




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tunnels of power: The cultural politics of the Beijing subway

Cheng Li¹ and Yanjun Liu² 

¹Department of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University, United States of America and ²Institute of National Governance Studies and Institute of Public Governance, School of Government, Peking University, Beijing, China

Corresponding author: Yanjun Liu; Email: yanjun_liu@pku.edu.cn

(Received 14 April 2023; revised 9 March 2024; accepted 11 March 2024)

Abstract

This article investigates the cultural politics of the Beijing subway. Drawing on diverse sources, we trace the evolution of the subway over the last half-century to reveal that it transcends its fluctuating, time-specific practicalities to serve as a potent conduit through which the Chinese state consistently shapes subjecthood. The article begins with the subway's Cold War inception as a military enterprise, spotlighting its deliberate concealment to safeguard the echelons of power and obscure both international and domestic tensions. The second section delves into the subway's rebirth in the wake of China's opening-up reform and rapid economic rise, as it transforms into a mobile gallery of political aesthetics that extols China's cultural heritage and triumphs, cultivating national pride under siege from unleashed market and social forces. The final section dissects the subway's orchestration of undesirable passengers, sculpting a socioeconomic hierarchy in the city's commuting system. As a multifaceted prism, the Beijing subway encapsulates a range of covert and overt, pragmatic and aesthetic, and inclusive and exclusive elements in the cultural politics of Chinese infrastructure at large; and it illustrates the sustained centrality of state power in shaping individual subjectivities and defining the cultural and representational significance of Chinese infrastructure, albeit amid growing contestation.

Keywords: Beijing subway; biopolitics of infrastructure; power and citizenship; cultural politics; China

Introduction: The biopolitics of infrastructure

In 1969, at the height of the Cultural Revolution and Cold War, China's first subway was covertly launched in Beijing as a military project to protect top leaders from potential air strikes. The subway was not opened to the public until 1981. Today, the Beijing subway symbolizes Chinese infrastructure and national prowess, serving over 13 million passengers daily.

This article delves into the cultural politics of the Beijing subway, situated at the intersection of China Studies and Infrastructure Studies—a field traditionally rooted in two intellectual traditions. The first explores Large Technical Systems (LTS),

examining how emergent technologies contribute to the evolution and governance of complex systems like electrical grids, telecommunication networks, and the internet.¹ The second, more germane to our enquiry, probes human-infrastructure relations, investigating the myriad ways in which social structures interface with infrastructure.² Early studies, including Susan Leigh Star's pioneering work, contended that infrastructure is 'invisible' until it breaks down.³ Yet, such interpretations have been challenged for overlooking political dimensions. Larkin, for instance, emphasizes that such 'invisibility' is a luxury afforded mainly to socially privileged groups for whom well-functioning infrastructure becomes inconspicuous. While some public infrastructures, like shopping malls and theatres, primarily function as communal spaces fostering social connectivity and collective life,⁴ others operate as 'apparatus of governmentality' steered by underlying political rationalities.⁵

Recent strides in infrastructure studies have underscored the intricate relationships between human interactions, infrastructural development, and state governance. Scholars like Brian Larkin argue that infrastructure not only serves as a stage for human activities but also acts as a complex interplay of political and technological mediations, thereby influencing societal norms and interactions.⁶ Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder emphasize the contextual nature of infrastructure, highlighting its evolution as being contingent upon the temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions of the societies they serve.⁷ Keller Easterling coined the term 'extrastatecraft' to describe the covert power dynamics embedded within infrastructural spaces, which she contends become arenas for political and biopolitical negotiations, and, often, points of contention.⁸ In his exploration of Mumbai's water systems Nikhil Anand illustrates how the management and control of basic resources like water become a fulcrum around which notions of citizenship coalesce. In his work, infrastructure emerges not

¹Thomas Hughes, *Networks of power: Electrification in Western society, 1880–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Renate Mayntz and Thomas Hughes, *The development of large technical systems* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

²Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering urbanism: Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition* (New York: Routledge, 2001); David Ribes and Thomas A. Finholt, 'The long now of infrastructure: Articulating tensions in development', *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2009, pp. 375–398; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon democracy: Political power in the age of oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

³Susan Leigh Star, 'The ethnography of infrastructure', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1999, pp. 377–391.

⁴Di Wang, *The teahouse: Small business, everyday culture, and public politics in Chengdu, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the neon lights: Everyday Shanghai in the early twentieth century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jie Li, *Shanghai homes: Palimpsests of private life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai modern: The flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁵Michel Foucault, *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 70.

⁶Brian Larkin, 'The politics and poetics of infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 327–343.

⁷Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, 'Steps toward an ecology of infrastructure: Design and access for large information spaces', *Information Systems Research*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1996, pp. 111–134.

⁸Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The power of infrastructure space* (New York: Verso Books, 2014).

merely as a mechanism for utility delivery but also as a site where identity and civic participation are continually redefined.⁹ Stephen Collier situates post-Soviet infrastructure within the realm of biopolitics, elucidating its transformation as a deeply political act that impacts on citizens' engagement with their urban milieus.¹⁰

Infrastructure transcends its functional role as a modernizing apparatus to act as a focal point for the crystallization of state ideologies, particularly in the Global South.¹¹ Take, for instance, Indonesia's satellite launches, which are not merely technological achievements but also potent symbols intended to foster and solidify national unity.¹² Similarly, in Mongolia, the advent of 'Lenin's light'—a state-electrification initiative—is not just about providing electricity; it serves as a metaphorical illumination of state-led modernity.¹³ Though infrastructure is often hailed as a marker of modernity and a symbol of national identity, it can also manifest what scholars term 'infrastructure violence'. Such violence is a form of systemic marginalization and exclusion targeted at specific communities, disrupting their access to services and thereby reinforcing socioeconomic disparities.¹⁴

In the Chinese context, where state agendas heavily influence large-scale infrastructural projects, the Beijing subway provides an illustrative case study. Its meteoric growth is emblematic of China's transformation and underscores the state's central role in shaping citizen engagement with such projects. Utilizing a historical lens, this article unearths how state power has been manifested, reinforced, and even occasionally counteracted in this sprawling underground network, providing insights into the larger human-infrastructure interaction within the confines of authoritarian governance.¹⁵ We contend that the Beijing subway, while adapting to varied functional roles across different historical epochs, serves as an arena wherein the Chinese state continually reconstitutes public spaces and individual identities.

The article is structured in three sections. The first concentrates on the subway's inception during the Cold War era as a military asset, emphasizing the calculated obfuscation employed to protect the upper echelons of political power and mask international and domestic tensions. The second section examines the subway's rebirth in the wake of China's opening-up reform and rapid economic rise. During this period,

⁹Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic city: Water and the infrastructures of citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁰Stephen Collier, *Post-Soviet social: Neoliberalism, social modernity, biopolitics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹¹Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (eds), *The promise of infrastructure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹²Joshua Barker, 'Engineers and political dreams: Indonesia in the satellite age', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2005, p. 706.

¹³David Sneath, 'Reading the signs by Lenin's light: Development, divination and metonymic fields in Mongolia', *Ethnos*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2009, pp. 72–90.

¹⁴Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O'Neill, 'Infrastructural violence: Introduction to the special issue', *Ethnography*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2012, pp. 401–412.

¹⁵Recent studies on Chinese infrastructure demonstrate 'the material dispositions and socio-technical nature of infrastructures themselves complicates many of our assumptions about what the "China Model" in fact entails'. It compels us to reflect upon the 'China Model' of development and understand China's infrastructure investment beyond policy initiatives perspectives. Alessandro Ripa and Tim Oakes, 'Infrastructural thinking in China: A research agenda', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 255, 2023, pp. 547–559.

the subway metamorphoses into a mobile gallery for political aesthetics, celebrating China's cultural heritage and national achievements to foster national pride. This section also probes the growing tensions between state-led objectives and emerging neoliberal impulses and a nascent civil society. The final section dissects the subway's orchestration of undesirable passengers, sculpting a socioeconomic hierarchy in the city's commuting system.

As a multifaceted tapestry, the Beijing subway encapsulates a range of covert and overt, pragmatic and aesthetic, and inclusive and exclusive elements, situating it firmly within the expansive landscape of Chinese cultural politics around infrastructure at large. It illustrates the sustained prominence of state power, albeit not without resistance, in shaping individual subjectivities and defining the cultural and symbolic ramifications of Chinese infrastructure. As China amplifies its global infrastructural footprint through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),¹⁶ the nuanced and deep-seated impacts of these endeavours—particularly as they permeate local societies—are shaped by the sorts of cultural politics posited in this article.

A secret underground: Military enterprise and controlled (in)visibility in the Maoist era

While railroads epitomize a nation's industrialization, subways represent urbanized prosperity in early modern metropolises. Chinese interest in subways began in the late Qing era, with media coverage on subways in cities like New York, Tokyo, Paris, and Moscow. In 1897, the Shanghai-based *Shenbao* reported on the 42-mile New York subway with curiosity and admiration.¹⁷ From the 1910s, Chinese news increasingly highlighted rigorous requirements for subway construction, reflecting Chinese elites' appreciation of advanced foreign technology and their aspiration to catch up with developed nations. For instance, the Paris subway was praised for preventing ground collapse and ensuring proper ventilation while moving underground soil with machinery.¹⁸ Likewise, the Tokyo subway, operating in 1927, was lauded for solving underground lighting challenges.¹⁹ Subway construction showcased a state's capacity, ideology, as well as technological prowess. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union completed the Moscow subway in just three years as part of its five-year plan, impressing the Chinese media, including even *Little Friends*, a magazine for Chinese youth.²⁰ In 1945, the communist *Liberation Daily* hailed the Moscow subway as the world's best, crediting its success to Soviet regions collaborating to contribute the best materials.²¹

¹⁶Min Ye, *The belt road and beyond: State-mobilized globalization in China: 1998–2018* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Eyck Freymann, *One belt one road: Chinese power meets the world* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022).

¹⁷‘地下铁路’ (‘Subway’), 申报 *Shenbao*, 15 February 1897.

¹⁸‘演说巴黎地下铁道之历史’ (‘Lecture on the history of the Paris underground’), 时事新报 *Current Affairs Update*, 26 May 1914.

¹⁹‘日本地下铁道九月可开通’ (‘Japan’s subways to open in September’), 东省经济月刊 *East Province Economic Monthly*, vol. 3, no. 5, 13, 1927.

²⁰‘莫斯科的地下铁道’ (‘Moscow’s subway’), 小朋友 *Little Friends*, vol. 663, no. 39, 1935.

²¹‘莫斯科地下铁道’ (‘Moscow’s subway’), 解放日报 *Liberation Daily*, 6 November 1945.

After the Second World War, China began designing its own subway: Shanghai proposed one for its post-war economic recovery in 1946,²² while Beijing's government suggested a western city subway connected to a railway.²³ However, these plans were suspended due to the Second Chinese Civil War.

It was not until the Communists came to power that China's subway construction materialized. In contrast to the economic motives behind the construction of most subways, however, the Beijing subway in Communist China was aimed at military defence against possible airstrikes from regime enemies—the Nationalists or the United States. After the Korean War in September 1953, a report titled 'Key Points of the Draft Plan for Reconstruction and Expansion of Beijing' was submitted to the central government, which mentioned that '...in order to provide urban residents with the most convenient and economical means of transportation, especially in order to meet the needs of national defense, we must plan the construction of underground railway as soon as possible' (our emphasis). Clearly, with Beijing's permanent population numbering less than three million at the time, transportation was not a primary reason for subway construction. According to Xie Rende, the chief engineer of the subway preparatory office, Premier Zhou Enlai stated that 'Beijing's subway construction is entirely for combat readiness. Any transportation needs can easily be met by buying two hundred buses.'²⁴ In the 1950s, the Soviet Union led subway construction projects within communist blocs,²⁵ to demonstrate socialism's superiority over capitalism.²⁶ Soviet experts were sent to help design the Beijing subway in 1956.²⁷ Plans for the subway remained confidential but were hinted at in a 6 July 1958 *Beijing Daily* report on Sino-Soviet scientific collaboration, which mentioned that China was sending experts to study 'the design of ocean dry cargo ships, electrified railways, mainline electric locomotives, and underground railways...'.²⁸ However, China's political economy suffered under the subsequent Great Leap Forward, and the project halted in 1961 when the Soviet Union split with China, withdrawing all its technicians and scientists.²⁹

In 1962, as China began to recover from famine and economic recession, the country resumed subway construction with a focus on defending itself against nuclear threats from not only the United States but also the Soviet Union. In 1964, top Chinese officials Li Fuchun, Bo Yibo, and Luo Ruiqing submitted a 'Report on How National Economic

²²'市临时参议会成立' ('The founding of Shanghai's temporary senate'), 申报 *Shenbao*, 28 March 1946.

²³Anonymous, 北平市都市计划设计资料第一册 (*Beiping urban planning design materials*, vol. 1) (Beiping: Beipingshi gongwujū, 1947), pp. 56–57.

²⁴Wang Dexing (王德兴), '北京地铁在我心中难以抹灭' ('Beijing subway is indelible in my heart'), in 中国地铁60年人和事 (*60 years of people and stories in China's subway*), (eds) Wang Hanjun (王汉军) and Feng Aijun (冯爱军) (Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, 2017), p. 102.

²⁵William K. Wolf, 'Russia's revolutionary underground: The construction of the Moscow subway 1931–35', PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1994.

²⁶Katherine Zubovich, *Moscow monumental: Soviet skyscrapers and urban life in Stalin's capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

²⁷Beijing Metro Operation Co., Ltd (北京地铁运营有限公司) (ed.), 责任与使命: 北京地铁发展史 (*Responsibility and mission: History of Beijing subway*) (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2011), pp. 17–18.

²⁸'中苏进一步加强科学合作' ('China and the Soviet Union further strengthen scientific collaboration'), 北京日报 *Beijing Daily*, 6 July 1958.

²⁹Anonymous, '承载一代传奇—记中国第一条地铁总工程师谢仁德' ('A legend of a generation—Xie Rende, chief engineer of China's first subway'), in *60 years of people and stories*, (eds) Wang and Feng, p. 12.

Construction Prepares for Enemies' Sudden Attack' to Mao Zedong. It provided rationales for China's construction of infrastructure during the Cold War, recommending that it be built 'close to the mountains, scattered, and hidden' to minimize damage from enemy attacks.³⁰ Factories, especially military and mechanical ones, should move to inner regions, creating a 'Third Front' against potential invasion.³¹ Although the report called for the suspension of several projects, it recommended the continuation of the Beijing subway as a defensive measure. The subway exploited vertical space to ensure the safety of Beijing or at least facilitated the evacuation of Chinese top leaders in case of an air or missile attack.³² This massive infrastructure project, reflecting Cold War anxieties, was known to a select few top leaders and elites, and kept secret from the public. This secrecy aimed to relieve security anxieties among the informed while concealing them from the masses by controlling the visibility of the underground space.

The Beijing subway became part of China's third Five-Year Plan in 1965, with the foundation stone-laying ceremony held on 1 July of that year. Due to a lack of lifts and strict steel requirements, however, shallow tunnels were used despite deeper tunnels being more defensively effective.³³ Military personnel spearheaded the construction and enlisted civilian technical experts,³⁴ ensuring rapid, high-quality construction while further militarizing the subway.³⁵ However, their efforts were not publicized. The lack of reporting, rather than obscuring the visual politics of the Beijing subway actually illuminated it. David Pietz notes that China's technological complex 'connotes the entire range of goals, actors, material, institutions, and tools organized to support a single project or a set of projects'.³⁶ The Beijing subway provides a unique, visual insight into this complex, as this massive infrastructure was deliberately kept hidden, despite consuming huge human and natural resources. In just four years, China completed its first 23.6 kilometre-long subway with 17 stations as a gift for the twentieth National Day in October 1969.³⁷ The trial operation began on 15 January 1971, with tourist tickets made available to only a select few with letters of introduction

³⁰Li Fuchun (李富春), Bo Yibo (薄一波) and Luo Ruiqing (罗瑞卿), '关于国家经济建设如何防备敌人突然袭击的报告' (Report on national economic construction to how to avoid enemies' sudden attack, 19 August 1964), 党的文献 *Party Documents*, no. 3, 1995, pp. 33–25.

³¹Covell Meyskens, *Mao's third front: The militarisation of Cold War China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³²Beijing Metro Operation Co., Ltd, *Responsibility and mission*, pp. 33–35.

³³Xie Rende (谢仁德), '北京地铁起始' ('The beginning of Beijing subway'), in *60 years of people and stories*, (eds) Wang and Feng, pp. 4–5.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁵On 16 April 1970, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) convened in Beijing to form a special military unit to build the Beijing subway. Wang Wenlian (王文亮), '一个地铁老兵的不了情' ('The enduring love of a subway veteran'), in *我与北京地铁同行: 纪念北京地铁建设四十周年回忆* (*I walked with the Beijing subway: A memoir to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the construction of the Beijing subway*), (eds) Xie Zhengguang (谢正光) and Zhang Shuren (张树人) (Beijing: Beijing ditie yunying youxiangongsi, 2010), p. 171.

³⁶David Pietz, *The Yellow River: The problem of water in modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 153.

³⁷The western section of Line 1 (from Pingguoyuan Station to Fuxingmen Station; red in [Figure 1](#)) and the southern section of Line 2 (Ring Line; blue in [Figure 1](#)) (from Changchun Street Station to Beijing Station) were completed.

from their working units. It was not until 15 September 1981, 11 years later, that the subway was signed over to the Beijing municipal government and opened for public commuting.³⁸

In Maoist China the Beijing subway was shrouded in tension and mystery. From September 1973 to September 1974, subway services halted to prepare for the fourth National People's Congress conference, amid rumours about the cancellation of the president's position. The subway covertly transported delegates behind the scenes. A military veteran working on the subway recounted participating in 'war preparation' when the conference took place in 1975.³⁹ On 4 January, all subway stations conducted comprehensive security checks. The government only announced the existence of the conference to the public after it had ended, just 40 minutes after the delegates were transported to the Great Hall of the People. It turned out that Premier Zhou Enlai was so ill that he could only read the beginning and end of his report. The secrecy surrounding the Beijing subway mirrored the heightened insecurity and vulnerability of Chinese politics during that era.

After Mao's death in 1976, China began to open up and embrace modernization and economic development, lauding other countries' subway projects as symbols of self-reliance and technological capability. For instance, in 1978, *Liberation Daily* covered North Korea's subway, emphasizing its self-developed technology.⁴⁰ Similarly, *People's Daily* praised the Bucharest subway in Romania: '...All the equipment required for the subway, including electric trains, were designed and manufactured by Romania.'⁴¹ Articles about the Beijing subway began appearing in Chinese newspapers, shedding its secretive past.

However, the demilitarization and publicizing of the Beijing subway caused confusion. In 1980, a *People's Daily* article questioned the subway's function and which agency should be in charge of it.⁴² Both the Beijing municipal government and the central government's Department of Railroad hesitated to take charge due to mounting costs. The article's author pointed to the general needs of the public and advised that the Beijing subway would be more suitable for civilian use, and that eventually it should become a civilian project with constant maintenance and investment. Eventually, in 1981, the Beijing municipal government established the Beijing Subway Company and officially opened the subway to the public. Nonetheless, Line 1 (red in [Figure 1](#)) primarily served central city residents near Chang'an Avenue and key political organizations like the People's Congress at Tiananmen Square. Despite adding Line 2 (blue in [Figure 2](#)), China's first circular subway line, in 1984 to connect the city centre

³⁸'北京地铁验收合格昨起正式运营' ('Beijing subway passed acceptance test and started formal operation yesterday'), *北京日报 Beijing Daily*, 16 September 1981.

³⁹Li Shoushan (李守山), '毛主席的“二·四”指示指引我们修地铁' ('Chairman Mao's "February 4" instructions guide us to build the subway'), in *I walked with the Beijing subway*, (eds) Xie and Zhang, pp. 154–155.

⁴⁰金日成主席为平壤地下铁道剪彩' ('Chairman Kim Il Sung cuts the ribbon for the Pyongyang subway'), *解放日报 Liberation Daily*, 7 September 1978.

⁴¹齐奥塞斯库总统视察地铁建设工地' ('President Ceausescu inspects subway construction site'), *人民日报 People's Daily*, 24 October 1977.

⁴²'首都地铁究竟由谁来管? 婆婆很多,实际无人负责;建设方针不明,浪费严重' ('Who is in charge of the Capital subway? There are many mothers-in-law, and no one is actually responsible; the construction policy is unclear, and the waste is serious'), *人民日报 People's Daily*, 14 December 1980.

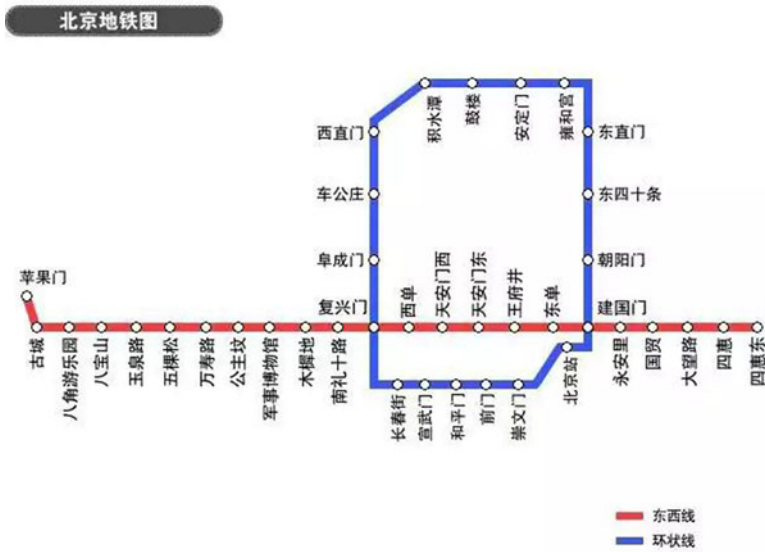


Figure 1. Beijing subway map in 2001. Source: 'Illustrating the great changes of the Beijing subway', available at <https://m.focus.cn/bj/zixun/69ca32571bf2f744.html>, [accessed 29 April 2024].

to the northern suburbs, the subway system remained limited to central city residents throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

As the Beijing subway transitioned from its military roots to becoming a public transport system, the 1989 Tiananmen protest reactivated its militarized role. Through the subway tunnels, small numbers of troops managed to reach Tiananmen Square, when trains and trucks were shut down or blocked by crowds.⁴³ A subway driver, in his memoir, described this transport of troops as the biggest 'test' (*kaoyan* 考验) of his life, recalling the secretive transportation of National People's Congress delegates in the 1970s. He recognized that running Beijing's subway required not only professional commitment, but also political loyalty.⁴⁴ This event underscored the subway's oscillation between military and civilian functions. One month after the protest, the government decided to expand the Beijing subway system.

However, the rapid expansion of the Beijing subway only came after the city won the bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in 2001. For China, ensuring the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was not merely about sport; it was an opportunity to demonstrate its ascendancy on the world stage and its capabilities as a global power. Central to this endeavour was the effective facilitation of public transport to accommodate increased demand during the Games, epitomized by the expansion and modernization of the Beijing subway. Line 13 (yellow line in Figure 2) and Line 5 (purple line in Figure 2) were

⁴³Timothy Brook, *Quelling the people* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 58; Craig Calhoun, 'Revolution and repression in Tiananmen Square', *Society*, vol. 26, no. 6, 1989, p. 26.

⁴⁴Wang Dexing (王德兴), '昨天的回忆' ('The memory of yesterday'), in *I walked with the Beijing subway*, (eds) Xie and Zhang, p. 71.



Figure 2. Beijing subway map in 2008. Source: 'The development of Beijing subway during the Olympic Games', available at <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1685774810243180965&wfr=spider&for=pc>, [accessed 29 April 2024].

built to connect the densely populated northern residential areas to the central business district within an hour. The subway also added Line 10 (turquoise line in Figure 2) and the Olympic Line (green line in Figure 2), connecting the Olympic stadiums and the Olympic Forest Park to the network. This expansion highlighted China's commitment to improving air quality, demonstrating engineering prowess, and promoting economic growth through infrastructure development.

After the 2008 Olympic Games, the Beijing subway continued to expand, with suburban lines such as Line 6 connecting the western and eastern suburbs to the city centre and improving access to downtown workplaces for those living in Hebei Province with its lower housing costs. Lines like Yizhuang, Daxing, and Fangshan further linked less-developed regions to the city centre (Figure 3), enhancing access to jobs, education, and services for those communities. The 2016 announcement of a Municipal Administrative Center in Tongzhou spurred further subway expansion, with a proposed Line 22 extending into Hebei Province for the first time by 2025.⁴⁵ The expansion has transformed suburban areas into bustling satellite districts, replacing traditional neighbourhoods with high-rise apartments and commercial centres, and altering the

⁴⁵'2025 年建成通车 北三县半小时到北京中心城区 地铁22号线进入全面建设阶段' ('By 2025, the construction will be completed and opened to traffic. It will take half an hour from the northern three counties to the central city of Beijing. Metro Line 22 has entered the comprehensive construction phase'), published online on 7 July 2022, available at http://www.beijing.gov.cn/fuwu/bmfw/sy/jrts/202207/t20220707_2765506.html, [accessed 29 April 2024].



Figure 3. Beijing subway map, 2018. Source: 'Beijing published subway opening plan for 2018', available at <https://item.btime.com/302s2f8ibpp8i7qd0tgbt3nvd0>, [accessed 29 April 2024].

city’s skyline. Moreover, the artistically designed subway stations added a visually appealing aspect to the city’s infrastructure for both residents and tourists.

Against the fraught backdrop of the Cold War, marked by pervasive apprehensions of threat and annihilation, the Beijing subway’s covert construction, initially conceived as a military enterprise, was a deliberate strategic move, deeply anchored in the era’s geopolitics. Ensuring the subway’s invisibility served dual purposes: it shielded this critical infrastructure from potential external threats and espionage, while also allowing the PRC, in its nascent phase, to cautiously mould its image as a state without laying bare its insecurities to its populace. It was this very cloak of invisibility that mirrored Maoist China’s underlying fears, vulnerabilities, and precarities, heightening a sense of political mystery and encapsulating the antagonistic Cold War ethos. By the 1980s, as the shadow of the Cold War began to wane, albeit non-linearly, the once clandestine Beijing subway transformed from an imprint of political anxiety to a showcase of cultural heritage and national achievement, offering both Chinese citizens and global audiences a tangible testament to the country’s progress and aspirations.

Visualizing nation: Mobile gallery and political aesthetic in the post-Mao era

The Beijing subway transitioned to disseminating cultural values after its military function diminished in the late 1970s. In 1984, Hu Qili, a senior Communist Party official, stressed that it was important for the Beijing subway to ‘have some fresco,

sculpture, and the artists can sign their names on their paintings'.⁴⁶ This contrasted with Deng Xiaoping's 1965 statement that subway construction should be 'simple, elegant, firm, and functional, but not luxurious'.⁴⁷ The shift from practical functionality to a cultural and aesthetic value mirrored China's broader transition from a Cold War antagonist mentality to a more cooperative mindset as the country opened up to the world.

Henri Lefebvre's seminal distinction between the city as 'a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact' and the urban as 'a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought' underscores the significance of the cultural dimensions of infrastructure. He highlights that these dimensions extend beyond the mere physicality of buildings and transport systems.⁴⁸ Zachary M. Schrag's thorough examination of the Washington, DC metro system demonstrates how innovative design, specifically a user-centric mapping and routing system, cultivates varied social interactions, fostering a deep sense of community that spans diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.⁴⁹ Similarly, Stefan Höhne's investigation into the New York City subway system reveals the power of artistic representations, such as the evocative photographs by Walker Evans and the poignant paintings by George Tooker. These works challenge and upend established prejudices and societal perceptions, sparking reflection among urban commuters.⁵⁰ As it evolved into a mobile art gallery, the Beijing subway offered its passengers access to curated art installations, thereby nurturing refined aesthetic appreciation and fostering a sense of national identity during China's era of reform and ascendancy.

This intertwining of art and public transport was not an isolated phenomenon in China. The 1980s witnessed a 'culture fever' where the younger generation's growing affinity for Western intellectual traditions led to multiple cultural movements. These ranged from a fascination with thinkers like Sartre and Nietzsche to broader movements such as the root-seeking literature phenomenon and the Qigong craze.⁵¹ Within this milieu, public art gained traction, not just as a form of aesthetic expression but as a potent symbol of public culture. As observed by Wu Hung, public art in Beijing occupied a unique nexus between state-sanctioned narratives and individual artistic expressions. Temporary art installations, often anchored to significant national events, transformed iconic spaces like Tiananmen Square. Beneath their celebratory veneer, they often bore nuanced political subtexts.⁵² However, the artistic landscape of Beijing and other Chinese cities was not monolithic. While some artists conformed to

⁴⁶Beijing Municipal Planning Commission (北京市规划委员会) (ed.), *北京地铁公共艺术 1965–2012* (*Beijing subway public art 1965–2012*) (Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, 2014), p. 32.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁸Henri Lefebvre, 'The specificity of the city', in *Writings on cities: Henri Lefebvre*, (eds) Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996 [1968]), p. 103.

⁴⁹Zachary M. Schrag, *The great society subway: A history of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰Stefan Hohne, *Riding the New York subway: The invention of the modern passenger* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

⁵¹Jing Wang, *High culture fever: Politics, aesthetics, and ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁵²Hung Wu, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the creation of a political space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

state-sanctioned themes, experimental artists operating on the fringes of mainstream art institutions used public art as a medium to introduce avant-garde paradigms, occasionally challenging the very orthodoxy within which they existed. The duality in public art, oscillating between state-driven narratives and avenues of sociopolitical critique, was not confined to Beijing. Drawing on this, Jane Zhang argues that urban sculptures in Shanghai served dual purposes. They were not only emblematic representations but also pedagogic tools, harmonizing seamlessly with the city's cultural ambitions.⁵³ Similarly, Han Cheng and Julian Worrall contend that Chinese public art resonated deeply with the local populace's passion and expertise, cultivating a participatory civic spirit and fostering community-driven public culture.⁵⁴ Taken together, these scholarly insights underscore the multifaceted nature of public art in China. It was a dynamic tapestry where government directives, societal conventions, and individual inventiveness coalesced, shaping urban spaces that echoed both the historical legacy and forward-looking aspirations of their communities.

The artworks of Beijing subway became a platform for Chinese passengers to reflect upon and appreciate China's culture amid the influx of Western influences, while also introducing foreign visitors to Chinese culture and achievements. Line 2's Xizhimen Station hosted the first subway murals by renowned artist Zhang Ding, who helped design the Chinese national emblem. The murals 'Yanshan Great Wall Map' and 'Great River Going East' exemplify traditional Chinese art, characterized by ink and brush on paper or silk and capturing the subject's essence over realism. The 70-metre murals, initially designed on paper, were carved on bricks using advanced epoxy resin materials. Zhang's artwork uses symbolic brushstrokes to convey love for the motherland, with 'Yanshan Great Wall Map' (Figure 4) highlighting the Great Wall's majesty through scorched ink landscape painting, the winding city wall, and the sturdy beacon tower, and 'Great River Going East' highlighting natural scenes such as mighty rivers and magnificent mountains and canyons, reflecting the momentum of 'big waves flowing eastward'.

Jianguomen station features a tile mural created in 1985 depicting ancient China's Four Great Inventions—papermaking, commercial printing, gunpowder, and the compass—and traditional Chinese ways of life such as family interactions and holiday celebrations, reminding passengers of the glory of China's traditional civilization. The opposite side showcases traditional Chinese mythology and contemporary China's ambitious space programme (Figure 5). By incorporating cultural values in the subway system, the government aimed to foster a sense of national unity and identity among its citizens, while sharing its rich cultural heritage with the world.

The accelerated expansion of the Beijing subway network in the 2000s brought new opportunities for artistic expression and cultural dissemination through the subway 'museum'. Liu Qi, then party secretary of Beijing, supported the inclusion of more

⁵³Jane Zheng, 'Contextualizing public art production in China: The urban sculpture planning system in Shanghai', *Geoforum*, vol. 82, 2017, pp. 89–101.

⁵⁴Han Cheng and Julian Worrall, 'The influence of public art in developing Chinese urban public space: Current trends and future directions', in *Cities' identity through architecture and arts*, (eds) Yasser Mahgoub et al. (New York: Springer, 2020), pp. 157–165.



Figure 4. Xizhimen station's mural, the first in Beijing's subway. Source: Photo taken by Xu Lixin on 9 November 2021.

artwork in the subway,⁵⁵ leading to an expansion of the scope and depth of the stations' design in the newly constructed lines. Since the 2000s, subway art design has expanded to cover the entire train station, including lifts, ceilings, pillars, and entrances, offering an immersive experience of local history and culture. Designs now include curved roofs, intricate tilework, and sculptures, offering a three-dimensional vision of the subway, contrasting with the two-dimensional mural design of the 1980s. For example, at Gulou (Drum Tower) station, a golden low-relief carving of the tower is featured (Figure 6), while abstract strokes portray nearby traditional Chinese hutongs, reminding passengers of the historical traditions in the vicinity. Similarly, at National Library station, Chinese calligraphy on the walls and lamps serves as decorative patterns, illuminating the cultural connections to the station and inviting passengers to explore China's largest library above ground (Figure 7).

Beijing subway stations have also incorporated designs that promote an appreciation for nature and history. Forest Park South station features tree-like pillars and ceilings depicting branches, while Lincuiqiao station showcases traditional paintings of birds in a forest, illustrating the harmony between human and nature. The subway's immersive architecture and natural imagery encourage environmental consciousness in a fast-paced urban setting. Yuanmingyuan station on Line 4 features tile murals

⁵⁵刘淇就地铁四号线建设及开通前准备工作进行调研' (Liu Qi conducts research on the construction and pre-opening preparations of subway Line 4'), published online on 3 July 2009, available at http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2009-07/03/content_1356007.htm, [accessed 30 April 2024].



Figure 5. The 1985 mural in Jianguomen station integrates traditional Chinese cosmology with the modern Chinese ambition to explore outer space. Source: Photo taken by the authors on 20 July 2019.

of the ruined Old Summer Palace, destroyed by French and British troops during the Second Opium War in 1860 (Figure 8). The Beijing municipal government rebuilt Yuanmingyuan village in the early 1980s and transformed it into a memorial park in 1988 to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the Old Summer Palace and educate visitors.⁵⁶ The design of Yuanmingyuan station serves as a poignant reminder of China's past humiliation and failure, as well as its progress since then, rallying Chinese citizens around nationalism.⁵⁷ This allows the subway station to be more than just a transportation hub, but also a place of remembrance, reflection, and education on Chinese history.

The Beijing subway incorporated local perspectives and artistic expression into its station design, reflecting a shift towards a more inclusive approach to infrastructure development. In the 1980s, Beijing subway station designs were primarily conducted by the government and cultural workers from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. However, recent projects incorporate local input and cultural representations. For example, Nanluoguxiang station, located in one of Beijing's most famous historic

⁵⁶Hu Liping (户力平), *北京地铁站名掌故 (The anecdotes of Beijing subway station names)* (Beijing: Oriental Press, 2020), p. 55; Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, *Beijing subway public art*, p. 88.

⁵⁷Jing Tsu, *Failure, nationalism and literature: The making of modern Chinese identity, 1895–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Zheng Wang, *Never forget national humiliation: Historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).



Figure 6. Visualization of three-dimensional architecture and traditional culture in Drum Tower station. Source: Photo taken by Xu Lixin on 12 November 2021.

neighbourhoods, consulted local residents to collect symbolic cultural materials that were digitized and displayed on the walls of the subway stations, preserving the local area's cultural memory and history. Passengers can learn about the site's history via a QR code.⁵⁸ The beautiful artwork in Nanluoguxiang station captures the essence of old Beijing, inspiring passengers to take photos and share their experience with others. The use of traditional kites and images of hutongs not only evokes a sense of nostalgia, but also encourages people to appreciate and preserve the unique history and cultural charm of the area (Figure 9). The station serves as a testament to the importance of maintaining a connection to the city's storied past, while embracing the

⁵⁸Wu Dingyu (吴定宇), '北京地铁公共艺术的探索性实践—“北京·记忆”公共艺术计划的创作思考' ('Explorative practice of public art in Beijing subway: Reflections on the creation of "Beijing: Memory" public art project'), 装饰 *Decoration*, no. 1, 2015, pp. 112–114.

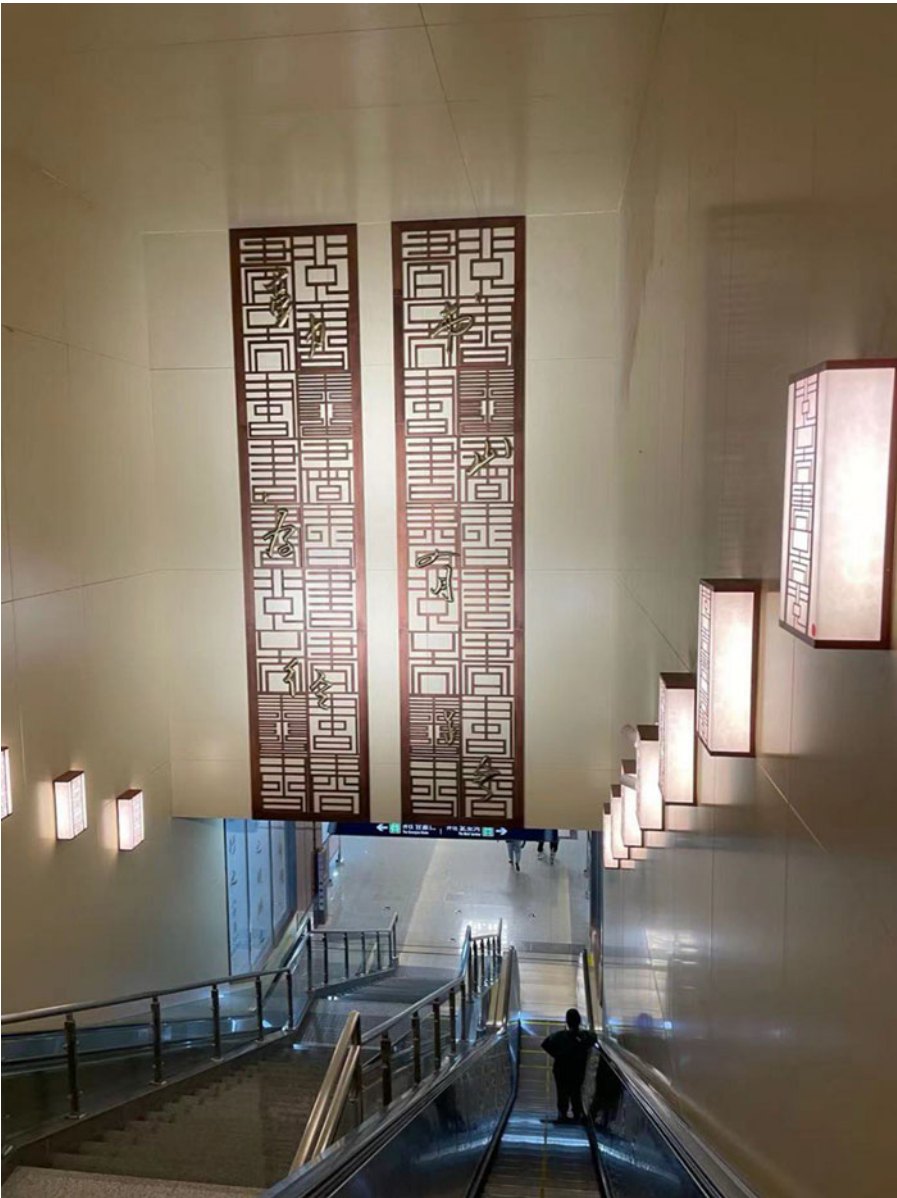


Figure 7. Chinese calligraphy showcases the educational background of National Library station. Source: Photo taken by Xu Lixin on 12 November 2021.

modern advances of urban life. While the subway serves as a symbol of urbanization, it now also addresses urbanization's side effects by safeguarding cultural relics, craftsmanship, and traditions, effectively combining modern infrastructure with cultural preservation.



Figure 8. The tile murals of the ruined Old Summer Palace in Yuanmingyuan station serve as a reminder of a traumatic period in Chinese history. *Source:* Photo taken by the authors on 20 July 2019.

In the early 2000s, the Beijing subway witnessed a surge in public art, largely fuelled by efforts to amplify the city's unique cultural signature. The Beijing Municipal Commission of City Appearance and Environmental Sanitation was established to steer this artistic surge, resulting in spectacular installations throughout the city. Notable among these are the 'Cultural Heritage' sculpture in Ritan Park, the 'World Peace' edifice at the Wukesong Cultural and Sports Center, and the 'Gate of the Orient' centrepiece at the China National Convention Center. Today, the subway exudes the ambience of a dynamic museum. Each station presents a medley of artistic styles and themes, from the cultural to the natural and from the ancient to the contemporary, all echoing state-approved stories. Commuters, as they traverse this subterranean world, inadvertently find themselves ensconced within an artistic haven.

Embedding public art in the Beijing subway also signifies resistance to the homogenizing force of global neoliberalism that can erase the uniqueness of urban spaces. As the Marxist geographer David Harvey elucidates, neoliberalism manifests as a spatial strategy, reshaping urban terrains to bolster neoliberal economic principles.⁵⁹ Indeed, as post-socialist Beijing leans further into consumerism, the sanctity of subway art may come under siege. Electronic billboards and commercial screens, which in part fund station operations, have begun to replace paintings and tile murals, immersing

⁵⁹David Harvey, *Social justice and the city* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).



Figure 9. Passengers taking photos of traditional kites in Nanluoguxiang station. Source: Photo taken by Xu Lixin on 14 July 2021.

passengers in consumer culture. Younger commuters, notably those in their twenties, regularly interact with QR codes of products, events, or services advertised, seamlessly blending their digital and physical worlds. Such interactions signal the deeper meshing of technology within urban experiences and the evolution of a consumer identity that is symbiotic with the city's infrastructure. Line 10, which encircles Beijing's emerging business hubs, has birthed a distinct 'subway work culture'. Here, it is common to observe commuters engaged in work-related tasks during their journeys, whether they are fine-tuning slideshows or conducting telephone meetings. The discussions about introducing free Wi-Fi on the Beijing subway further encapsulate how infrastructure can shape work habits and, by extension, worker identities.⁶⁰ These dynamics, not entirely intended by the state, are largely driven by market forces.

The Beijing government's decision to replace subway station names translated into English with Chinese pinyin, and its ensuing reversal, highlights the intricate choreography of present-day Chinese cultural politics. Increasingly, the state may find itself in negotiations or contestations with an expanding, though still embryonic, civil society. Scholars like Bourdieu have discussed the linguistic landscape as a critical terrain

⁶⁰ '北京地铁是否也设置免费WIFI引起强烈关注' ('The possibility of offering free Wi-Fi on the Beijing subway has garnered strong attention'), 地铁资讯 *Subway Information*, published online on 25 October 2023, available at <https://www.yunhuoche.com/ditieshow-2356>, [accessed 30 April 2024].

where power and identity dynamics play out.⁶¹ The move to pinyin, transcending simple semantics, showcases the state's ongoing efforts to reassert Chinese cultural identity. Such manoeuvres echo broader indigenization efforts in countries contending with the stranglehold of English-centric globalization.⁶² However, faced with substantial online backlash, within a year the Beijing subway discreetly reverted to its original design, restoring English translations for station names.⁶³ This rollback demonstrates that the state cannot always simply impose its will; in this case, it must navigate a delicate balance between global appeal and preserving local heritage, especially when societal pushback is potent.

As the number of passengers swells, the challenge emerges of aligning the state's steadfast commitment to maintaining a rich cultural heritage with the ever-changing demands and aspirations of modern urban life. Serving as a mobile museum for state-sanctioned artistic expressions, the Beijing subway is poised to undergo continual transformation. This metamorphosis will catalyse both intentional and incidental shifts in passenger identities, encapsulating the tensions between neoliberal drives and their counterforces. Most crucially, even amid escalating influences from market and social forces, the subway persists as a dynamic tableau upon which the state delineates its evolving vision of modernity, tradition, and the global-local continuum.

Infrastructure violence: Undesirable passengers and social exclusion in the post-Olympic era

The expansion of the Beijing subway system over the years has elicited intricate dynamics of accessibility, manifesting in distinct policy shifts that unveil the underlying tendencies of social exclusion and state control. As passenger numbers burgeoned, so did concerns about access for the city's urban poor and beggars. In the lead-up to the late 2000s Olympics, ticket prices were recalibrated as part of Beijing's broader push towards eco-friendly transportation, underscoring China's commitment to international decarbonization initiatives. Yet, by the mid-2010s, a rise in ticket prices was rationalized by the authorities on the grounds of overcrowding and aspirations to situate Beijing as a world-class city. This decision, however, also had the unintended consequence of sidelining those deemed 'undesirable' by the state, pushing the urban poor and beggars towards the peripheries of societal visibility.

The accessibility issues surrounding the Beijing subway, particularly the orchestrated removal of beggars and the stringent crackdown on the 'low-end population' (*diduanrenkou* 低端人口), are emblematic of deeper urban management practices and social injustices entrenched in Beijing's sociopolitical fabric. On the surface, these measures seem intent on refining the city's façade and operational efficiency. Yet, they

⁶¹Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and symbolic power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Jennifer Leeman and Gabriella Modan, 'Commodified language in Chinatown: A contextualized approach to linguistic landscape', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2009, pp. 332–362.

⁶²Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jan Blommaert, *The sociolinguistics of globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶³'北京地铁将“zhan”改回“station”?' ('Did the Beijing subway change “zhan” back to “station”?'), 网易新闻 *NetEase News*, published online on 24 April 2023, available at <https://www.163.com/dy/article/I33BD98F05562NEZ.html>, [accessed 30 April 2024].

also inadvertently underscore a latent tension: the clash between the urban development drive and the rights of the city's most vulnerable. In its quest for a pristine urban image, Beijing's governance often pushes to the margins those who diverge from its idealized progress narrative. This trend transcends the confines of the subway, mirroring a larger urban governance approach that often forsakes inclusivity for the sake of aesthetics and order. With Beijing's ambitions ever-increasing, it becomes imperative to discern the true societal costs of such policies and to reckon with the realities faced by those eclipsed by these advancements.

Broadening the dialogue, the evolving global discourse on citizenship has extended beyond the traditional triad of civil, political, and social rights to incorporate the concept of 'mobile citizenship', positioning mobility as a form of access. This perspective amplifies the myriad barriers individuals face in accessing a spectrum of 'activities, values, and goods' that are pivotal for full societal membership. The crux lies in surmounting the diverse financial, physical, organizational, and temporal challenges that impede such access.⁶⁴ The nuanced policy alterations of Beijing's subway system provide a window into social injustice. They tacitly suggest that public infrastructures, exemplified by the subway, are not genuinely inclusive spaces for the entire public, but rather are tailored for a select, often more affluent, populace. Such infrastructural exclusions intensify societal disparities while simultaneously signalling a nuanced, yet potent, exertion of state control. In this light, infrastructures like the subway become a locus where the broader structural dynamics of social stratification and injustice are both manifested and reproduced.

Understanding accessibility requires a multifaceted lens, as it is shaped not only by deliberate design but also through everyday interactions among diverse users.⁶⁵ As Daniel Muñoz posits, rooted in the idea that infrastructure melds both social and technical aspects, accessibility emerges as an intricate interplay of factors, blurring distinctions between the 'social' and the 'technical'.⁶⁶ Alex Cockain's seminal work on the Shanghai subway underscores how the subway, far beyond its functional utility, becomes a space of everyday encounter, where urban denizens navigate not just physical terrains but also sociocultural norms, forging distinctive urban identities in the process.⁶⁷ Drawing from Rashmi Sadana's ethnographic study of the Delhi Metro's 'social lives', it becomes evident that urban mobility transcends mere transport. While enhancing urban connectivity and offering greater access to opportunities, services, and cultural experiences—especially for marginalized communities—urban mobility delves deep into the intricate emotional and psychological facets of individuals' personhood as they traverse and envision metropolitan landscapes. The

⁶⁴Noel Cass, Elizabeth Shove and John Urry, 'Social exclusion, mobility and access', *The Sociological Review*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2005, pp. 539–555.

⁶⁵Olivier Coutard and Jonathan Rutherford (eds), *Beyond the networked city: Infrastructure reconfigurations and urban change in the north and south* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 8.

⁶⁶Tanya Titchkosky, *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Daniel Muñoz, 'Accessibility as a "doing": The everyday production of Santiago de Chile's public transport system as an accessible infrastructure', *Landscape Research*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2023, pp. 200–211.

⁶⁷Alex Cockain, 'Riding and reading the Shanghai Metro: Signs, subjectivities and subversions on and around Line# 8', *Social Semiotics*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2018, pp. 533–554.

women-only compartment in the Delhi Metro serves as a poignant example. It represents not just safety, but is also a symbol of empowerment, reshaping women's interactions with urban spaces and their perceptions of self.⁶⁸ However, such segregation also underscores the unique challenges women face in public spaces, highlighting the constant negotiation between empowerment, inclusion/exclusion, and infrastructure.

Within the particular context of the Beijing subway, the state's approach to fare policies and marginalized populations exposes its agenda of social regulation. In 1978, the Beijing municipal government introduced affordable monthly subway tickets, granting passengers unlimited access for a month.⁶⁹ However, rising popularity led to price increases from 18 Yuan in 1991 to 80 Yuan in 2000, diminishing support for the poor. In 2006, two Renmin University professors claimed that the monthly ticket was being abused, potentially costing the subway one billion Yuan annually, and recommended ending it to 'ensure justice'.⁷⁰ In September 2007, a year before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the Beijing government held a hearing to balance operational costs and the needs of the poor.⁷¹ Despite objections, the monthly ticket was abolished. A flat rate of two Yuan per ticket was introduced, which allowed unlimited transfers within the city.⁷² Following the central government's guidance for the Olympics, the Beijing subway's rhetoric shifted from profit-driven to inclusive and environmentally friendly.⁷³

For the 2008 Olympics, Beijing's subway system became emblematic of China's burgeoning strength and its aspiration to seamlessly mix with the international upper echelons.⁷⁴ The city's vision of a 'Green Olympics, High-tech Olympics, and People's Olympics' was epitomized by the subway, which underwent remarkable expansion, more than doubling its length to cater to a surging influx of international attendees. This infrastructural enhancement was not just a logistical decision but a strategic one,

⁶⁸Rashmi Sadana, *The moving city: Scenes from the Delhi Metro and the social life of infrastructure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).

⁶⁹'我国最早的公交月票' ('The earliest monthly bus pass in China'), in 古今交通拾趣 (*Interesting things in ancient and new traffic*), (ed.) Guo Xin (郭欣) (Beijing: China Communication Press, 1992), p. 111. As early as 1908 in late Qing, a monthly ticket was in use in Shanghai's trolleybus.

⁷⁰'地铁月票伤及公平与效率' ('Subway monthly pass hurts fairness and efficiency'), 北京日报 *Beijing Daily*, 18 December 2006.

⁷¹9月26日, 北京市将举行听证会——北京地铁票价有望降至2元' ('On September 26, Beijing will hold a hearing—Beijing subway fares are expected to drop to 2 yuan'), 人民日报 *People's Daily*, 21 September 2007; '北京轨道交通路网票制票价听证会' ('Beijing rail transit network holding fare hearing'), published online on 26 September 2007, available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-09-26/133013977362.shtml>, [accessed 30 April 2024].

⁷²'本市地铁票价有望全国最低' ('Subway fares in Beijing are expected to be the lowest in the country'), 北京日报 *Beijing Daily*, 27 September 2007.

⁷³'北京市公共交通状况好转 "新北京" 延伸奥运精神' ('Beijing's public transport situation improves, "New Beijing" extends the Olympic spirit'), 新华社 *Xinhuashe*, published online on 14 December 2007, available at http://www.gov.cn/ztlz/beijing2008/content_833999.htm, [accessed 30 April 2024].

⁷⁴'胡锦涛主席接受外国媒体联合采访' ('President Hu Jintao accepted a joint interview with foreign media'), 人民日报 *Renminribao*, 2 August 2008. In the interview, Hu Jintao pointed out that the hosting of the Olympic Games by China, which has one-fifth of the world's population, showed the world's trust in China and China's dedication to the world; and that the Beijing Olympics belonged to the Chinese people as well as to the people of all countries in the world.

projecting China's prowess in urban development and planning. In fact, Beijing's ambitious moves set it apart in terms of Olympic preparations. While cities like London, in 2012, primarily refined their existing transport systems, and Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, extended its metro to connect key Olympic sites, Beijing's strategy was unparalleled. Daily services were enhanced on key routes such as Line 1 and Line 13, enabling the transportation of an additional 5,000 people daily,⁷⁵ culminating in nearly four million passengers during the Olympic period, as reported by *People's Daily*.⁷⁶ However, in a nod to the exclusivity of the event, the line specifically crafted for the Games was reserved solely for athletes and media personnel.⁷⁷

After the Olympics, the subway was hailed as a means to build an underground city, accommodating a large number of migrants and resolving congestion issues. This development embodies David Nye's 'technological sublime', inspiring awe through gigantic and powerful machines.⁷⁸ In the context of the Beijing subway right after the Olympic Games, a strong technological optimism materialized in grand visions for cities, realized through integrated infrastructural and urban planning. A state-endorsed documentary, entitled *Super Project: Beijing Subway Network*, hails the subway as a 'second city'.⁷⁹ The documentary claims that Beijing has attracted numerous migrants, with one out of three Beijing residents being 'outside visitors' (*wailaike* 外来客), causing the city to expand quickly. While implying that these 'outside visitors' can be a burden, the documentary suggested that the subway could provide a solution to the expansive city of migrants.

However, a few years after the Olympic Games, increased passenger numbers were no longer seen as a symbol of strength and inclusiveness. The Beijing subway shifted from promoting inclusiveness to 'purifying' itself by removing beggars who were viewed as damaging the city's global image. Local news reports revealed that the Beijing subway had mapped out sites where beggars frequently congregated, presenting them as a threat to the public interest.⁸⁰ Beggars were criticized for annoying passengers with their intrusive actions such as begging for money by touching passengers' clothes and blocking paths, creating difficulties in evacuating passengers in case of emergencies. Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O'Neill coined the concept of 'infrastructure violence' to explore how infrastructure excludes the poor and disadvantaged populations. They argue that infrastructure can act not only as a material embodiment of structural discrimination against the poor, but can also serve to 'reinforce

⁷⁵绿色奥运概念深入人心 地铁已成北京市民出行首选' (The concept of green Olympics is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, and the subway has become the first choice for Beijing citizens to travel'), published online on 28 December 2007, available at <http://sports.sina.com.cn/o/2007-12-28/10263385889.shtml>, [accessed 30 April 2024].

⁷⁶'北京奥运会期间城市运行保障平稳有序 赛时赛事交通顺畅 空气质量全部达标' ('During the Beijing Olympic Games, the urban operation was stable and orderly; the traffic during the competition was smooth; and the air quality all met the standards'), 人民日报 *People's Daily*, 24 August 2008.

⁷⁷'北京地铁奥运支线暂不向普通市民开放' ('Beijing subway Olympic branch line is temporarily closed to ordinary citizens'), 京华时报 *Beijing Times*, 18 July 2008.

⁷⁸David Nye, *American technological sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

⁷⁹'超级工程: 北京地铁网络' ('Super project: Beijing subway network'), *Chinese Central Television*, 2014, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR1ZrvDZwzY&ab_channel=CCTV%E7%BA%AA%E5%BD%95, [accessed 30 April 2024].

⁸⁰'北京地铁“乞讨地图”背后的处罚难: 乞丐没钱' ('The punishment behind the Beijing subway's "begging map" is difficult: Beggars have no money'), 北京青年报 *Beijing Youth Daily*, 24 August 2015.

social orders, thereby becoming a contributing factor to reoccurring forms of harm'.⁸¹ The infrastructure violence was evident as beggars, often from poor, agriculture-dominated provinces, were stigmatized and demonized. Anti-rural bias in Chinese cities has its roots in the early Maoist period and has only intensified over time.⁸² Research shows that the Chinese government used coercive methods to control the urban floating population in the post-socialist era.⁸³ The process of disappearing the poor from the public eye is fuelled by stigmatizing them. Newspapers labelled beggars as lazy, troublesome, and morally corrupt, reporting that adults exploited children by making them beg during school holidays. The urban poor in Beijing embody not just urban problems, but also nationwide, systemic discrimination against rural migrants.

The government provided beggars with only ten days of aid before returning them to rural villages,⁸⁴ where they may have lost their homes, jobs, or family members, offering little hope upon their return. Urban residents are also unwelcoming to them. A local Beijing newspaper documents the story of a beggar who lost her home due to an earthquake in Gansu Province. Despite receiving partial government assistance for reconstruction, she still needed to take a high-interest loan to make a living, which eventually bankrupted her.⁸⁵ When she arrived in Beijing, she brought her children with her to help her beg for money. When in 2014, the Beijing subway replaced the flat-rate two Yuan ticket with a flexible mileage-based pricing system, ranging from a minimum of three yuan to an uncapped maximum, the price changes disproportionately impacted on the urban poor. Additionally, an overtime fee system was introduced, targeting beggars, which charges a minimum one-way ticket price of three yuan if a passenger's time in the subway network (departure time minus arrival time) exceeds four hours. The Beijing government claimed that raising ticket prices would ease the city's financial burden and prevent congestion. Officials argued that the government lost almost half a Yuan for every kilometre a passenger travelled on the subway.⁸⁶ When residents requested the city to issue monthly tickets for the poor, the proposal was rejected.

The Beijing subway, which represented inclusiveness during the 2008 Olympics, became increasingly exclusive in the mid-2010s when the Beijing municipal government adopted aggressive policies towards poor migrants. In 2016, *People's Daily* even labelled poor migrants in Beijing as 'lower-rank people', leading to their eventual

⁸¹Rodgers and O'Neill, 'Infrastructural violence', p. 404.

⁸²Jeremy Brown, *City versus countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the divide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁸³Li Zhang, *Strangers in the city: Reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China's floating population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁴Zhou Ning (周宁), '走近“丐帮”我采写《北京地铁乞丐群调查》的故事' ('Approaching the "beggar gang" I wrote the story of *Beijing Subway Beggar Group Investigation*'), 新闻记者 *Shanghai Journalism Review*, no. 11, 2009, pp. 78–80.

⁸⁵“暑假乞丐”现身北京地铁 儿童带作业来乞讨('Summer beggar' appeared in Beijing subway, and children brought homework to beg), 北京青年报 *Beijing Youth Daily*, 12 August 2015.

⁸⁶“北京地铁讲告别“两元时代”市民对涨价反应不一' ('Beijing subway will bid farewell to the "2 yuan era" and public reaction to the price hike is mixed'), published online on 20 October 2014, available at https://caijing.chinadaily.com.cn/2014-10/29/content_18819942.htm, [accessed 30 April 2024].

removal from the city.⁸⁷ The government prioritized Beijing's status as a political, cultural, and international exchange centre, displacing migrant workers' small businesses under the pretext of building 'the core area of the capital'. In examining the forced displacement of local residents during dam-building, Rob Nixon highlights that 'If the idea of the modern nation-state is sustained by producing imagined communities, it also involves actively producing unimagined communities. I refer here [...] to communities whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development.'⁸⁸ Rob Nixon suggests that the grandiose rhetoric of national development often overlooks disadvantaged communities' interests. Poor migrants, including Beijing subway beggars, were deemed not to fit the city's ambition to become an advanced international metropolis. Newspapers reported harsher punishment for 'professional beggars', such as a mother who begged with her three children and was arrested.⁸⁹ Citing safety and social order, the Beijing subway company hired staff to remove beggars, primarily from the iconic and earliest subway lines, Line 1 and Line 2.

The Beijing subway's transformation into a modern and efficient public transportation system has been celebrated as a symbol of China's economic growth and urban development. While the affluent can afford private cars and the ultra-poor were expelled, the working class rely on the crowded subway for daily commutes, forming a socioeconomic hierarchy in the commuting system and highlighting the inequalities that persist in Chinese society. Despite its crowdedness, the Beijing subway remains the most popular means of transportation for commuters.⁹⁰ The government has continued to invest in its expansion and modernization, and has reframed the underground space to align with its political and economic objectives, reminiscent of earlier tactics. As such, the subway's transformation highlights how celebrating the public infrastructure's grandeur can come at the expense of the most vulnerable and unimagined.

Conclusion

Originating during the Cold War as a discreet defence undertaking, the Beijing subway has metamorphosed into a vibrant showcase of national pride, cultural heritage, and environmental commitment. While the surge in passenger numbers was initially lauded as a testament to China's strength and inclusiveness, it later became seen as an impediment to Beijing's global city ambitions. Throughout its storied evolution in the past five decades, the Beijing subway stands as emblematic of the interplay between infrastructure and politics in China. This article highlights the Beijing subway as a

⁸⁷ '北上广常住人口增速放缓 专家:靠政策清理“低端人口”' ('The growth rate of the permanent population of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou has slowed down. Experts: relying on policies to clean up the "low-end population"'), 人民日报 *People's Daily*, 1 August 2016.

⁸⁸ Rob Nixon, *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 150.

⁸⁹ '带着娃在地铁上乞讨岷县三人因违法被拘' ('Three people in Minxian County were detained for illegally begging with their baby on the subway'), 北京青年报 *Beijing Youth Daily*, 31 March 2017.

⁹⁰ '地铁出行比例最高!北京绿色通勤还有这些新特点' ('The highest proportion of trips by taking subway! Beijing's green commuting also has these new features'), 北京日报 *Beijing Daily*, 23 May 2022.

rich tapestry, encapsulating hidden and overt, pragmatic and aesthetic, and inclusive and exclusive facets in the cultural politics of Chinese infrastructure at large. Amid the shifting currents, however, a singular constant stands out: the subway's embodiment of state power, capturing the nuances of Chinese governance—its capacity for adaptability, its propensity for control, and its adeptness at weaving and reweaving narratives to resonate with prevailing political winds.

The dance playing out in the tunnels of Beijing reveals the intricate choreography of Chinese statecraft: fluid, transformative, yet consistently anchored within the assertion of state power. This insight is essential for comprehending China's escalating global influences, particularly through its expansive infrastructure projects across the globe.⁹¹ Take the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for instance. This multibillion-dollar venture is not only a major trade route but is also a testament to the deep bond between China and Pakistan. While it fortifies Pakistan's geopolitical significance, the swift execution of CPEC has nudged regional policymakers towards a centralized, infrastructure-focused trajectory. However, beneath its sheen, there is palpable local tension. While CPEC has undoubtedly created employment, it has also been met with local resistance, especially over land disputes and concerns about environmental impacts. These anxieties underscore the importance of local agency and its capacity to shape, refine, and sometimes even resist overarching narratives. In a parallel vein, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, funded by Chinese resources, embodies Africa's drive for modernity and China's commitment to its partners. For many Ethiopians and Djiboutians, this railway is both a conduit to global markets and a mark of their nations' ascending international relevance, rendering China's state-driven strategies enticing to some African figureheads. Yet, the local narrative is multifaceted. There are concerns about wage disparities, limited opportunities for local workers, and an increasing sense of marginalization, leading to social fissures.

Mega-infrastructure initiatives do more than just establish routes for connectivity and economic advancement. They serve to weave complex sociocultural tapestries that inscribe new narratives and identities upon diverse local communities. As shown in our study of the Beijing subway, these projects, more than mere bricks and mortar, stand as symbolic arenas where cultural, social, and political destinies are cast and recast. When other countries encounter Chinese infrastructure, these arenas often become vibrant grounds of nuanced negotiation and contestation, mirroring the complex dance of aspirations, concerns, and visions between local stakeholders and China's global ambitions.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank Elisabeth Köll for her helpful feedback during the panel on Chinese infrastructure at the Association for Asian Studies Conference in 2023. Special thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of *MAS* for their constructive comments, which improved the manuscript significantly.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

⁹¹Selina Ho, 'Infrastructure and Chinese power', *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1461–1485.

Cite this article: Li, Cheng and Yanjun Liu. 2024. 'Tunnels of power: The cultural politics of the Beijing subway'. *Modern Asian Studies* 58(3), pp. 840–864. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2400009X>