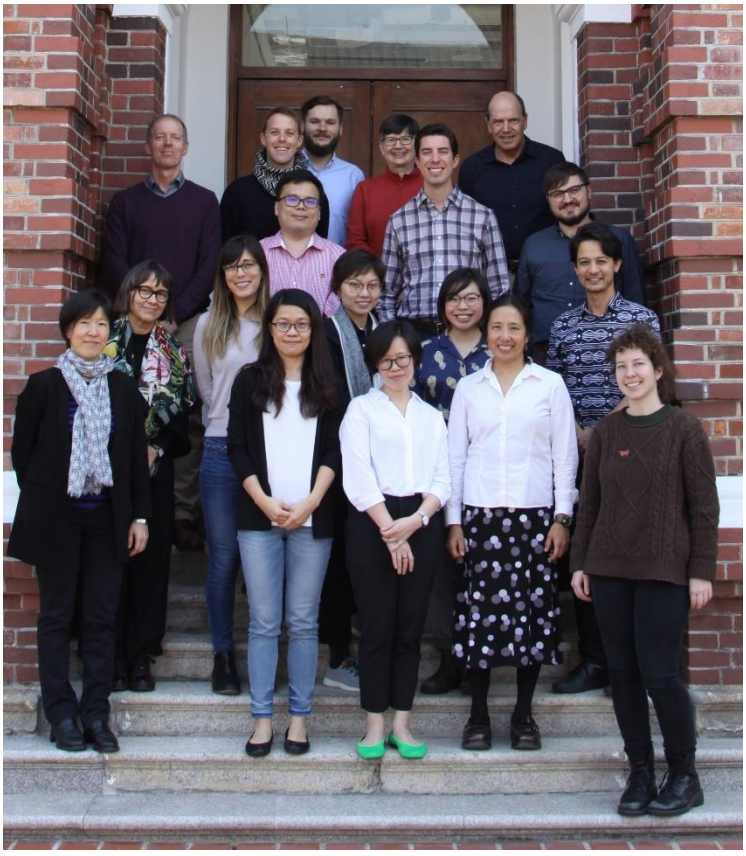
CHINAMADE BRIEF

Second China Made Workshop: China's Domestic Infrastructure

Alessandro Rippa and Tim Oakes, March 2020

In the wake of the recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Wuhan authorities, at the centre of the outbreak, promised to build an ad-hoc hospital in six days. The move was intended as a (however late) attempt to cope with the growing threats of widespread contagion. To fulfil this task, a team of 7000 worked around the clock to complete the project in time. The structure, authorities promised, would be able to host and treat over a thousand patients. The news immediately made the rounds in the local, national, and international media. In China, millions of people followed the construction of the hospital via livestream platforms. Fellow migrant construction workers, temporarily unemployed due to *chunjie*

celebrations and restriction to their mobility due to virus containment measures implemented throughout the country, cheered along the speedy delivery of the hospital. For central leaders in Beijing, and at least some observers around the world, this was an example of China's efficiency and efforts in fighting the virus. For others, it was indicative of the state's eagerness to showcase its tremendous mobilizing power in order to draw attention away from the ways the virus exposed key lapses in the Chinese model of governing.[1] But even for those who remained critical of Beijing's handling of the situation, the successful construction of the hospital in "Chinese speed" was never questioned.[2] If the Chinese political economic system has proven one thing, in recent decades, it is its ability to deliver stunning infrastructure against all the odds. From the railway to Tibet to the nation-wide high-speed railway network, to the Three Gorges Dam, examples abound.



Notably, the construction of the Wuhan hospital was not the first instance in which Chinese leaders responded to a crisis by turning to infrastructure. In 2003, during the SARS outbreak, Beijing authorities built a hospital in 7 days. In 2009, at the time of the global financial crisis, Chinese leaders injected into the economy a stimulus package of US$586 billion over two years, or the equivalent of 13.4% of GDP – specifically targeting infrastructure development. Following the dramatic train crash in Wenzhou in 2011, which sent shock waves through the Chinese internet in a rare moment of collective criticism of the Party-state, the Chinese government responded by investing more into China's high-speed railway network, which is now globally celebrated as state-of-the-art and a source of national pride. Infrastructure, then, seems to speak to a very particular way in which state power is deployed, enacted, mediated, and experienced in China today.

In January, 2020, an interdisciplinary group of scholars from Australia, Hong Kong, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States met at the Hong Kong Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences to consider the following question: what can we achieve by thinking *infrastructurally* about China's development over the past few decades? This question was addressed through a variety of case study accounts from around China, but the timing of the workshop brought into stark relief the ever-present salience of infrastructural issues in the recent crises that have roiled this part of the world. During the lead-up to the workshop protests in Hong Kong challenged the view that the city's spectacular infrastructure could ever be seen as merely technical and apolitical. And the COVID-19 outbreak that came on the heels of the workshop in turn reminded us that China's enhanced infrastructural connectivity not only brings with it a whole new level of unanticipated techo-political issues, but bio-political ones as well.

In academia, recent years have seen a proliferation of social science studies of infrastructure (cf. Larkin 2013; Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018; Harvey et al. 2017; Rippa, Murton and Rest 2020). What is notably marginal in this growing body of literature, is an analysis of "Chinese" infrastructure. Despite China's leading role in the construction of actual, physical infrastructure over the past three decades, the most influential paradigms for the study of infrastructure in the social sciences originate from research conducted elsewhere. To be sure, important groundwork has been laid for critically engaging the 'China model' of development (Lee 2018; Driessen 2019), as well as for appreciating the socio-political dimensions of how people experience infrastructure provision and demolition in China (Chu 2014). But a more complete rendering of the 'infrastructure turn' in China studies is yet to be developed. For this reason, the China Made project, funded by The Henry Luce Foundation (2018-2021) organised a series of workshops to more thoroughly interrogate *Chinese* infrastructure and the so-called Chinese model of development, from within ongoing theoretical discussions occurring beyond the field of China Studies (for a summary of the first China Made workshop see the China Made Brief #1)

The second China Made workshop, in Hong Kong, aimed to develop a theoretical and methodological agenda for bringing infrastructure studies into conversation with China's domestic infrastructures. In particular, the workshop traced infrastructure development within China by interrogating *how* it has become a key feature of China's political economy. Some of the key questions that participants considered included: how does infrastructure development relate to (local) administration in China? How do infrastructure spaces in China (zones, industrial parks, cultural districts) blend state and capital in their own particular manner? In what ways is infrastructure development a process of state making, or a way of doing politics by other means? What does an infrastructure approach tell us about processes of state territorialisation and authoritarian statecraft? How do socialist legacies inform infrastructure development today? And in connection, how do we trace the trans-national origin of Chinese infrastructural expertise (Soviet, French, American, Japanese)? What is the role of infrastructure in China's "ecological civilization" – and to what extend is nature thought of "infrastructurally" in this context? How are connectivity and convenience complicated by territoriality, control, and state paranoia?

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As a whole, workshop participants considered a number of overarching themes and issues related to China's domestic infrastructures. One of these is the apparent tension, or even contradiction, between the smooth connectivity promised by China's transport and digital infrastructural investments on the one hand, and the state's continuing commitment to controlling mobility, reinforcing borders, securing frontiers, and generally subjecting its population to enhanced surveillance and other technical infrastructures of control. The infrastructures at the heart of the 'China model' of development are not really about enhanced mobility and convenience, it turns out. At least not for certain segments of the population that have been deemed unfit for self-governance. Discussions also focused on the role of infrastructure within China's state environment of 'total planning', given that infrastructures consistently produce unexpected uses and unplanned-for outcomes. This was a particular focus of cases in which urban planning and infrastructural urbanism – both of which figure as significant characteristics of China's urban experience – were considered. An additional topic of emphasis was Hong Kong itself and the role that infrastructures have played in debates, contests, and negotiations over the city's historical and contemporary relationships to mainland China. Water supply, artificial island building, and the construction of cultural facilities were all discussed in this context. Whether or not a 'China

model' can even be identified given the vast range of variation in how infrastructure functions, how it gets built, and how it shapes social, cultural, and political patterns also became an increasingly apparent theme through the two days of the workshop. Overall, the workshop suggested a strong need for more qualitative and ethnographic studies of infrastructure developments, given the centrality of these in Chinese state-building, national identity, and governing practice and capacity.

A selection of workshop papers will be published in 2021 a special issue journal. Papers presented in Hong Kong included:

- "Infrastructures of Turkic Muslim internment: 'reeducation' through industrial parks in Northwest China" (**Darren Byler**, University of Colorado Boulder)
- "Cultural infrastructure and the post/socialist city: 'cultural facilities' and the palace museum at the West Kowloon Cultural District" (**Carolyn Cartier**, University of Technology Sydney)
- "Low carbon frontier: renewable energy and extractive infrastructure in western China" (**Tyler Harlan**, Loyola Marymount University)
- "Technical experts and the production of China's airport infrastructure" (**Max Hirsh**, University of Hong Kong)
- "New roads, old stories: traveling through bureaucracy and time in northwest China" (**Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi**, University of Zurich)
- "The making and unmaking of Pukou: urban development, infrastructure changes, and mobility shifts from the early 20th Century to the present" (**Elisabeth Köll**, University of Notre Dame)
- "Infrastructure space in a Chinese register" (**Tim Oakes**, University of Colorado Boulder)
- "Storing data on the margins: making state and infrastructure in Southwest China" (**Darcy Pan**, Stockholm University)
- "The territory of water supply: landscape transformations and engineering water security in Hong Kong" (**Dorothy Tang**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
- "Making the foreign domestic and the domestic foreign through the infrastructure of Hong Kong's artificial island landscapes" (**Andrew Toland**, University of Technology Sydney)
- "Natural infrastructure in China's era of ecological civilization" (**Emily Yeh**, University of Colorado Boulder)

Other workshop participants included: **Mia Bennett** (University of Hong Kong), **Cecilia Chu** (University of Hong Kong), **Andrew Kipnis** (Chinese University of Hong Kong), and **Alessandro Rippa** (Tallinn University)

Notes

[1] https://www.ijurr.org/the-urban-now/the-quarantine-of-a-megacity/
[2] https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1149287719698407424?lang=en

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