Chinese cities (qq.com, 2021). In another news headline, netizens asked, ‘Is the Chinese Treatment of its Disabled Lagging Behind other Countries?’ (Baidu.com, 2020).

⁵ For more media representations of run volunteers, see Jinjiang (2022), Liang (2021), and Xu (2021).

Although the hundreds of comments under these headlines could be contested, with some users claiming that the disabled were better off staying home, the proliferation of these discussions suggests that the relationship between infrastructure, volunteering and citizenship is increasingly becoming a public topic, way more visible than it was in the past. Most importantly, volunteering has become a major driver for a real, operational change, instead of just a discursive media-level discussion. With more citizens becoming volunteers and interacting with citizens with visual impairment, they immediately experience existing urban design and related media bias. Volunteers' testimonies, such as Fangfang's critical reflection on the ineffectiveness of government city campaigns to enact real change for the disabled, ultimately become a subtle form of critique to which the government, even in an authoritarian setting, must respond. Acting collectively and in multiple cities, these volunteering platforms enable ordinary citizens to make changes happen in a non-confrontational manner.

Conclusion: Biopolitics of Coexistence and Sharing the City

Chen Guangcheng represents perhaps the first generation of rural Chinese residents with disability who travelled extensively to big cities for work and education. His courage to articulate civic rights and legal entitlements for those who were violated transformed both the political legal norms of the time and made him the target of political persecution in a non-democratic regime. Unfortunately, the rural-level government's ruthless measures at the time to illegally detain him, and harassing journalists from all over the world only called for a wider concern for social justice at a time when the country was stepping up on international mega-event hosting and global visibility. And although the Chinese laws and later the CDPF have been designed to guarantee the rights of disabled persons to participate in cultural, sport and recreational activities, it remains a big challenge for millions of people with disability to commute to and access these activities, let alone participate in competitive sport. A recent *New York Times* headline shows that even professional athletes with disability in China continue to face severe social discrimination and inaccessibility on a daily basis, despite their achievement of winning medals at the recent Winter Olympic Games (Chien, 2022). The same goes for all the other citizens with disability who must face daily obstacles when it comes to finding jobs and getting around. The low visibility of disabled people in the public space says much about this reality, no matter how much Beijing claims the capital is already a disabled-friendly city (Xinhua Net, 2022).

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how specific urban spaces, infrastructural facilities and digital technologies have become meaningful in the urban encounters

between strangers. The meetings between disabled and non-disabled citizens do not necessarily solve existing structural problems of inequality and future problems of injustice; nonetheless, they present opportunities for citizens of bodily differences and abilities to be visible and to meet. I argue that mass volunteering and the changing urbanscapes are transformational. Mass volunteering, in which hundreds of citizens are collectively recruited to projects of audio movie programs, audio book readings, running in marathons and touring museums, bridge the new city experiences and urban lifestyles, with citizens of visual disability eager to get outdoors and be social. In these volunteer encounters, the bodies of otherness that have been isolated for decades are able to emerge in the urban public space. Most importantly, they are not struggling alone; they are experiencing the city with company. China's urban public spaces have also changed significantly in the last 10 years to an extent that citizens of disability are able to conduct their lives more independently. The subway and high-speed railway as a standard mode of transport, and digital technologies such as smartphone applications that voice texts and images have meant the visually challenged are now able to access mobility and information like never before.

I have also shown that the volunteer meetings between citizens of different bodies and abilities in such technologized urbanscapes are reconstructing citizens' knowledge about the city. Moreover, volunteering is making it possible for many to review traditional concepts of 'normal' biological bodies. In this way, the previous notions of biopolitics, defined either by the socialist party-state repressive one-child policy or the urban discriminatory discourse of *suzhi* privileging the precious middle-class one-child productive bodies, are being transformed. These previous bio-politics approached population control—either its number or its quality—in a kind of top-down, elitist way. They were concerned about government intervention in family planning, genetic development and society's economic gain, implicating a kind of governmentality that is in Foucault's (1977) concept of a police state. Volunteering for the blind, by contrast, transforms the imagination of this biopolitics. It involves citizens of bodily differences being actively involved in the formation of an improved urban landscape, sharable urban experiences, habits and public culture. The more such volunteering occurs, the more citizens awake to the fact that urban planning does not have to be merely top-down or designed solely for the abled body. It has to take users of various abilities, and the ways they use the city, into consideration. The implication is that another technology of power has to be introduced, one that deals with coexistence, equality and care.

How Chinese citizens continue to negotiate these bodily differences and the public discussion of diversity and inclusion remains to be seen in its ongoing urban development. The interplay of mega-event hosting, the Xi Jinping administration's tightening of political control, a citizenry more exposed to information from the

internet, companies drawn to corporate responsibility schemes and new generations of young Chinese returning from education abroad will continue to change the ways in which embodied others are understood in this new phase of urban modernity. Together, they could rework the forms of knowledge and discourse in China, resonating with a wider global call for the rights of people with disability in the cities and beyond.

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The Pink *Flâneur*: Feminist Volunteering in Urban Transits and Landmarks

Abstract

This chapter features feminist volunteers and the various ways in which they have left civic markings and imaginations on urban spaces and infrastructures. The chapter starts with Zhang Leilei, who transformed herself into a walking billboard in Guangzhou, wearing a poster reading ‘no to sexual harassment’ as part of her daily routine. To attract attention, she cycled, walked and rode the subway with her poster, pink hair, pink outfit and pink plastic shower slippers. Zhang Leilei’s action was soon emulated by hundreds of citizens, who called themselves ‘feminist volunteers’ and printed out the same poster. These volunteers held the poster up in different cities and shared pictures of their actions on the microblogging website Weibo with the hashtags #IAmABillboard and #WalkingAgainstSexualHarassment. The chapter examines both the feminist message and the urban landscapes and environments against which the message was posted, especially the new transit hubs and the ways they are connected to digital media and technology. By describing the performative citizen as the ‘pink *flâneur*’, a figure of city explorer in Walter Benjamin’s writing, the chapter examines feminist volunteering, civic ideas and practices within a larger materialist network of upgraded transit infrastructure and digital media, arguing that Chinese feminist volunteering shaped a gendered counter-public in city spaces with more consumption and state surveillance.

Keywords: Feminist volunteers, urban landscape and infrastructure, no to sexual harassment campaign, *flâneur*, Guangzhou, China

For 18 days in May 2017, 25-year-old Zhang Leilei transformed herself into a walking billboard, wearing a poster reading ‘no to sexual harassment’ as part of her daily routine in Guangzhou, after a plan to buy billboard space in a subway station failed. To attract attention, she cycled, walked and rode the subway with the poster, with pink hair, wearing a pink outfit and a pair of pink plastic shower slippers (Figure 5.1). She was soon followed by hundreds of others, who printed out the same poster, held it up in different cities and posted their pictures on the microblogging website Weibo with the hashtags #IAmABillboard and #WalkingAgainstSexualHarassment. Apart from the feminist message, media reports were also filled with spectacular urban landmarks, many of them new transit infrastructure hubs, where citizens took their protest pictures.



Figure 5.1. Zhang Leilei in front of the Canton Tower in Guangzhou.
Photo courtesy of Zhang Leilei.

In this chapter, I show a form of volunteering that is bottom up, citizen initiated and about gendering the existing urban infrastructural environments. On the one hand, I show how volunteering could be turned into a platform, picked up by social activists, to articulate gender inequalities within the urban landscape. On the other hand, this chapter focuses on a group of young women who organized and called themselves feminist volunteers (*nüquan zhiyuanzhe* 女權志願者). Their actions are related to a broader feminist movement that has flourished in urban China in the last 10 years, and that has been powerful in shaping civic ideas and engagements. Its creative activism subverts any easy conclusion about China as an all-encompassing authoritarian state with only conforming citizens.

Connecting feminist volunteers with the physical and virtual fabric of urban infrastructure, I aim to show how volunteering, originally designed for a top-down state mobilization of citizens in mega events, is chosen by activists to create more meaningful civic engagements. This chapter also zooms in on the emerging high-tech infrastructural networks and their connections to ideas of activism and citizen ideals. It will sketch a complex ‘assemblage of mediation’, articulating feminist performative bodies, digital technology and urban landmarks of infrastructure where the forces of surveillance, consumption, social media and gendered public citizenship come together.

Following previous chapters’ analyses of volunteering in the context of urban change, this chapter focuses more on the materiality of infrastructure, its role in

exciting people's imagination and in redefining the political (Akhter, 2015; Appel, Anand & Gupta, 2018; Coleman, 2014). It aims to link the materiality of urban infrastructure projects to feminist organizing and various digital modes of gendered citizen practices. This discussion is especially relevant in China, as the state has always been seen as the biggest agent of infrastructural projects, steering the nation's global and domestic political, economic and cultural capacities (Bach, 2016; Oakes, 2019). As I will show, infrastructure does not just work in the way the state intends; it is highly dynamic and relational, and reassembles the social with the technical (Bennett, 2005, pp. 4–5; Harvey & Knox, 2015). Recent scholarship on infrastructure not only pays close attention to the technical functioning and bureaucratic design of infrastructural projects, but also the 'material articulations of imaginations, ideology and social life' (Anand, 2012).

I draw on in-depth interviews with feminist activists and collected visual and textual data of their campaign materials starting in 2016. In 2017, I walked some of their campaign routes and took pictures of myself holding related slogans in various spots in both Guangzhou and Beijing. In 2016, for instance, activists initiated a walk in Guangzhou called 'A Feminist Pace Never Stops' (*nüquanlu butingbu* 女權路不停步). They started from the 'Goddess' sculpture in the People's Park in central Guangzhou and ended at the sculpture of the Qing dynasty feminist Qiu Jin at Sun Yat-sen University (Qiao, 2017). When I walked the route in 2017, the urban landscape has changed, with an increasing presence of shared bikes and shared office spaces. From 2010 to 2017, the Guangzhou subway had expanded with six more subway lines. The city has also expanded its museum and cultural infrastructures.

The Chinese feminists' walks inspired me to think of them as *flâneurs*. Walking and strolling, rather than rallying, are permitted in China. Yet walks are not apolitical. In 2014, feminist volunteer Xiao Meili launched a cross-country marathon walk from the capital city Beijing in the north of China to the city of Guangzhou in the south to raise national awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Like other everyday initiatives such as museum visiting and running in the previous chapters, walking and taking photos are in no way political. Yet, when conducted in certain ways, these activities can be used creatively to push for social change in a politically restrictive regime. In *The Arcades Project* (1982), Walter Benjamin evoked the walking figure of the *flâneur* to approach the commodification of urban Paris in the nineteenth century. Looking at the *flâneur's* wanderings through shops and cafes, Benjamin wrote about the new sensuality, alienation and uniformity of modern city life. But if Haussmann's urban renovation plan was a collective consumption dream of Europe before the Nazi era, one might consider a similar, although much heightened and state-engineered, dream in contemporary China. In Guangzhou, feminist activist Zhang Leilei was far more media-savvy and purposeful in her strolls through the subway and new buildings than Benjamin's *flâneur*.

Following the pictures she posted online, together with numerous other pictures posted by citizens who held the same poster in many newly renovated cities, I found that their ordinary actions revealed a great deal of depth and ‘strangeness’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93) in Chinese urban modernity. By strangeness, I refer to those moments when citizens’ interactions or interventions with urban infrastructure might not necessarily align with the functional ways the party-state intends. The chapter specifically examines these moments of tension and strange interactions.

I need to highlight that the term ‘feminist volunteer’ (女權志願者) is not of my own invention. The term was already widely used during my interviews with Chinese feminist activists. Zhang Leilei would call people who supported her the feminist volunteers. Citizens who supported Zhang Leilei’s cause would be addressed as volunteers in news reports (Xinkuaibao, 2016; Xiao, 2018). In one news media report on Sina.com, a major news website in China, it was reported that ‘most volunteers are fresh graduates in their twenties (the 1990s generation), who had experiences of being sexually harassed at the workplace’. Without knowing each other, these young citizens often resonated with the feminist advocacy and volunteered to help with organization of logistics once certain agenda were put up on the social media. For instance, during the IAmABillboard campaign, many of the young women accompanied Zhang Leilei to send a petition to the Transport Department of the Guangzhou Municipal Government to request the authority to pay attention to women’s safety in public transit. One volunteer who graduated from Wuhan University told the reporter, ‘We are young people living in Guangzhou enjoying the convenience and efficiency of the city’s transit. But we have often heard about cases of sexual harassment in public spaces, thanks to the digital media.’ During the interviews, they often used the term *zhiyuanzhe* (volunteer) to describe themselves. In this particular report by Sina.com, it was said that there were about 30 ‘volunteers who were concerned about anti-sexual harassment’. (Xiao, 2018; Xinkuaibao, 2016; Yang, 2017).

I argue that feminist volunteering contributes to an expanding public, materialist and participatory form of citizenship within an authoritarian state structure. Linking feminist ideas to the materialist discussion of infrastructure, I explore the ways in which volunteering becomes a language and a form of practice that enable citizens to articulate a non-confrontational but critical approach to the country’s infrastructural upgrades. Theoretically, this chapter makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the discussion of material feminism that brings the materialities of our world into feminist theory and practice (Alaimo, 2016; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 5; Barad, 2017). Feminism has long looked at the importance of discourse and language in constructing the social. Material feminism enriches our understanding of the actions, agency and ongoing transformative power of the world by including phenomena that are material, more-than-human and technological

(Alaimo & Heckman, 2008). It stresses the ‘agentic’ power of non-human actors in constructing the parameters and consequences of our world (Bennett, 2005) and the numerous ‘intra-actions’ that are formative of our reality (Barad, 2017). Instead of seeing agency as coming solely from human actors, new materialism theories understand politics and ethics in ways that distribute agency among consumer products, toxins, non-human animals and humans (Alaimo, 2016: 8; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Latour, 2005). This chapter takes on this scholarship and its insights to explore material interchanges between feminist advocacy and infrastructural projects in Chinese cities. It also explores the ways citizens relate their daily experiences to the materiality of urban infrastructure.

Western feminisms have long revealed the racist, masculine and class bias intrinsic to conventional definitions of citizenship by showing that many women and people of colour have limited access to civil, social and political rights, classically identified by T. H. Marshall because these rights were often defined on the basis of white male norms of property ownership and paid work (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Vogel, 1995; Walby, 1994). Nancy Fraser (2013) specifically argued that the meaning of citizenship, based on a gendered nature and division of public/private spheres, needs reformulation through the transformation of gendered roles, and the ways in which gender underlies work institutions and the political economy.

In today’s China, digital media have created a highly contentious society (Svensson, 2014; Wan, 2017), feminist ideas have become mainstream (Wang, 2015) and state-sponsored infrastructures are altering older institutional barriers. How has the concept of citizenship changed? This chapter goes beyond looking at citizenship as legal status to stress how citizenship is about ‘access’ to urban resources when legal citizen rights could be ‘emptied’ in both neoliberal economy (Balibar, 2015) and authoritarian implementations. It also stresses citizen rights as a mode of urban practice (Woodman & Guo, 2017). In a later section, I show that citizens’ acts of taking and sharing photographs of themselves with urban infrastructure as a backdrop to index their sense of belonging on the social media could also constitute a new mode of urban practice, and therefore, a new form of political participation.

A Brief History of Recent Feminist Activism

There is no doubt that the recent feminist movement in China successfully problematized many misogynistic ideas and discriminatory practices. Young activists have vigorously redefined ways of doing gender, art, media and politics (Fincher, 2018; Han, 2018; Tan, 2017; Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Feminist volunteers have combined creative new media methods to stage activism (Li & Li, 2017) or create ‘counter-publics’ in a repressive regime (Ip & Lam, 2013). They have deployed online platforms

and the new digital media to enable large-scale consciousness-raising and gender awakening over the past few years (Wang & Driscoll, 2019). The social media platforms of Weibo (the largest microblogging platform) and WeChat (an instant messaging and calling app with payment function), for instance, have enabled ways to circumvent state control and have become some of the most critical spaces and tools of citizen journalism, public debate and collective actions (Svensson, 2013, 2014; Yang, Goldstein & deLisle, 2016). The feminist protests riding this wave of the digital media revolution comprise multiple interventions and intersectionalities, articulating gender inequalities with topics ranging from sexuality, class and the rural–urban divide to institutional inertia and the politics of representation.

Each volunteer I interviewed agreed that the feminist movement began with the ‘Bloody Bride’ performance in Qianmen, Beijing in the summer of 2011. Four feminists in bridal gowns stained with red paint posed in front of cameras on a busy shopping street in central Beijing. The action aimed to speak out against a court case in which a woman received a life sentence for killing her husband after suffering decades of domestic violence. Journalistic reports and photographs of the bridal performance went viral in local Chinese media (Li, 2012; Xu, 2012). Exposing the issue of violence using the auspicious symbol of the wedding dress in a historical and now shopping district, the young feminists not only played with symbolism, visual images and bodily performance in an era of digital sharing; they also highlighted them in the most conspicuous space of urban consumption. The subsequent ‘Occupy Male Toilets’ campaign at a city park in Guangzhou in 2012 was another example of striking visual imagery in the most ordinary urban background. The feminist actions addressed the unequal gender access to public resources by raising the problem of shortage of women’s restrooms in many public spaces, including parks and tourist attractions (*The Economist*, 2012; Liang, 2016). Volunteers queued up outside female toilets and posted pictures of the long lines online to raise society wide attention.

In 2014, Xiao Meili’s walkathon once again engaged the urbanscape and digital media heavily. She launched a cross-country marathon walk from Beijing in the north of China to Guangzhou in the south, two mega cities with more than 20 million population, to raise national awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Marching along the 2520 kilometre-long G107 highway over 160 days, Xiao stopped at major but smaller cities along the way, gathered citizens’ signatures and sent petitions to local Education Bureaus to call for the implementation of proper procedures in schools for dealing with cases of sexual harassment and abuse. Most importantly, she live-streamed her whole walk. Hundreds of supporters and citizens posted comments of encouragement while following her walk online. Widely reported in national and international media, Xiao’s marathon walk had a significant impact on shaping the national landscape of understanding issue of

sexual harassment as a social-political problem (Jacobs, 2016; Liu, 2013; Liu, 2014; Mao, 2014; Rauhala, 2014; Zhu, 2014).

Digital media and social media sharing have played a big role in making this movement happen. In 2013, a serious crime occurred in Hainan, in which six primary school girls were drugged and raped by the school headmaster and a local official. A feminist sex worker, Ye Haiyan, launched a solo action at the entrance of the provincial government building in Hainan to put pressure on the authorities. Shortly afterwards, she posted her protest video online and it went viral. It created a chain effect, which motivated hundreds of concerned citizens to post images of themselves online with the same protest slogan. Among them were Ai Weiwei, the famous artist, and Ai Xiaoming, a university professor, who both went naked in their online posts to garner more attention (Branigan, 2013; Dargis, 2016; Lau, 2013a, 2013b; Zeng, Tan & Wang, 2019).

Feminist sentiments built through both physical and online activism also spilled into other forms of action and change-making. A group launched the country's first litigation case against the discriminatory hiring policy of the National China Postal Service. A woman nicknamed 'Mahu' was the first to sue the government unit after her application to become a 'postman' was rejected based on her gender (Ivngo.com, 2015; Lady.163.com, 2015). Some volunteers also staged a collective head-shaving action to protest against an Education Bureau regulation that allowed colleges to admit male students with lower scores over female students (Lady.163.com, 2012).

Feminist actions attracting widespread media attention and expanding the sphere of civic action started to alarm the authorities. In 2015, five volunteers involved in a plan to give away anti-sexual harassment stickers in subway stations were arrested the evening before International Women's Day. The detention came as a major blow to the volunteers, who had believed all along that their actions were non-confrontational and in line with the state policy of promoting gender equality (Wang, 2015). Clearly, the Chinese government had been paying attention to the series of actions/performances preceding 2015. It was alarmed by the ways these actions and performances attracted rampant online discussions and offline reactions. Once again, the arrest of the 'Feminist Five' shows the Chinese state simply could not tolerate these civic actions in the name of performances and digital sharing. Worse, the government later forcibly shut down a few feminist-related NGOs in the country. The Xi Jinping government exerted its iron fist to kickstart a series of censorship and silencing procedures, targeting feminist organizations and individuals.

Released after 37 days, the five feminists were traumatized (Fincher, 2018). Related women's rights movements also died down considerably. The detention of the 'Feminist Five', however, raised more concerns. Political leaders, journalists, scholars and activists from around the world also called for their release (Fincher,

2016, 2018; Haynes, 2018; Tsui, 2016). Despite all the crackdowns, the feminist agenda was picked up again as the global wave of the #MeToo movement hit China in 2016 and 2017. Numerous individuals reported their teachers or seniors for alleged sexual harassment and assault. There was also increasing online discussion about the definition of feminism and how the personal is political. Nevertheless, the movement suffered from setback as more news headlines online discredited it and labelled Chinese feminists as terrorists and related to foreign influences.

The recent feminist campaign was essentially China's first in the twenty-first century and one of the strongest civic movements to address misogyny in Chinese society in general. In Maoist China, debates about women's liberation were tied to women's status within the patrilineal hierarchy and institution of marriage, and whether women could be treated equally as formal workers in the collectivized economy of production. The Marriage Law in 1950 corrected many of the feudal practices, as the state started to prohibit archaic practices such as concubinage and child betrothal, and emphasized free choice of partners over forced and arranged marriages. In 1954, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China specifically gave women 'equal rights with men in all areas of political, economic, cultural, social and domestic life'. This legislation, however, did not altogether stop everyday sexism in the workplace, sexual harassment at schools, domestic violence at home and a general lack of sex education in society. In other words, the state discourse on gender equality was not clearly articulated to cover cultural and institutional sexism in relationships, popular culture and daily practices (Wang, 2017).

The recent feminist movement has raised gender awareness beyond the legal framework of marriage and women's right to work. People have begun to break out of their guilt and silence to talk about rampant sexism in everyday life: sexual harassment on the subway, domestic violence at home, status subordination, discrimination against women in popular culture and the alarming numbers of rape and sexual assault cases made known by the new media (Han, 2018; Fincher, 2019; Lü, 2019; Wang & Driscoll, 2019). In many ways, the recent infrastructural developments have exacerbated the visibility of these problems as women have started to experience them collectively in public spaces. This explains why feminist activism has continued even though the authorities cracked down on the movement, marginalized the activists, and suppressed online reporting. They also forcibly closed the account of the online journal *Feminist Voice*, with 250,000 subscribers, in 2018. In the next section, I return to Zhang Leilei's campaigns of 'I am a billboard walking against sexual harassment' to present a materialist account connecting feminist politics, urban landscape, transit infrastructures, resistance and surveillance.

Birth of the Pink *Flâneur*: Feminist Advertisement Meets Political Censorship

Zhang Leilei's walking campaign may be traced back to a collective idea in 2016 to crowdfund money to rent a billboard space in Kecun Subway Station in Guangzhou city. Online crowdfunding was a new digital tool that had appeared only a year earlier, but feminist volunteers were quick to adopt it. They launched the online fundraising campaign on International Women's Day and within 60 days had met the target of 40,000 yuan (approximately US\$6,000)—enough to buy a subway billboard space. Zhang told me that many donors were secondary school students, who each contributed 5 or 10 yuan. Everyone was excited. A volunteer in New York City contributed a poster design and the activists ran an online competition for the slogan. The poster design to be submitted seemed perfect: a bold and contemporary graphic in which a woman's hand with red painted nails grabs a masculine arm by the wrist. Three pop-art speech bubbles read 'Stop!', while the slogan reads 'Temptation is no excuse. Stop the wandering hands.'

The advertising company must have thought it straightforward when it agreed to take on the project on behalf of the feminist clients. The application was, however, rejected by the Guangzhou Administration for Industry and Commerce, which deemed the poster design likely to cause anxiety among the public. In China, censorship is often not directly initiated by the state propaganda department but by and through contact agencies such as this one.

The advertising company then revised the poster graphics with a new slogan: 'Temptation is no excuse. Please commute with civility'. Although the feminists disagreed, the company explained that the new wording would make things 'less politically sensitive'. Nevertheless, the changed version with its less-specific message was also rejected. The reason given this time was that 'the clenched fists looked too revolutionary'.

Sensing looming political censorship, the feminist volunteers subsequently produced an entirely different design: a cat bravely fending off a faceless pig's trotter in the presence of other animal bystanders. The administration finally agreed to the poster design but quoted a 'new' rule that all non-profit advertisement required official government affiliation. After a full year of negotiating with various poster designs and requesting an official government affiliation to back them—all in vain—the advertising company refunded the group's deposit and said there was no point in pursuing the matter further.

Refusing to be censored, one of the volunteer organizers, Zhang Leilei, decided to take up the new billboard design herself and carry it everywhere she went in the city. Her action was widely reported both nationally and internationally (*Feminist Voice*, 2017; Nüquan, 2017; Zhao, 2017). The news coverage unanimously focused on her anti-sexual harassment message, which was a positive development. Unlike

the previous attempts of feminist volunteers handing out stickers in the subway station, walking alone wearing a billboard and not openly engaging with people became a new tactic. By not necessarily resisting anything, Zhang's walking also represented a new form of civic action that articulates gender inequality and urban rights in a new light. The next section turns our attention to what is commonly left in the background: the places where she walked.

The New Transit Spaces: Canton Tower and the Kecun Subway Station

Two of the most circulated pictures of the pink-clad Zhang Leilei include one set against the new Canton Tower and another in the Kecun subway station (Lin, 2017). The 600 metre-high Canton Tower is instantly recognizable to many people in China. Built specifically to broadcast the 16th Asian Games in Guangzhou, the Canton Tower took seven years to build and opened in 2010. In addition to broadcasting, it houses two levels of observation desks, museums, a 4D cinema, games rooms, rides, Ferris wheels, and revolving restaurants. Beneath it are a large public plaza, food courts, and transportation stations. It is therefore a new space of spectatorship, leisure, consumption, and public transit.

The Canton Tower was also in the national headlines on many occasions because the Guangzhou municipal government launched a public competition and poll to name it. It was so popular among local Guangzhou residents that they even gave it a nickname, 'Small Waist', because of its sleek architectural design. However, people love it mainly because it symbolizes the pride of the city in hosting a mega event, the 2010 Asian Games. While the Canton Tower has certainly become a symbol of the new Guangzhou, it is only a small part of a much larger infrastructural plan that was to change the entire outlook and planning of the historic city. For the purpose of hosting the Asian Games, this included building a number of sports facilities ranging from stadiums to athletes' dormitories that would be turned into apartments for sale, as well as the construction of a high-speed railway station named 'Guangzhou South' and five new subway lines.

Just south of the Canton Tower, Kecun station—where the feminists initially planned to place an advertising billboard—may be one of the busiest subway stations in southern China. Sitting on two major subway lines, no. 3 and no. 8, it connects 51 stations from four directions. Most importantly, it connects the older Guangzhou city area with the new business areas filled with art and leisure spaces, such as the Guangdong Provincial Museum, the new Opera House, the new Guangzhou Library, and the new Convention Centre. There are also office buildings, new shopping malls, five-star hotels, and the International Financial Centre building. Kecun station also connects Guangzhou city with the southern

county of Panyu, where another two million people live, but it is only one of the 257 stations on the 14 lines in the larger subway network of Guangzhou. By 2019, the daily carrying capacity of the Guangzhou subway was estimated to be about 10 million people.

What kind of urban experience does such urban renewal bring about? One major feature of the transformation is the opening up of free and public access spaces, including museums, the library, and public plazas. These free public spaces converge with the Canton Tower in the centre. Just a decade ago, museums and parks still charged a fee, while public libraries asked for identity cards and user registration. The construction of the Canton Tower symbolizes not just a new landmark but also the opening up of new spatial experiences, in which citizens find improved access to public services and resources.

Other major features of the infrastructural transformation are mobility, technology and speed. With the high-speed railway and subway lines connecting hundreds of thousands of towns, cities and provinces, citizens are suddenly able to engage in very frequent and rapid inter-city and inter-regional travel. Areas considered remote in the past are now just a 30-minute subway or high-speed railway ride away. For instance, the journey from Beijing to Guangzhou used to take about 30 hours by train. With the high-speed railway, it now takes about eight hours. A popular saying that best captures such extraordinary time-space compression goes 'Morning dim sum in Guangdong, dinner roast duck in Beijing!'

It is not just the speed that has changed, but the mode of travel as well. For instance, the Guangzhou subway is the first in the country to allow passengers to travel by scanning their cell phones at the turnstiles. In 2017, I saw a subway billboard promoting ticketless rides in Guangzhou, in which a male passenger passed through the turnstile using his phone. Although his body language seemed relaxed, with one hand in his pocket and a smile on his face, the slogan on the advertisement behind him read: 'The secret of getting ahead lies in your phone.' Riding the subway without a ticket is very much about convenience and saving time, but it is equally about being technological and integrating one's body with the wider infrastructure. Smart travel extends even further when people step out of subway stations and scan QR codes for shared bikes. In the last few years, these low-cost and user-friendly shared bikes, dominated by brands such as Mobikes or OFO, have shortened the final trip between subway station and final destination technologically.

Smartphone technology is well integrated into all transit and consumption infrastructure in today's China. Payment is electronic and virtual. Using touch screens, citizens buy tickets, scan station machines, and travel all over the country. The electronic payment platforms WeChat Pay and Alipay are used by everyone except visitors from abroad and some elderly people. They are becoming so

widespread and dominant that people using cash are sometimes even frowned upon for slowing things down. At the same time, travel and consumption using one's phone mean that everyone's whereabouts and consumption behaviours can easily be tracked—the technological element also involves surveillance and control.

The subway is certainly one such space of surveillance. In major Chinese cities, using the subway means going through checkpoints. It is now a standard procedure for all passengers to pass through door-frame metal detectors, opening their arms and pockets for security attendants with scanning devices. All bags and luggage must also go into x-ray machines to be scanned. Commuters are barred from riding trains if they are carrying items such as kitchen knives, Chinese wine and even spray bottles of deodorant because the latter two are considered inflammable. Guangzhou is also the first city in China to experiment with the latest biometric surveillance machines that automatically scan people's faces and bodies (Chen, 2018).

I delineate these experiences in the new transit infrastructures to provide a sense of what many Chinese urban citizens have come to experience in terms of mobility and technology over the last 10 years. Brightly lit parks, well-curated museums and improved transportation also mean enhanced social rights for citizens in accessing public resources. It would not be an exaggeration to say that millions of citizens in urban China feel a great sense of pride in these infrastructural projects. I certainly shared such pride when I took a high-speed elevator to the top of the Canton Tower and enjoyed a bird's eye view of the historic city, completely transformed into a futuristic metropolis in just a decade. Although there are mixed feelings about price inflation and the disappearance of historic areas, few would want to return to the life of 10 years ago. At the same time, however, surveillance has become omnipotent and normalized. Monitoring no longer comes from the top authorities but is initiated by the individual self. Willingly or not, all are plunged into an entirely virtual, yet also 'panopticon'-like, urban experience in these new infrastructural spaces (de Certeau, 1984).

My observation is that feminist protests exhibit a performative body akin to what Stacy Alaimo (2016, pp. 77–78) terms 'a metonym of trans-corporeal connections between people and places', in which the protest bodies are enmeshed within the material world of infrastructural landscapes. In other words, I do not consider feminist ideas and activism to be separate from the above infrastructural materiality and digital media technologies. Instead, the feminist protest message should be read as mediating and interchanging with the affective infrastructural backgrounds and new media technologies. In the following section, I describe how transit infrastructures, internet technology, smartphone applications, social media, and virtual payments are new sites and modes of citizen practices in China.

The Affective Transit Infrastructures

Transit infrastructure sites in China are not just neutral or purely technical surfaces. They are surfaces of a variety of content. Party-state propaganda posters promoting the China Dream of harmony, prosperity and happiness are ubiquitous. As in subway stations in many cities around the world, consumer commercials for property sales and new electronic products are highly visible. At the same time, images promoting civic behaviour are conspicuous. Subway billboards with anime designs and slogans such as ‘Garbage into the Bin, Beautiful and Unselfish’ and ‘No Jumping in Line, Travel in an Orderly Way’ are prominent.

Various non-governmental organizations have also promoted their campaigns and social and environmental ideas in subways and on high-speed railways. In 2017 alone, when I was conducting fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing, I encountered subway billboards with powerful images and slogans, such as ‘Reduce Energy Consumption, Travel Green’, ‘Eat Smart, One Vegetarian Meal a Week’, ‘Protect the Ocean, Say No to Shark Fin’, ‘Open the Fridge Door Less Frequently, Keep the Earth Cool’ and ‘Put Your Computer in Sleep Mode, Let the Earth Rest More Easily’. On the Beijing subway line no. 13, for instance, I observed a series of posters by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and USAID (an international development agency



Figure 5.2. Subway billboard in Tiananmen Square Station, Beijing, December 2017. Author's photo.

based in the United States). Using the faces of Chinese celebrities, these international NGOs advocated saying ‘No to Ivory Trade and Products’ and making responsible decisions when buying pets. One of the most memorable billboard designs I saw that summer was in the Tiananmen Square Station in Beijing. Occupying one side of the station wall was a 100-metre-long series of posters by the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF), consisting of images of salamanders in various colours and shapes, with the slogan ‘Fight Climate Change, Save the Chinese Giant Salamander’ (Figure 5.2).

Two Modes of Practising Citizenship

The Pink *Flâneur* Zhang Leilei did not walk alone in the affective infrastructural landscape. She set up a Weibo page, initiated a walking-with-the-poster campaign and called for supporters to upload pictures and share their support and reflections. One hundred citizens from 23 cities across China joined the campaign, printing out the same poster design and holding it up in their own cities (Nüquan, 2017). All posted pictures of themselves with the poster in front of urban landmarks of their own cities (see Figures 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5).



Figure 5.3. A young man holding the poster in front of the Changsha high-speed railway station. Source: <https://tw.weibo.com/1948917241/p/14> (note that the webpage is no longer available). Author's screen capture.



Figure 5.4. Two supporters holding up the poster in the plaza fountain in Beijing. Source: <https://tw.weibo.com/1948917241/p/14> (note that the webpage is no longer available). Author's screen capture.



Figure 5.5. A young woman holding up the poster by a pond against the background of the newly built twin towers of Xiamen city. Source: <https://tw.weibo.com/1948917241/p/14> (note that the webpage is no longer available). Author's screen capture.

Some even shared the extra efforts they took by conducting independent surveys on experiences of sexual harassment in subways. Some initiated discussions on gender equality in public parks. The backgrounds of these pictures demonstrate powerfully how the message spread to various locations of the country. In this section, I show that it is not just the anti-sexual harassment message that matters. Beyond the message, their use of recognizable urban infrastructure in their images points to ways citizens relate to their city and appreciate the new infrastructures. They also show how citizens imagine new forms of civic participation, and thus a new mode of citizenship.

The visual elements of these photographic images are worth noting. First, many were taken as long shots to highlight the background or the location. This is especially so for the man holding the poster at the Changsha high-speed railway station (Figure 5.3), a mega construction that connects China from north to south and east to west. The photograph shows the front of the vast railway station, with the man looking small and the poster even smaller. A medium-long shot was used in another photograph, where two women are shown having fun while holding the poster at the plaza fountain of Beijing's Taikoo Sanlituan, an iconic shopping complex and landmark in the nation's capital (Figure 5.4). Amid the water splashing and kids playing, the two women hold their posters high, merging the protest message with the commercial advertisements of the shopping mall in the background. The third photograph uses a medium shot, showing the poster image and slogan more prominently. The new landmark of Xiamen city's Twin Towers is seen from afar against the wide background of an expanse of water. The young woman is pictured in a green dress and cardigan, holding the poster above her head and looking up (Figure 5.5).

With longer shots, more background space and particular poses, the overall effect of the first two photographs is a blending of the anti-sexual harassment slogan with the various new infrastructural spaces. The framing makes the protest less clear and censorship more difficult. Moreover, these photos, featuring supporters posing with relaxed smiles next to these iconic urban landmarks, become fused with millions of similar pictures circulating online, making it difficult for the authorities to sort and censor them. In Figure 5.4, although the poster image is much bigger, it is juxtaposed with the young woman posing stylishly. The effect is a merging of the protest message with the photographic genres of fashion or portrait. As media scholars have argued, photographic images shared online and on social media in China are where individual identity, collective action, and social movements meet. Photographic images become creative ways in which citizens use visual images to circumvent internet censorship and stage political struggles in the context of a highly censored environment (Sullivan, 2014; Svensson, 2014; Tan, 2023; Yang, Goldstein & deLisle, 2016).

Finally, the infrastructural backgrounds of these images once again demonstrate the enormous transformation of many lower-tier Chinese cities outside of the mega cities of Beijing and Shanghai. They come from cities that are much less known, such as Foshan, Xi'an, Chengdu, Wuhan, Changsha, and Xiamen. While some of these cities were previously considered less developed, these pictures show that they are now uniformly supplied with shopping malls, subway stations, high-speed railway stations, and pleasant public parks. Changsha and Xiamen, for instance, with populations of about seven million and five million respectively, launched their first subway lines in 2014 and 2018. Both cities were connected to the national high-speed railway network in around 2010.

Citizens who take photos of these urban structures for social media circulation are not just advocating feminism; they are also expressing a sense of belonging and pride in their own cities, where urban renewal projects and related constructions have greatly enhanced the quality of people's lives. People are experiencing mobility, connection, and entitlements daily. The viral circulation of these photographs on social media platforms created not only a greater resonance with the anti-sexual harassment campaign, but also resonances with the 'social citizenship' or urban entitlements to social provisions as a full member of society (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). This is especially true when residents from smaller cities show that they now share the same set of infrastructural hardware, services and mobility that previously had been exclusive to residents of Beijing and Shanghai: subways, high-speed railways, roads, parks, museums, libraries and shopping malls. In other words, the act of taking pictures with new urban structures directly challenges the long-established hierarchical sedentarism of state socialism that has fixed people in one place and distributed entitlements that divide residents between urban and rural areas, between first-tier urban cities and smaller cities, and between regions.¹ In many ways, these pictures featuring both new urban landmarks and the protest poster show that citizenship practice, entitlements, the feminist message, and a much bigger digital and transit infrastructural network are now embedded with each other.

Digital infrastructure such as the internet, smartphone applications, social media and virtual payments integrated into the urban infrastructures have radically changed citizen practices and ideas. Another salient example would be Tencent Holdings, which runs WeChat, a social media platform currently used by

¹ For many decades, urban developments were limited to the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and a few others such as Changchun and Tianjin. Workers in state-owned enterprises located in these cities have not only enjoyed work stability and higher social status but also better living standards with the availability of electricity, water supply, paved roads, flushable toilets, trams and buses, and in recent decades the subway and shopping malls. During Mao's period, the majority of the Chinese population living outside of these cities were not allowed to move to other locations and they had limited access to these municipal services.

more than 1.3 billion users. Chinese citizens not only use WeChat for social media and WeChat Pay for e-payment, they also use WeChat public accounts to access numerous news, academic, literary and cultural criticism journals, including *Feminist Voice*. Furthermore, millions of citizens use WeChat Charity (*Tencent Gongyi* 騰訊公益) to make donations to various civic initiatives and charity projects run by grassroots NGOs all over the country.² The WeChat social media platform in China is part of a wider network communicating various civic initiatives, public disclosure and fundraising for social impact. At the time of writing, a fundraising project calling for donations on WeChat Charity concerned the mental health of transgender people. By raising funds online, local NGOs provide public education about marginalized groups and expand the parameters of citizens' rights. In turn, citizens donate and support these ideas by scanning a QR code on their phones and sharing their support through social media. Again, how these various technologies provide a set of key infrastructures for social activism, including feminist volunteers, was unimaginable even a decade ago. They are profoundly changing and shaping the manners and meanings of citizen participation (Wang, 2019). Still heavily constrained by the state, the technological power of Web 2.0 disputes the dominant understanding that civic engagement and policy change is not possible in authoritarian China.

The complex assemblages of mediation connecting gendered public citizenship with feminist walking, consumer capitalism, the ubiquitous mix of social media, and surveillance technologies are best exemplified in another picture of the *Pink Flâneur's* action. It shows Zhang holding the poster on a bench in the street, next to the back of a salesperson sitting on an adjacent bench, also holding a poster advertisement for apartment offerings (Figure 5.6).

The street background features a small restaurant, a phone shop and a shared bike randomly parked by the kiosk of the Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau, commonly called *chengguan* in China. When I asked Zhang Leilei about the picture, she commented on the ironic coincidence: 'That is the only place in town where I could freely hold the poster.' By immersing herself

² From funding kids in the rural areas for science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) education to funding improved social integration for optically challenged people, numerous NGOs share their project objectives, budget proposals, funding justifications, track records and work in progress on the WeChat charity platform for public scrutiny and donation. Citizens make lump-sum or monthly donation decisions based on such online information disclosure. In 2017, 6.8 million users donated over 300 million yuan (US\$44 million) to various initiatives on the Tencent September 9 Charity Day platform (Flannery, 2017). In the same year, I had the opportunity to talk to the executive director of Tencent Charity. He shared with me an insight from the charity's big data, revealing that many citizens have developed a habit of browsing through these projects on a weekly basis and making donations of as little as 10 yuan (less than US\$1.50) before going to bed.

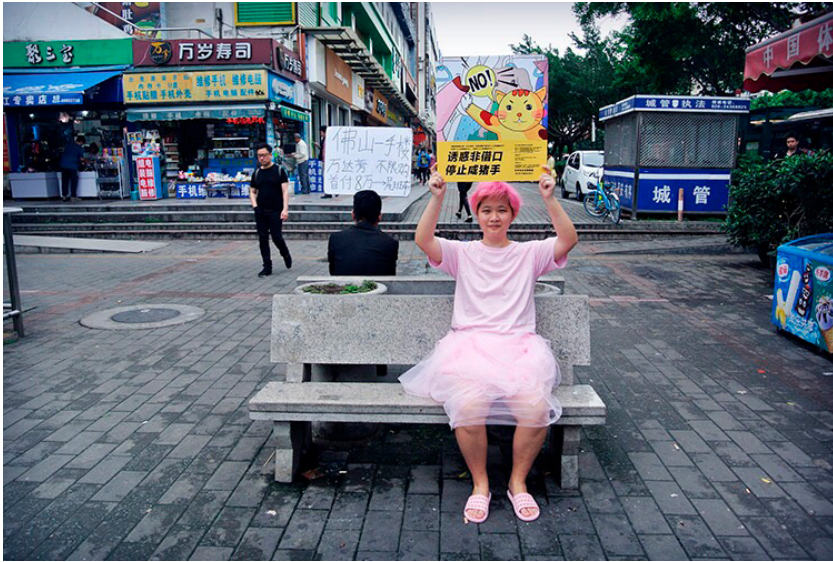


Figure 5.6. Zhang holding the poster on a bench next to the back of a salesperson sitting on an adjacent bench holding an advertisement for apartment offerings. The kiosk reads *chengguan* in Chinese, meaning the Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau. Photo courtesy of Zhang Leilei.

in a cityscape where consumption, shared bikes, soaring housing prices, and ubiquitous social media and state surveillance interact, Zhang Leilei mediated her activism amidst competing discourses on civic awareness, party-state governance and consumption.

The irony of this picture is that two *flâneurs* are pictured together with the *chengguan*, a government unit responsible for tackling street management issues such as illegal street hawkers, illegal parking, littering, homeless people, beggars and fraudsters. The Pink *Flâneur* is no doubt a political dissident. And the property salesman is perhaps what Susan Buck-Morss (1986) would call the ‘sandwichman’, the salaried *flâneur* carrying billboards advertising commodities. Interestingly, in the picture, both the Pink *Flâneur* and the contemporary sandwichman managed to appear under the surveillance radar of the street management.

Zhang Leilei’s poster walking lasted for 18 days. She was eventually stopped after national security agents without batch numbers, names or warrants broke into her home. They asked her to move out of Guangzhou city if she wanted to continue her walking. The police also threatened her landlord in case she did not move out soon (Xiao, 2017; Zhang, 2017). Zhang was terrified by the forceful crackdown. After all, she had only walked around with a poster reading ‘no to sexual harassment’. But even during her poster walking, she suffered a shocking car accident. In my

interview with her, she recalled the moment she was thrown off a shared bike by a car that struck her from behind. She fell to the ground with the poster still on her back. Worse, it was a hit-and-run incident and there was no way to trace whether it was a simple road accident or an act of political harassment. Either way, it frightened her to realize that walking with the poster could have cost her life.

The crackdown ultimately reveals the severe party-state control on freedom of speech. It also reveals that Zhang Leilei and other citizens were not wandering 'freely' across the urban landscape in the way Benjamin had described his *flâneur* doing. Susan Buck-Morss (1986) has exposed the distinctly unmarked masculine and class natures of Benjamin's *flâneur* in her essay 'The *Flâneur*, the Sandwichman and the Whore'. She argues that wandering women are unlikely to be seen as adventurist walkers delving into the tactile nature of urban modernity; on the contrary, the figure of a feminized *flâneur* inevitably conjures up the image of a whore, embodying erotic desires, commodified fantasy, and sexuality on sale. If a *flâneur's* strolling is meant to reflect on the meaning of modern existence, the female *flâneur* can only embody objectivity and otherness, and suffer the same degradation as the lower-class sandwichman (Buck-Morss, 1986, pp. 112–18).

A different form of reflection about the nature of the *flâneur* in China is urgently needed. These young feminist activists are certainly class and generational specific, yet to criticize these walkers as middle-class is to dismiss their protest concerns too easily and to obscure the political reality that even their walking could be highly political. Similarly, to say that these walkers are the only fighters in a repressive regime falls short of understanding the changing conditions of volunteer opportunities and creative civic practices proliferating within Chinese cities. In fact, there was an anticlimax to the crackdown and intimidation. The subway in Guangzhou introduced women-only train compartments with 'Care for Women' (*guan'ai nüxing* 關愛女性) slogans at the end of 2017. In Beijing, the message 'Say no to sexual harassment' appeared on the subway handles for a month in 2018. Today, reports and shaming of sexual harassment are far more visible on the official Weibo subway sites of many cities.

Conclusion: Feminist Volunteering in Mega Cities

In this chapter, I have addressed two modes of feminist volunteering: walking and taking photographs featuring new urban infrastructure and landmarks. Zhang Leilei's poster walking constitutes action to make claims to a gender-friendly public sphere. Citizens' photography with new urban structures of their hometowns makes claims to both gender equality and better access to infrastructure, mobility and entitlements that historically were not available to the majority of the

population. Together, their activities mark the ways citizenship is experimented with and practised in an authoritarian regime. Through feminist volunteering, citizens affirm their social rights and citizen entitlements as consumers, commuters and users of public resources. Through walking and showing photographic images with infrastructural backgrounds, the volunteering articulates a form of gendered citizenship that does not always conform to the values of wealth and power that the hegemonic party-state imagines in these infrastructural wonders, but instead generates values of equality, participation, and autonomy.

I have situated this specific type of activism/volunteering in the context of a simultaneously technologized and authoritarian society in which the power of monitoring and control does not stem solely from the repressive state apparatus, and civic ideas of advocacy or volunteering—including feminism—are mediated and distributed in a much wider digital infrastructural network of transit and consumption. Most importantly, feminist volunteering is rather unlike the above types of volunteering, which are about service delivery and facilitating the flow of people, information and resources. Feminist volunteering is more activist in nature and their practice is about connecting global ideas and images of gender equality and ‘no to sexual harassment’ campaigns with the current infrastructural network and the ubiquitous mix of social media in Chinese cities. Communicating via subway billboards, social media and fundraising platforms, feminist volunteering is about making a call for more gender awareness, rights and responsibilities in public spaces. Finally, feminist volunteering not only enacts ‘the personal is political’ with a growing proportion of the urban population; it reconfigures a new form of civic practice surrounding urban infrastructural backgrounds for more rights articulations.

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Conclusion

In January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in China. First detected in Wuhan City, the super-contagious coronavirus quickly spread to the rest of the country and caused panic and severe strains on hospital capacity. The outbreak stunned the country, which had been experiencing political stability, high economic growth, infrastructural expansion, and urban prosperity. Facing a sudden public health crisis, China entered a phase of constant testing, quarantine, and total lockdown. While developing its own vaccine, the government wanted everyone to stay home and work online if possible, and stopped social gatherings. Once a case was detected, an entire school, factory or shopping mall could be shut down. Migrant workers had to leave the city and go back to their rural homes while college students were sent home to learn via Zoom. Not only were restaurants closed and gatherings banned, but many residential neighbourhoods were locked down completely. The measures literally blocked thousands of residents from leaving their apartments. With empty streets and vacant factories, the Chinese economy and its GDP plummeted. Yet the crisis motivated thousands of citizens to become volunteers in the process.

In this final chapter, I aim not to pull out a full presentation and data analysis of volunteering during the pandemic, because I don't have enough empirical data. I could not go back to China for any fieldwork after COVID-19 broke out because the borders were mostly closed. But I have talked to people who became volunteers during this time. There was also massive coverage of volunteering in various Chinese media, ranging from official propaganda stories and mainstream media reports to individual WeChat posts. Most of this chapter information was sourced from desktop research of these representations. I highlight how volunteers worked as urban operators in connecting people with the resources needed during the lockdowns. I also show how volunteering made many people's lives sustainable under such a state of emergency.

The Chinese government's decision to fight the virus with all its available political might not only made sure that everyone complied with its strict controls; it trickled down so all provincial, municipal and district government officials became accountable if cases of infection were caught. One single case of infection or positive result could cause concerned civil servants or officials to lose their jobs. One positive result could also get the entire neighbourhood or work unit locked down, affecting thousands of people's mobility and jobs. Many Chinese cities adopted a policy that closed borders to non-residents. Residents who were out of town and

who needed to come home from elsewhere were required to go through two to three weeks of hotel quarantine and repeated COVID tests. The purpose was to stop the virus from spreading in the community. The governments also stopped and reduced subway and high-speed train schedules drastically to prevent people from moving around. During the peak of the outbreaks, many provincial airports were also shut.

Checkpoints were installed not just at the borders but everywhere inside the mega cities. In order to better monitor the number of infections, provincial and city governments later developed health code apps so citizens could upload their vaccinations and COVID-19 test records onto their smartphones. People with a green health code could go out of homes, ride public transit, and get groceries at the supermarket. They were allowed to show up at factories/offices, enter public buildings, even cross provincial borders. Those waiting for a COVID-19 test result could carry a yellow health code, which meant they had very limited access to most services. Those who tested positive would be given the alarming red health code. These people were denied access and service everywhere. During the three years of battling against the virus, Chinese people had to flag their health codes on their smartphones to security at various checkpoints to go anywhere or do anything. This included students going to class on campus or workers entering any commercial/factory building, even patients checking in in hospitals. There were scandals of hospitals blocking patients who could not show any proof of negative PCR tests who eventually died.

The residents' committees at the community level became very busy during this time. They were given numerous tasks to assist with contact tracing, isolation and home quarantine of suspected cases. They were needed to help coordinate testing (and later, vaccination) in residential neighbourhoods, fielding questions, and complaints from residents and providing feedback to the government. When residents came home from another province, or external quarantine facilities, even countries overseas, residents' committee staff often doubled down on the home quarantine again as a precaution. All these measures meant many extra staff and volunteers were needed for various kinds of monitoring and assistance. No wonder the party-state leader Xi Jinping announced in early 2020 that 'the whole nation should empower neighbourhoods in the war against the pandemic, moving all forces to strengthen pandemic control efforts at the neighbourhood level'.

Physical barricades, electronic checkpoints and quarantine facilities became the norm in many Chinese cities from February 2020 to February 2023. They completely halted the hustle and bustle of Chinese mega cities. Worse, digital surveillance and control of mobilities became so tight that people felt their rights were being violated. It was during this state of emergency that citizens felt that their identity was entirely flattened by the health code and monitory systems. In October 2022,

a fierce fire killed more than 20 people in Urumqi city in Xinjiang Province. It was allegedly linked to the building management blocking all entrances according to anti-COVID guidelines and people inside it had no way of escaping. The tragedy eventually put pressure on the Chinese government's strict Zero COVID policy. The subsequent white-paper movement in which many students came out to protests with just a piece of blank white paper finally pressured the government to give up the massive lockdown policy and monitoring restrictions countrywide.

China's Zero COVID policy was controversial. The government deployed the health code system to track and monitor the whereabouts of every citizen. It also massively censored media freedom and individual reports to contain the spread of (mis)information. There were also cases of people being prosecuted because they refused to cooperate or quarrelled with medical staff over COVID testing results and unreasonable lockdown policies. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to how volunteers operated to connect urban resources and people of various social groups during this difficult time. Also, millions of residents still needed to have meals and go to hospitals for check-ups during the massive lockdown. Most importantly, all needed to get tested regularly, sometimes once every two to three days, in order to make sure their health code stay green. How did people continue to manage during the three years of COVID restriction and lockdown?

As I will show, volunteering was a major means through which people connected with each other and made sure much-needed resources were distributed. At the same time, social and digital media became a major component in such volunteering platforms. Those in despair, needing medicine, hospital beds, even food supplies, turned to social media for help. When these SOS messages became 'super topics' on Weibo based on the algorithm, and were viewed a million times, volunteers often rushed to help, and pressured government to respond. To conclude the book, I show in this conclusion how volunteers worked to connect in this state of emergency and make top-down state strict restrictions more tolerable among ordinary people. I also highlight some of the infrastructural facilities that became possible in the background.

Chinese Cities During Lockdown

Chinese mega cities could easily have a population of over 10 million. Beijing and Guangzhou, for instance, had over 20 million people when the virus struck. In these cities, most people live in high-rise apartment buildings within a residential neighbourhood (*xiaoqu* 小區). Some of these neighbourhoods are so big that there could be dozens of apartment buildings within their confines. In other words, a single residential neighbourhood could easily accommodate a population of over

10,000 or even 20,000 people. When a residential neighbourhood was locked down, district governments would install barricades and guards to secure the area, restricting people from going beyond the gates or walls of the residential boundary. At the neighbourhood checkpoints, residents' committee staff and sometimes volunteers would take shifts to be on duty for document checking, and to facilitate the necessary passage of people and goods.

But that was just the lockdown measures. How did people continue to live? The volunteers came in. They helped residents to order food online, helped medical professionals to check people's body temperatures, and helped to distribute masks to the vulnerable. Volunteers also helped to deliver groceries and essential supplies when barricades were placed at the neighbourhood entrance. They knocked on residents' doors and handed out necessary goods. They also helped to register returnees from outside their own homes to settle down. In short, by connecting ordinary people with the national goal of battling the COVID-19 virus, volunteers were simultaneously complicit in the government effort of monitoring and limiting people's movement and in making it possible for people to live with some dignity under such extreme conditions.

The massive mobilization of citizens, scholarly and media coverage of the phenomena mainly came back to a dominant thesis: the war against COVID-19 in China was a successful state mobilization of social forces with the goal of compliance. According to Diana Fu (2021), when the Wuhan city lockdown started, it was not just doctors and nurses who became the frontline personnel: 'the most visible foot soldiers were the community volunteers donning red vests and red armbands'. Indeed, it was reported that when the Communist Youth League of Wuhan publicly called for volunteers online, over 7000 citizens immediately applied and registered in less than 12 hours (Fu, 2021). In other words, most analyses regard volunteers as tools of the CCP's mass mobilization and assume that Chinese citizens are always already 'interpellated' to serve the country. It is true that volunteers helped with state policy implementation and their collective effort symbolized a compliance with state policy. However, this concluding chapter shifts the focus to the ways in which volunteers related horizontally to fellow nationals and connected them to some of the infrastructural elements that are missing from the simplified picture of a controlling state and obedient citizenry.

Volunteering During the Pandemic

China's Zero COVID policy meant anyone infected, with or without symptoms, needed to be mandatorily sent away from their residence and isolated in quarantine facilities. In order to unearth the infected people, there were compulsory and

regular COVID tests in all residential neighbourhoods, especially in mega cities. At the same time, there were large-scale quarantine facilities to accommodate the infected. Governments all over the world were facing a public health crisis, with a severe shortage of medical facilities and resources during peaks of infection. The problems were even more severe in China as the government needed more spaces, resources and human labour for COVID testing and quarantine centres—also known as Fangcang hospitals—both of which were grand infrastructural operations.

For community COVID testing, the *jiedao* government would send in hundreds of medical personnel to residential neighbourhoods. As mentioned above, all citizens needed to be tested constantly to keep their health code 'green' so they could continue with jobs and daily activities. To facilitate such an endeavour, COVID testing stations were set up so residents did not have to wait too long in line and could easily update their health codes. I was told that there could be one testing booth set up for two to three apartment buildings, and hence a dozen of them in one big single residential community, hundreds in a district and thousands in one city. In fact, residents were highly motivated to be tested within the confines of their own residence once their health code expired and turned yellow. This was because travelling further to be tested at hospitals, carried a far higher risk of infection.

Many residents became avid volunteers during the three years of COVID restrictions and constant testing. Volunteers were needed to help with various tasks such as booth set-up and communication, especially helping elderly people install the health code app on their phones and connecting it with WeChat social media accounts. Volunteers' services were also needed in the initial stage of the pandemic, when thousands of people gathered to be tested and the health code app was not yet available.

Volunteering was needed the most when lockdowns happened, either within one apartment building or for an entire neighbourhood. Lockdown meant that all residents within one apartment building of twenty or thirty storeys were banned from stepping outside their apartments. And if an entire neighbourhood was locked down, often involving 5,000 to 10,000 people or even more, physical barricades of various types would be set up at the building entrances. Residents could still go downstairs but they could not step outside the restricted boundary. District government would also send in security, together with residents' committee staff, to guard and restrict residents from stepping outside the grid. It was in this context that young and abled-bodied residents would turn themselves into community volunteers to help with the logistics of living under such strict control. For instance, volunteers played a big role in helping residents order and deliver food. In some cities and at certain time periods, companies and retailers only responded to bulk orders, forcing residents to group together to buy in bulk. At the same time, couriers could no longer take separate orders to each door, but instead placed the

bulk orders at the barricades rather than entering specific buildings. The result was that many goods that had been delivered were mixed up. In fact, it took dozens of volunteers to go through the initial rounds of classifying deliveries based on the number and floor of buildings within the locked-down neighbourhood on a daily basis. Otherwise it would be impossible for several thousands of people to scramble to find their own orders at the same time in the small entrance space. Imagine when big boxes of meat, fruits and vegetables and other perishable products were dropped off at the barricade entrance during the hot summer months: volunteers had to immediately rush to the scene and start unpacking and rearranging things. A lot of logistics was involved. Volunteers would need to match the goods with the resident who had ordered them and what building and floor they were located on. They needed to figure out how much each household paid and when they could come down to pick things up in an orderly manner. Volunteers had to divide the labour among themselves regarding collecting money from individual households (electronic payments). They also created spreadsheets and helped elderly people who were not capable of using smartphones to make cash payments. All these communications and transactions involved tedious manual labour, which meant volunteers worked hard every day during the lockdowns. Yet their efforts really helped residents to survive. Last, community volunteers had to do neighbourhood patrols for fear that people would attempt to escape from the suffocating quarantine rules. They also acted as community negotiators at the barricades when various emergencies came up.

The single most infrastructural space during China's Zero COVID policy certainly concerned the Fangcang hospitals or Fangcang quarantine facilities. Quarantine in special facilities was mandatory in China once a person tested positive, with or without symptoms. That was how the miracle of Fangcang hospitals were born. During the three years of war against COVID, as many as several hundred of them were built all over the country to house, feed and isolate infected citizens from the densely populated residential communities. In fact, so many Fangcang hospitals were built in a short period of time that some of them had not been even put into use when at the beginning of 2023, the strict COVID policy was suddenly called off and the requirement for mandatory quarantine was relaxed. Although given the name 'hospital', Fangcang clinics were actually makeshift facilities of partitioned bed spaces with little medical equipment. Many temporary bedspaces were built but the total numbers are impossible to determine. Some Fangcang hospitals were housed in existing convention centres or stadiums in the cities. Brand new quarantine centres were built in more remote areas. Despite controversies about some Fangcang hospitals being put into use without adequate facilities, they became the major spatial infrastructure that enabled the government to track and segregate cases of infection. It was reported that some patients with medical conditions

were forcibly sent there as they could not take care of themselves. Citizens with a positive COVID test were required to stay for an extended period of time until they could show two negative tests to be able to return home.

The Fangcang hospital was called a Chinese miracle because many of these facilities were speedily put together in a period of just a few months, even weeks. During the time, many municipal governments mobilized as many as 7,000 workers willing to work day and night to construct the walls, wire water pipes and cables and install beds and toilets. The first quarantine hospital, in Wuhan, took only seven days to build. The miracle was not just the construction of these facilities; it was also their operation. When thousands of infected people were forcibly sent to quarantine, huge amounts of effort and resources were needed to make it work. There were simply not enough regular hospital staff. Massive numbers of volunteers were recruited to help with the logistics of food delivery and bedding distribution, delivery of masks and testing kits, even with the maintenance of order outside bathrooms and toilets. Since the Fangcang hospitals were so big and all partitioned beds looked the same, wayfinding was also a necessary service provided by volunteers for those in need. Indeed, the management of several thousands of people—many of them elderly and with mobility problems—in such a space would have been impossible without the help of volunteers.

Volunteers as urban operators

Volunteering was perhaps the single most important factor that made life possible and sustainable under such intense anti-pandemic restrictions in China. The Chinese government liked to boast about how quickly the Fangcang hospitals were built; it rarely mentioned how many volunteers it took to make these quarantine facilities actually work. On news media, the government liked to report how lockdowns could make the rest of the city safe; it rarely mentioned how thousands of ordinary community volunteers had to work behind the scenes so people who were locked up in apartment units could continue to survive. COVID lockdowns in China created numerous types of spatial infrastructure and segregation inside the cities, but rarely do people acknowledge that it was volunteering and civic organizing that enabled people to tolerate the inhumane policy. Imagine being locked up in a fenced-up residential neighbourhood for four weeks without being able to get out. It was an extremely strange and disorientating time to navigate. Volunteers came in to help people survive physically, mentally and emotionally.

A study shows that in a residential neighbourhood under lockdown in Wuhan, it took a web of over 400 volunteers working alongside 25 community workers for such intense public health measures to work (Liu et al., 2022). The granny

community volunteers mentioned in Chapter 2 were also involved but they were older and less educated in digital devices and phone media communication, so external younger volunteers had to be recruited. In some ageing neighbourhoods with fewer younger residents, the municipal government had to send in civil servants to act as volunteers during the emergency. In short, the lockdown policy would not have been possible without huge numbers of volunteers joining the effort to help millions of people survive.

As at other mega events, volunteers during the battle against the COVID pandemic performed exceptionally well. They functioned as the critical nodes connecting the gaps between people, material resources, and infrastructural spaces. They were the major mediators and operators bridging ordinary people with multiple levels of government personnel and inhumane policy execution. Within the confined spaces of lockdown or new infrastructural Fangcang facilities, they helped to distribute much-needed resources, eased conflicts and made horizontal interactions between strangers possible. Through many semi-structured interviews, sociologist Beiyi Hu (2021) found that many informal community initiatives arose, and citizens were self-organizing to conduct social and political participation from below, sparking meaningful relationships among individuals. For instance, many homeowners' associations started chat groups on WeChat to coordinate food and medicine deliveries in bulk so people could have food to survive. During this time, volunteers were no longer differentiated along the lines of state mobilization or grassroots initiatives. Needed by all, and endorsed by the government, volunteers helped thousands to secure food and preserve their dignity.

This final chapter has reiterated my argument that mega events in China produced not just the omnipotent state, spectacular infrastructural constructions, and obedient citizens. They also led to a proliferation of various volunteering initiatives and civic imaginations. The COVID-19 pandemic was certainly one of these mega events, even though its related built infrastructures were aimed at confining and limiting, rather than improving, people's mobility and welfare. While previous chapters have focused more on transit and cultural and sporting infrastructure that facilitated citizens to be more mobile, more resourceful and more informed, this last chapter has demonstrated that volunteers were vital while Chinese citizens were locked up and heavily monitored during the country-wide battle against the virus. Citizens/volunteers reached out to each other, divided their labour to obtain resources, and approached elderly people and other vulnerable groups. Nobody liked their residences barred by barricades and monitored by tight surveillance. No one wanted to be sent to the Fangcang hospitals for weeks, fighting for dirty toilet spaces with others. Yet volunteers proactively organized and coordinated themselves and built self-help groups in ways that were beyond state mobilization. In some ways, I resonate with the view that the massive volunteer initiatives

during COVID actually made Chinese civil society stronger during this critical time, influencing public policy and changing government decision-making (Hu, 2021).

This book has shown that volunteering has become a major urban practice through which citizens negotiate, reflect, and sometimes challenge the hierarchies of urban and rural, gender, age, and abilities in the cities. In previous chapters, I have found bottom-up dwelling in places (elderly community volunteers) and various storytelling, caring and activist strategies (museum volunteers, run-for-the-blind volunteers and feminist volunteers). I have shown that Chinese citizens deploy the language and practice of volunteering to experience public life and urban spaces differently from the original intentions of the state. I have also shown that volunteers are the connectors who fill many gaps: between new urban/cultural spaces and citizens' demands; between state propaganda and grassroots quotidian practices; and between state intentions and bottom-up appropriations. Like the ceremonial volunteers in Chapter 1, volunteers under COVID restrictions had to cater to the demands of the government. Yet they became much more community oriented, grassroots initiated and survival responsive during the public health crisis. The infrastructural urbanism during COVID—the ways citizens experienced their cities on pause and life invaded by health code checkpoints—needs further research. This conclusion, however, highlights that even in extreme conditions and with multiple spatial segregations such as that occurring during the pandemic, Chinese volunteers continued to try to translate and appropriate government policy at the local level in order to make it more understandable and tolerable. They also became the most active agents during this public health crisis, connecting different groups and helping everyone to navigate the spatial and content restrictions of various infrastructural facilities.

This book has aimed to see citizens' practices and infrastructural urbanism in Chinese cities beyond a perspective that sees people and the government as the only binary actors in a non-democratic setting. It engages the urban material environment, including the Fangcang hospitals discussed in this conclusion, and focuses on examining the transversal relationships between civic volunteering and volunteers' connection to and appropriation of urban spaces. It is the volunteers and their transversal practices that are reinventing the carefully planned and top-down technocratic infrastructures. I have shown that volunteers have brought relational and social change, no matter how small, in both infrastructurally improved and restrictive scenarios. It is in the massive middle ground between China's state mobilization and democratic imaginary form of civil organizing that Chinese volunteers operate. In post-COVID times, how Chinese citizens continue to negotiate more urban rights and access, appropriate top-down controlled spaces and environments for more changes and advocacy remains a topic warranting further investigation. The unnoticed forms of bottom-up knowledge, alternative

interactions, unofficial stories and care for the public interest (*gongyi* 公益) and charity (*cishan* 慈善) will remain the grist of everyday life and potential development in mega-cities.

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Glossary

Pinyin	Traditional Chinese	Explanation
aiguo	愛國	love for and devotion to one's country
bowuguan zhiyuanzhe	博物館志願者	volunteer providing services in museums
canji	殘疾	disability (deafness, blindness, and other physical and mental challenges that limits people from fully participating in society)
chaoyang qunzhong	朝陽群眾	community volunteers in Beijing known for patrolling in residential neighbourhoods and reporting suspicious activities to police
chengguan	城管	Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau in Chinese cities
chengshi gengxin	城市更新	the process of revitalizing urban areas
chengshi jichu sheshi	城市基礎設施	physical and organizational structures for city operation
chengshi quanli	城市權利	rights related to urban living and participation
cishan	慈善	philanthropy; giving to help those in need
danwei	單位	state-assigned workplace and social unit in urban China
fangcang yiyuan	方艙醫院	makeshift hospital, often used during COVID-19
fazhi	法治	the principle that all people and institutions are subject to law
feizhengfu zuzhi	非政府組織	non-governmental organizations
fuwuxing zhengfu	服務型政府	governance that emphasizes public service and responsiveness over to citizens' needs
gaotie	高鐵	high speed intercity and inter provincial train system

Pinyin	Traditional Chinese	Explanation
gongmin shehui	公民社會	organizations and associations outside of state and market
gongyi	公益	activities for the common good or public benefit
hexie	和諧	harmony
jiankong shehui	監控社會	society characterized by extensive surveillance
jiedao	街道	<p>A jiedao is a subdistrict-level government office in urban China, sitting below the district and above the community/residents committee. It is responsible for local administration, public services, and social management, acting as a bridge between higher government levels and ordinary urban residents.</p> <p>In urban China, the administrative hierarchy is organized into several levels. At the top is the province (省, sheng) or municipality directly under the central government (直轄市, zhixiashi), such as Beijing or Shanghai. Below the province or municipality is the prefecture-level city (地級市, dijishi), which is a large city that governs several districts.</p> <p>Within a prefecture-level city, the next level is the district (區, qu). Each district is then divided into several subdistricts (街道, jiedao). The jiedao, also known as the “street office” or “subdistrict office,” is the main administrative unit responsible for governing urban neighborhoods. The jiedao manages public services, social management, and the implementation of policies at the local level.</p> <p>Under each jiedao are multiple communities (社區, shequ), which are the smallest urban administrative units. Each community is managed by a Residents Committee (居民委員會, jumin weiyuanhui or 居委會, juweihui), which handles daily affairs, community activities, and local governance for residents.</p>

Pinyin	Traditional Chinese	Explanation
		To summarize, the hierarchy in urban China from the highest to the lowest level is: Province/Municipality → Prefecture-level City → District → Subdistrict (Jiedao) → Community (Shequ) → Residents Committee.
jiti zhuyi	集體主義	collectivism
liyi	禮儀	ceremonial etiquette
liyizhibang	禮儀之邦	“Nation of Etiquette,” a traditional phrase describing premodern China’s emphasis on culture, etiquette, ritual ceremonies and social hierachies
shequ	社區	the smallest administrative unit in the city
shequ zhiyuanzhe	社區志願者	volunteer serving in a local neighbourhood
suzhi	素質	personal quality, often referring to civic or moral character
xicheng dama	西城大媽	elderly women in Beijing’s Xicheng district known for their roles in neighbourhood patrol

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