

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 derailling 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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