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DRIVING (IN) THE CITY
CHAPTER 5 DRIVING (IN) THE CITY: TAXI DRIVERS AS THE MODERN FLÂNEUR — CAUGHT IN THE WAVES OF OLYMPIC TRANSFORMATION

Xiao Jun: Too fast. Beijing has changed a lot in the past five years, streets have all been renovated, many property developers popped up, many high-rises are built.

I: Do you like these changes in Beijing?

Xiao Jun: Really changes too fast. [I] look around everyday; everyday you can tell something is different, like seeing your own children, growing up near you, keep growing up everyday. If you don’t see them for a few years, the differences you see are drastic.

Xiao Jun was a taxi driver in his forties whom I met on a summer day in 2008. He spoke a heavily accented mandarin — known as “er hua” (“er” 儿話) — a linguistic style that is said to be common among the working strata of the population in Beijing. In Beijing, an eligible taxi driver has to hold a Beijing hukou (户口), that is, an urban household registration.\(^{137}\) In this light, all taxi drivers in Beijing are considered Beijingers.\(^{138}\)

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136 The “modern” in the modern flâneur in this chapter refers to the flâneur of the present time who uses the mode of driving in his act of seeing while in motion.

137 The hukou system is, according to Chan and Buckingham, “a state institution that regulates and restricts population mobility. . . . Today, it is one of the most important mechanisms determining entitlement to public welfare, urban services and, more broadly, full citizenship” (2008: 587). Beijing hukou is given to people whose registration is within the municipality of Beijing. Many taxi drivers from the suburbs of Beijing like Tongzhou (通州), Pinggu (平谷), Miyun (密云), Shunyi (顺义), etc., are considered Beijingers.

138 In cities like Guangzhou, there is no such requirement. In fact, my informants told me that taxi drivers in Guangzhou are often migrants from other regions. The Beijing hukou is the most desirable for citizens but also very difficult to come by. The Olympic volunteers I talked to told me that when they looked for jobs, they would choose one that paid less but would guarantee a Beijing hukou.
Before driving a taxi, Xiao Jun had been a driver for the state-owned Capital Steel (首钢) for more than ten years. Five years ago, he traded in the job security and stability for a better income and individual freedom. He told me that to be a taxi driver was to be his own boss — he could decide when and where he worked. Taking taxi-driving as a profession, Xiao Jun was always on the move and his relationship with passengers was an impersonal one: Passengers come and go; they rarely have contacts after a ride. Nevertheless, this impersonal relationship can also be an engaging one when the drivers develop conversation with passengers.

In this chapter, I want to explore the ways in which taxi drivers like Xiao Jun, through their daily practices of driving, experienced and narrated their everyday lives in the Olympic city, Beijing. Often overshadowed by their class position, taxi drivers’ narration and their everyday experiences were often rendered insignificant and neglected. I want to reclaim these “neglected” voices and I argue that through their everyday practice of driving in the city, Beijing taxi drivers were comparable to Walter Benjamin’s flâneur. The flâneur is an urban ethnographer who observes, experiences, and narrates the city and the people in-and-of the city through his act of strolling in the city (Benjamin 2005: 262; see also, Benjamin 2008). Taxi drivers’ everyday practice of driving in the city also allowed me to look at the procedural aspects of daily life that seemed to be natural, common, and therefore taken-for-granted to most of us. This everyday aspect often commanded little media attention, unlike other more eye-catching Olympic media news, such as the demonstrations in Tibet, the demonstrations in the rest of the world afterward, and the related large-scale Olympic spectacles like the opening and closing ceremonies, and so on. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in the Introduction, whenever there were reports about Beijing, attention was drawn to citizens’ discontent or censorship placed upon them as it fitted into the tilted interests in portraying an authoritarian and oppressive Chinese government. Much of the narratives about urban changes in Beijing and the Olympic Games did not take Beijing-dwellers’ everyday lives into account, though many claimed to

139 There are however exceptions. Some people have their “private taxi,” they call the same taxi driver whenever they need taxi services. In this case, it is a rather “long-term” economic relationship.

140 Benjamin first wrote about the flâneur in Die Wiederkehr des Flâneur (1972 [1929]). Later on in The Arcades Project (1999 [1935]) and his studies on Charles Baudelaire’s literary works, he revisited the idea-cum-figure of “the flâneur” and developed it into a concept in connection with the nineteenth-century Paris. See, for example, Benjamin, Spencer, and Harrington 1985; Benjamin 1969. To make it easier to read, I use male (possessive) pronoun to refer to both male and female flâneur throughout the chapter.
speak for the oppressed citizens. Even less has been written on how the very people living in the Olympic city witnessed and experienced their daily lives.

BEIJING TAXI DRIVERS AS THE MODERN FLÂNEUR

The flâneur in Benjamin’s writings is represented as an urban ideal (E. Wilson 1992; Featherstone 1998); this urban ideal does not refer exclusively to the educated and well-off class. It is said that Benjamin’s flâneur has a multiplicity of personas including prostitutes and collectors of out-of-date items (Gluck 2003; Buck-Morss 1986). A few studies have stretched the flâneur figure to see him as a well-off male figure who dominates the city (Wolff 1985), a detective-like urban dweller (McDonough 2002), an urban commuter (Toiskallio 2002), and a social scientist (Bairner 2006). Featherstone, in light of new internet technology, argues that the flâneur is no longer confined to the streetscapes, but also exists in the virtual public space (Featherstone 1998). Caught in the waves of industrialism, commodity capitalism, and social alienation, the flâneur is a marginal figure that draws Benjamin’s attention (Benjamin 1969: 170; Benjamin in Buck-Morss, 1986: 101).

Beijing taxi drivers, like the flâneur, are products of their time: Their ways of navigating, driving, seeing, experiencing, and narrating the city are inseparable from the very time and space they dwell in.

The taxi drivers in my study were marginal figures of the city. As some taxi drivers would tell me, they were often seen to belong to the working strata of the society with little culture and education (沒有文化, 素质低). Their views were rarely taken seriously and their behavior considered “unrefined.” Because of rapid urbanization and demographical changes, many taxi drivers were from the rural areas of Beijing. City-dwellers in urban Beijing would generally be better-educated, with better resources that opened up more career choices. They would find taxi-driving a physically demanding job (between twelve to sixteen hours of driving per day) with low salary (average income was around RMB 3,000 per month in 2008). Driving a taxi, however, offered a better income than farming. Male rural-dwellers were drawn to taxi-driving to supplement their farming income. To avoid

141 “Wenhua” (文化) is a word borrowed from Meiji Japanese scholars in the nineteenth century (Erbaugh 2008). The word “wenhua” is sometimes translated as “civilization,” “enlightened,” or “civil.” When “meiyou wenhua (沒有文化)” is used to describe someone, it often implies a lack of education and therefore results in a lack of culture, to be precise, a lack of knowledge of “high culture” as supposedly possessed by the educated class. In a word, “wenhua” here is linked to a “class” discourse.
traveling time and expenses, these rural taxi drivers usually rented a sleeping place, approximately RMB 200 per month, outside the city center but still closer than their rural homes. Maintaining personal hygiene would often have to give way to making a better living.

All Chinese citizens bore the weight of presenting a modern and civilized image of China; and taxi drivers, because of their presupposed frequent and direct interactions with potential visitors-in-town, were assigned the role of “cultural ambassador” in the sacred mission of displaying a positive image of China. Their behavior, personal hygiene, and the taxi conditions had become sources of concern for the Olympic organizers and officials. This was revealed by an official’s paternal comment. Yao Kuo (姚阔), vice-director of the municipal transport management bureau, said: “A person’s hairstyle and the accessories they wear are their personal business, but cab drivers must remember that their industry is a window for China’s capital, and they contribute powerfully to the city’s image.”

Dismayed by the thought that these drivers might leave potential visitors bad impressions about Beijing, China, and the Chinese, the authorities put forward guidelines for civilized behavior to instruct taxi drivers how to behave well and to look good. In the period leading up to the Olympics, Beijing taxi drivers were subjected to a series of re-educations to fine-tune their unrefined-ness so that they would transcend from driving a car to driving the city to the league of presentable global cities, and thus driving China to its great rejuvenation. Taxi drivers’ working class position and the disciplinary measures placed upon them have rendered them marginal figures. Yet this does not mean that they were oppressed or passive: To recall Foucault again, power is dispersive and it operates in numerous micro-sites in which individuals actively engage in these power-relations. What I show here is that even the marginalized could engage with the surroundings in multifaceted and sometimes tactical ways.

The makeovers that the taxi drivers had to undergo, accompanied by their presumed familiarity with the fast-changing urban landscape, had turned them into a theme of numerous media productions. These productions use Beijing taxi drivers to unfold the transformations taking place in the city in the period around the Olympics. Some examples are Beijing Taxi (2009), Taxi (2008), Mad about English (2008), and RTHK’s program on the

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Beijing Olympic Games. Curiously, there is hardly any academic research focusing on taxi drivers, except economic and management studies on the operation system of the taxi industry, and a quantitative social psychology research on the subjective well-being of Beijing taxi drivers (Nielsen, Paritski, and Smyth 2010). When taxi drivers are mentioned in academic articles, they are mentioned in passing as a decorative point without much academic value (see, for example, Ha and Caffrey 2009; Lovell 2008).

I will first present some background information of how Beijing taxi drivers have been disciplined to carry the burden of being “cultural ambassadors” of Beijing and China. This is followed by a discourse analysis on how taxi drivers experienced and narrated their everyday lives in the Beijing caught in the waves of Olympic transformation. The themes that appear most prominently in my corpus pertain to two areas: (1) accelerating urban changes, and (2) China hosting the Olympic Games. In terms of urban changes, the discourses of positive Olympics-led changes and progress were met by the dystopian discourses of deteriorating urban conditions and of a vanishing old Beijing; whereas in themes related to the Beijing Games, the discourses were of gaining international recognition and of raising suzhi. These two discourses were met by conflicting themes of demanding taxi-training and strict security control.

CAUGHT IN THE WAVES OF OLYMPIC TRANSFORMATION

The flâneur in Benjamin’s writings is widely acclaimed for being an “individual sovereign of the order of things” around him (Tester, 1994: 6). Our flâneur-driver, even though he treated the surrounding with a sense of detachment, could not stand outside the changes taking place in the very city he drove in. The taxi industry in general and the taxi drivers in particular were literally “the windows”143 to showcase China’s hospitality to the world and the country’s grand accomplishment for the last thirty years. This was explicitly spelt out in the Guidebook:

Taxis constitute an important part of a city’s public transportation. To visitors within China, Beijing taxi drivers represent the capital; to foreign visitors, they

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143 The service industry has been called “窗口行业” (literal translation: the window industry). A special guidebook on the requirements and attitudes of the service industry was entitled The Beijing Olympic Games Guidebook for People in the Service Sector (北京奥运会窗口行业员工读本) (2006).
represent China. Because of their frequent and direct contacts with foreign visitors, taxi drivers are particularly important for the service industry in Beijing. All Beijing taxi drivers should acquire professional skills to showcase a good professional image. They should exhibit driving civility and all-round services to all passengers; this is the holy task assigned by the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games to all taxi drivers.

To have China’s Olympic dream materialized was no easy task. It not only required the supervision of mega-projects like the construction of Olympic venues but also meticulous attention to details. Specific Olympic responsibilities were assigned to specific professions and specific service sites. The volunteers in chapter 4 have demonstrated the ways in which the young and educated segment of the population were trained and guided to act out their potential as the model citizens of the Chinese nation. Like the volunteers, the taxi drivers were also subjected to various disciplinary tactics so as to help showcase the best image of China; yet, the goals behind these specific tactics and strategies differed: to bring out the best potential of the volunteers but to contain the potential damage of the taxi drivers. This can be partially elucidated by the ways how these driving civility campaigns addressed small details that would often be seen as trivial, routine, and mundane; and partially made explicit by the ways of implementation involving the taxi companies, traffic polices, and juridical practices.

Many of the taxi drivers’ daily practices were considered “ills” that required drastic makeovers. The taxi drivers were asked to attend classes to learn (1) English language, (2) road directions, (3) driving etiquette, (4) operational knowledge like driving techniques, and (5) knowledge of road safety and security measures such as how to deal with a robber or a terrorist in the taxi (all mentioned in Operational Safety). These would be followed by examinations to ensure that the fine details were well-rehearsed and learned. Taxi drivers had to pass all the examinations in order to keep their job.

An ordinance, entitled Operational and Service Guidelines for Taxi Industry (出租车营运服务规范), was put forward in 2007 to regulate taxi-driving practices. It instructed

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144 They were required to drive for fifteen minutes, which would be evaluated by an examiner to see if they were fit to drive as proper taxi drivers.
taxi drivers to look tidy and neat, and to keep their car clean. It spelt out the gender expectations for male and female drivers: Male drivers should not wear sleeveless shirts, show no tattoos, and have no moustache or beard; they were required to keep their hair short but not bald; female drivers should not wear heavy make-up, mini-skirts (Guidebook: 34), or slippers while on duty (Palm Book: 217). Perhaps due to a lack of confidence in the actual implementation, the government required all taxi drivers to wear a set of unisex uniforms from August to October 2008. This uniform eliminated individual and gendered characteristics, turning the drivers into a collective being and paralleling school uniforms. This uniform served to regulate and normalize the looks and acts of taxi drivers.

The exterior of a taxi constitutes an important part of the city image, just like the yellow cabs always remind one of New York. Since 2004, older taxis in Beijing were being replaced by new taxis that were given a set of standardized colors: green, burgundy, or dark blue with yellow (see figure 5.1). Taxi drivers were asked to keep the inside of their cars clean: “six cleans, three nos (六净，三无).” The “six cleans” were: clean car body, clean interior, clean seats, clean windows, clean tires, and clean car plates. The “three nos” were: no dust, no dirt, and no foul smell (mentioned in both Guidebook: 34 and Palm Book: 208–16). Excessive decorations inside the car were prohibited. Exceptions were the stickers exhibiting the taxi drivers’ professionalism, such as the license, the certificate of annual transport test, stickers indicating that the taxi offered services in eight different languages (see figure 5.2), and stickers showing taxi drivers’ dedication to follow all driving civility requirements. Taxis were to provide comfort to passengers, thus car seats had to be well-maintained without damage, and with clean seat-covers. To ensure tidiness, all taxis had to be sterilized regularly (Guidebook: 34). All these requirements were implemented at the drivers’ own expenses.

145 The uniform was yellow in color, with a short-sleeve shirt, a tie, and a pair of dark brown trousers. Taxi drivers told me that they were given two short-sleeve shirts for summer, two long-sleeve shirts for colder days, a tie, and two pairs of dark brown trousers.
These guidelines on driving civility also aimed at changing the lifestyles of the taxi drivers. Taxi drivers were asked to keep a better personal hygiene (shower and clean their bodies regularly, brush their teeth regularly, change their clothes regularly as suggested in *Palm Book*: 218; *Taxi* 2008 [June]: 50), as well as to change the ways they speak, behave, and act. For example, they were advised not to smoke and consume garlic, ginger, spring onions, or any kind of food that would leave a strong smell before and during their duty (*Palm Book*: 218; *Taxi* 2008 [June]: 50). Spitting and littering cigarette buds, especially inside the taxi, were not allowed (*Guidebook*: 34; *Palm Book*: 214–16). Having physical contact with passengers was impermissible. Yet, it was highly recommended that taxi drivers gave an extra hand to people in need such as the elderly, the injured, the sick, the disabled, and pregnant women; and they were obliged to help passengers place their luggage in the car trunk (*Palm Book*: 184–85, 199–200; *Taxi*, 2008 [June]: 53, 2008 [September]: 73–75).

An important part of this Olympics-led education centered around learning the English language and taking the English examination. According to my observations and interviews, this was by far the most disturbing aspect and caused quite a commotion in many taxi drivers’ daily lives. To prepare for the English exams, some taxi drivers would listen to English-learning cassettes tapes or CDs while driving. For a while, they had to give up their radio-listening habits for a rather disciplined habit of “learning.” To make sure that
the message of hospitality was delivered to passengers, a welcoming sentence saying “Welcome to Beijing . . .” in English was installed in the taxi meter. Whenever drivers started the meter, this sentence would play automatically.

![Sticker inside the taxi indicating that it offered interpretation in eight different languages.](image)

Figure 5.2: Sticker inside the taxi indicating that it offered interpretation in eight different languages.

Courtesy speech was another important element in this education campaign. *Palm Book* emphasized the importance of courteous words. It urged the drivers to remember the “ten-character courteous phrases” (10字礼貌用语): Hello (您好), Thanks (谢谢), Please (请), Sorry (对不起), Byebye (再见) (221). Drivers were asked (1) to speak decently and politely; (2) not to gossip about other people, or complain about his seniors or spread rumours; (3) not to ask passengers for personal information; (4) not to cut in passengers’ conversations; (5) not to behave with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, not to boost oneself, and not to denigrate others. Many more suggestions aiming to shape taxi drivers’ behavior could be found in *Palm Book* (222–24) and in *Guidebook* (34). For safety reasons, they, like all other drivers, were not allowed to use mobile phones while driving.

These driving civility campaigns and those disciplinary tactics pertaining to the training of the Olympic volunteers mentioned in chapter 4 struck a chord with previous campaigns on civilized behavior like “personal hygiene,” “manners,” and “personal
grooming” (Brady 2003). According to Mary S. Erbaugh, the courtesy and “verbal hygiene” campaign, has been part of many ongoing “civilization and courtesy” campaigns since the 1980s (2008: 642). Other requirements also bore similarities to earlier civilized behavior campaigns. Yet, never were they so specifically spelt out in such a multi-sensory way and targeted at those whose daily practices were just driving in the city.

**READING THE OLYMPIC CITY**

To forge the links between taxi drivers and the *flâneur* is to let taxi drivers’ observations and their narration of the everydayness of urban life in Beijing take centre stage. The *flâneur* is acclaimed for his exceptional observational skill connected to the activity of strolling. The term “*flânerie*” is coined to mark the *flâneur*’s particular activity of strolling and reading the city (Tester 1994). This ability of reading the city strikes some as a “magical yet unexplained gift” (McDonough 2002: 104). In the case of taxi drivers, I argue that this extraordinary ability is an acquired ability resulting from their everyday practice of driving in the city.

Although the concept of the *flâneur* was conceived a century ago on the European continent, its applicability is not limited to time or locality. The key, I argue, lies in changes in urban conditions. The concept of the *flâneur* was developed in nineteenth-century Paris, which was, in Ferguson’s words, “the post-revolutionary Paris” (1994: 39) for the city was undergoing socio-, politico-, and economic transformation. The *flâneur* was a social figure associated with public space, exteriority, and public life (Benjamin, 1999; Gluck, 2003: 55). He was found strolling in the arcades (“the forerunners of the department stores” [Benjamin 1969: 165]) — the products of capitalism and symbol of modernity (ibid.: 165–

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146 According to Brady, these could be traced back to as early as Sun Yat-sen’s foundational speech in 1924.  
147 When I presented this case study at a conference, a participant commented that “this (the proper public behavior) is precisely what the taxis in New York are not.” This anecdote interestingly shows that much of this idea about bringing China up to par with the West says more about what China imagines how the West is than it actually is and, how this imagination of the West is mobilized as governing strategy.  
148 Other authors like Featherstone, define *flânerie* as “a method of reading texts, for reading the traces of the city.” (1998) The question on “how” the act of reading has been carried out is a topic for many scholarly works (see, for example, Tester 1994; Ferguson 1994; Mazlish 1994, etc.). Tester also points out that because of the elusiveness associated with Benjamin’s use of the *flâneur* and today’s conditions of modernity and post-modernity, “the precise meaning and significance of *flânerie* remain more than a little elusive” (1). Tester illustrates this point through Baudelaire’s idea of the *flâneur* and *flânerie*: “He [the flâneur] cannot be defined in himself as very much more than a tautology (the flâneur is the man who indulges in *flânerie*, *flânerie* is the activity of the flâneur)” (7). I apply “*flânerie*” as reading the city while in motion.  
149 The modernist architectural structure of the arcades turned them into symbols of modernity.
It was the accelerating changes and the juxtaposition of the then-new arcades and the old urban landscapes that attracted the gaze of the _flâneur_. Contemporary scholarly works applying the concept of the _flâneur_ always relate it to the changes happening in a particular city (Bairner, 2006: 124). Alan Bairner gives us a few cases in point: “post-revolutionary Paris, _fin de siècle_ Vienna; interwar Berlin; post-socialist, _fin de millénaire_ Budapest,” and his case study of post-Troubles Belfast (ibid.: 125). Taxi drivers as the _flâneur_ give us first-person accounts of how they experienced changes in fast-growing Beijing.

Another key element central to the question of contemporary significance is how speed has changed our everyday live. The popular imagination of the _flâneur_ in the nineteenth century was one that was independent of “the clock” and “time” — the _flâneur_ was said to take a turtle for walks (Tester, 1994: 15). At the time of Benjamin’s writings, the fear and anxiety of losing public space and the accelerating speed accompanied by modern life had led to the crisis; some even say the _death_ of the _flâneur_. The increase in the number of automobiles and traffic was said to have taken away the “gentleness” and “tranquility” of humanity (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1986: 102). This act of reading the city while in motion is supposedly a non-hastily and pleasurable one; speed matters in the sense that the _flâneur_ may not be able to observe because he is pacing too fast. It is said that if the _flâneur_ cannot stroll at a peaceful pace, this pleasurable act of walking and the relevant act of reading the city are taken away from him. This brings me to the question of whether driving, instead of walking, is a possible way of approaching urban life. Does driving, or being in an automobile, take away the ability to read the city? Featherstone mentions these concerns and raises the following questions:

Could not these new forms of urban locomotion [new transport systems like the train, tram, bus and car that come to dominate the urban landscape] be said to offer new ways of experiencing urban landscapes? How does looking at the world through the window of a passing train differ from perceptions of the strolling _flâneur_? What differences does speed make? Is _flânerie_ possible as one sits enclosed in a moving vehicle with varying degrees of sensory deprivation? Can cruising in a car, or being stuck in a traffic jam in Los Angeles or Sao Paulo, in any sense be regarded as a form of _flânerie_? (1998: 911)
Featherstone calls our attention to several key issues. The first one is on speed: Could we evaluate the quality of reading the city according to high and low speed? Second, how do these new forms of locomotion like automobiles shape our reading of urban landscapes? Third, does being in an automobile take away our sensory experiences? And, fourth, does locality matter? Does the act of reading city differ in one city from another (Think, for instance, of the differences between Beijing and Amsterdam)?

The question on speed prompts me to address the danger of “the hegemony of sight” (Jay 1994: 389). Implicit in the argument — speed hastens pace and lessens the ability to observe — is an overemphasis of “the power of eyes” in the concept of the strolling flâneur. The flâneur not only sees, but also observes through other senses (Tester 1994), for example, in the case of taxi drivers, through conversing with passengers, listening to the radio, smelling the city while having the windows open on a hot summer day, and so on. Also, the measures that aim to shape taxi drivers point toward the multidimensionality of urban experiences (Kang and Traganou 2011); our driver flâneur not only sees but also experiences the city in multi-sensory ways.

Moreover, given the technological advancement, our perception of speed has become somewhat different from the previous centuries. What was fast in the nineteenth century would be perceived as slow in the twenty-first century. Speed therefore needs to be understood and contextualized in our time. The automobile is a key factor in shaping our understanding of speed (mobility) and space today. The flânerie should not be limited to strolling; other modes of flânerie should also be considered.

The act of reading a city varies from city to city. The sheer scale of Beijing, along with the growing wealth of the population, has made automobiles an indispensable part of everyday life. This would be considerably different from, for example, Amsterdam, where cycling offers a better way of navigating the city. According to statistical data provided by the Beijing Traffic Management Bureau, Beijing alone had 3.13 million automobiles with

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150 Does a driving flâneur, advancing at a faster pace than a strolling one, experience less and therefore lose the ability to sense the world around him? Another hypothetical question is: Will a shorter person walk slower and therefore see more than a person with longer legs?

151 According to Featherstone, “‘auto’ in the term automobile initially referred to a self-propelled vehicle (a carriage without a horse). The autonomy was not just through the motor, but the capacity for independent motorized self-steering movement freed from the confines of a rail track.” (2004: 1)
4.55 million drivers in 2007. The accelerated increase in the number of automobiles has led to traffic jams and deteriorating air quality. Traffic congestion was one of the urgent matters that the authorities had to deal with in the run-up to the Games. Locality matters: Specific local contexts shape the ways in which one experiences the city.

Beijing: A Fast-changing City

Beijing has undergone drastic changes since the Open Door Policy in 1979 and at an accelerating speed since the successful bid for the Olympic Games in 2001. The modern Olympic Games are acknowledged as an important mega-event that accelerates urban development and place-marketing (C. Hall 2006; Hiller 2000; Owen 2002; Roche 1994; Waitt 1999; Harvey 1989a, 1989b; Kearns and Philo 1993; A. Smith 2005; C. Hall 1987; Bhada, Backman, and Ciahan 1993; Chalkley and Essex 1999; Essex and Chalkley 1998; Garcia 2004; H. Hughes 1993; R. Ong 2004; Pyo, Cook, and Howell 1988; Ren 2009).

Architecture plays a crucial symbolic role in the place-branding of a city (see, for example, Bunnell 1999; Charney 2007; Crilley 1993; Gold and Gold 2005; Yeoh 2005). It was especially salient in Olympics-related place marketing (Ren 2008). Beijing would not be the first city to dress up for the Olympics. Previous host cities that had undergone similar urban changes were, to name a few examples, Berlin, Tokyo, Montreal, Los Angeles, Barcelona, and Sydney (C. Hall 2006; Hiller 2006; Roche 1994; Chalkley and Essex 1999; Liao and Pitts 2006; Essex and Chalkley 1998).

Despite the strong link between the Olympics and urban changes, China had received severe criticism in relation to its Olympics-led urban transformation. These critiques, raised by human rights organizations, the media, and Western academics, revolved around the following issues: extravagance, wasteful use of resources, potential

153 The Beijing authority therefore proposed the policy of restricting car travel by using an odd/even license plate rule during the Games. The accompanying purpose of this odd/even number policy was to improve the air quality. This was first put forward and tested in 2007, and officially implemented from July 20 to October 20, 2008. When the date ended in an odd number, only car plates ending with an odd number were allowed to drive on that day, vice versa.
156 See, for example, Broudehoux 2007; Marvin 2008.
safety problems, forceful removals without adequate compensation, exploiting the weak and the poor, destroying local communities, human rights infringement, and the like. In these criticisms, one can observe what Rey Chow (1998a) calls “the King Kong syndrome”: The Chinese government would usually be portrayed as a despotic ruler who used “brutal development tactics” to oppress its citizens and citizens were in turn portrayed as helpless individuals who could not have a voice and needed to be rescued by the morally justified Western Other. The media workers and the Western academics often assume the responsibility of speaking for the oppressed “locals”; but, interestingly, they seem to address their concerns selectively, downplaying the relatively neutral or positive views while magnifying the negative ones. The central question on how the very people who dwelled in the city saw the urban transformation and the Olympics-led changes remains largely overlooked. This case study is born out of research interests in Olympics-led changes; however, one should be warned against over-emphasizing the role of the Olympic Games in urban changes. The Olympics might have fastened the pace of urban change, but changes did not happen only for the Olympics. A taxi driver said, “Demolishing the old relics and houses is not something happening only today, the communist party did the same before!” This echoes with Geremie R. Barmé’s analysis on Beijing’s changing landscape (2008). The taxi driver spoke of it in such a commonsensical way that it prompted many of us to question our readings of urban changes pertaining to the Olympics in general and the Beijing Games in particular.

My interviews with taxi drivers show a rather complex reading with seemingly conflicting discourses: The majority of these interviewees saw urban transformation as a sign of progress and Olympics-led development as something positive; yet, at the same time, many of them also expressed disappointment toward deteriorating urban conditions and a vanishing “old” Beijing.

Changes symbolize “progress”

“A lot of changes, Beijing today can be said to be a modernized city,” a taxi driver told me proudly. One of the most recurrent themes in relation to urban changes in Beijing in general and to the Olympics-led urban development in particular was how taxi drivers saw urban changes bring progress and development to the city. This repeated emphasis on
progress was often expressed in connection to various aspects. The most salient one was positive Olympics-led development. Other aspects included how progress was portrayed in connection to the iconic architecture built around the Beijing Games and the ever-growing number of high-rise buildings found in the city.

The Beijing taxi drivers I interviewed were particularly conscious of changes taking place in the built environment. A predominant theme in my interviews was how taxi drivers narrated the Olympic Games as a catalyst for urban development. They said, “a 10-year plan [in urban development] is achieved in 5 years’ time.” Hosting the Games was seen as a valuable opportunity to speed up urban development and to improve urban living condition: “Roads, infrastructure; the government has grabbed the opportunity to work on these areas, also public hygiene, attracting foreign investment. Property developers are willing to invest in Beijing. The symbolic value of hosting the Olympics is materialized.” Many taxi drivers highlighted that there was a remarkable improvement in terms of urban living conditions; for instance, trees were planted, air quality was better, cars discharged less exhaustive pollutant, the whole city was cleaner, and the like. Because of the odd-even number traffic policy, the traffic conditions had significantly improved. All of these were read as signs of progress that brought Beijing closer to the standard of the developed world. The amount of money spent on Olympics-related urban development was considered worthwhile and its benefits were foreseen to be long-lasting: “Many roads are built in Beijing, venues are built, [all of these] can be used for many many [sic] years to come.” In their eyes, the Olympics had made Beijing a more pleasant place to live.

A key element of making the Olympics a “great Olympics”157 was to decorate Beijing with new architecture and new Olympic venues. The most frequently mentioned architecture in my interviews were the Beijing National Stadium (Bird’s Nest), the Beijing National Aquatics Center (Water Cube), and the new China Central Television headquarters building. Taxi drivers often expressed a strong sense of pride and fondness whenever they talked about the Bird’s Nest and the Water Cube. One taxi driver said:

Conceptually speaking, the design is quite new. “Nest” is a family, Bird’s Nest, which means a family. Second, its design is quite firm, using a lot of advanced

157 “New Beijing, Great Olympics” was the slogan for the Olympic city-in-the-making; see de Kloet, Chong, and Liu (2008).
technology. The Water Cube swimming venue, inside the venue [it] is all advanced technology. [I] once had a passenger, [who was] the designer, he told me that the interior [of the Bird’s Nest] was very very [sic] advanced and very good. After the Olympics, [it] can be used for all kinds of big performances.

These Olympic venues were not only new but also technologically advanced. Like many other taxi drivers I talked to, this driver had never visited the venues but the image of these venues appealed to him as something innovative and modern. Many also projected their hope and expectation for what the Olympics could bring to China by assigning meanings to the Bird’s Nest. This driver expressed his fondness by linking the Bird’s Nest to the idea of family, which was often equated with the discourse of unity and harmony, and of course, how Chinese valued family and nature. Another taxi driver associated it with a boat-shaped sycee (大元宝) that was translated into a symbol of prosperity and wealth.

The new CCTV building, because of its ultra-modern design and central location in the central business district (CBD), was the other frequently mentioned architecture. Unlike the Bird’s Nest and the Water Cube, taxi drivers expressed a mixture of likes and dislikes. Many liked it for its “unconventional” and “refreshing” design, a taxi driver said, “[I] like [the new CCTV building] . . . it has some special characters . . . because it is the only one in the world, [it is] new, refreshing.” However, many also said that they did not like the design, saying that it resembled a toilet seat and the tilting shape looked like it would collapse (i.e. read as an inauspicious sign). That mentioned, even for those who disliked the design personally, the new CCTV building was translated as a sign of China’s progressive thoughts, openness, and adventurous attitude toward ultra-modern design:

Because this design, in the U.S. or other countries, [they] don’t dare to build [it], [but] China dares to build [it]. Because no matter from which angle you see it there is something not right, isn’t it? If you look at it from below, or if you look from here it seems a bit better, but if you look from the other angle it’s very much hanging, a bit like it is going to collapse.
This taxi driver did not like the design; however, he also articulated a sense of pride by saying that other advanced countries like the U.S. would not even make this bold attempt of building something like this. On other occasions, taxi drivers equated the national background of the architects with “advanced thoughts”: “After all, [it is designed by] foreigners, whose economy and many other things are more advanced and more developed than China, take the U.S. for example, even China is developing at an accelerating speed, the U.S. is still more powerful than China. How to put it, this conceptual design, they [the foreigners] are still far more advanced [than us].”

Apart from these iconic architecture, the other feature widely associated with progress and development in urban landscape was the symbol of high-rise buildings (高楼大厦). Xiao Jun’s words at the beginning of this chapter made an explicit link between urban changes and the appearance of high-rise buildings. High-rise buildings were used as points of reference whenever urban development was mentioned. Another taxi driver said:

I personally find the changes are particularly drastic for the past few years . . . there are a few sayings about the old Beijing, one of them said that the urban design of the old Beijing is a bit chaotic, now everything is new and fresh, from here to there we see only high-rise buildings, this is a very good signature. (indeed, so you like high-rise buildings?) I am particularly fond of this prosperous feature, this particular look.

High-rise buildings were seen as signs of prosperity that brought order and development to the urban landscapes, or what Wang calls “the new life” that encompasses “an enviable life of wealth and elegance” (2010: 28). Many taxi drivers related ideal urban living conditions to high-rise buildings: “Who doesn’t like to live in high-rise these days?” Others, when questioned whether they preferred to live in the hutongs (alleys formed by traditional courtyard houses), expressed assertively: “Of course high-rise building, Beijingers today prefer to live in high-rise.” However, apartments in high-rise buildings were usually very expensive, only affordable to the better-offs. In this light, being able to
live in high-rise buildings was seen as a symbol of personal wealth and personal achievement that was linked to the discourse of *benshi* (本事, literally translated as ability).  

This sign of progress was, however, also a sign of unequal development. An observant and opinionated taxi driver made a strong comment about unequal development in urban landscape: “It is said that the whole country should enjoy prosperity and equal development, then how come only Beijing has all these high-rise buildings?” High-rise buildings served as indicators of the level of development. The Chongwen District (崇文区) and the Xuanwu District (宣武区), with fewer high-rise buildings, have been known to be the less developed districts.

Elements related to positive urban changes are often intertwined with the less celebratory elements. High-rise buildings symbolize progress, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, they also stand for deteriorating urban living conditions, such as poor air quality and expensive living condition. A taxi driver said: “[Beijing] changes a lot, how to put it, that is to say the air quality has worsened seriously, everything else has changed for better, who doesn’t like high-rise buildings, but air pollution is just too unbearable.” In another pattern of speech, a taxi driver connected high-rise buildings, traffic congestion, and air pollution together: “Like these constructions, the higher the buildings are, the worse the pollution. If there were no high-rise, there would not be that many cars and that many people. Today there is an ever increasing amount of cars, and an ever-growing population. Pollution and traffic congestion are expected outcomes.” Discourses on urban changes are often not clear-cut — good versus bad — but mixed with conflicting discourses.

Changes mean deteriorating urban conditions and a vanishing old Beijing

Despite the repeated emphasis on progress and positive Olympics-led development, the taxi drivers also narrated less celebratory elements of urban changes. I

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158 I have heard so often how people measure success in terms of what one possesses and how wealthy one is. *Benshi* is a discourse that links one’s ability to wealth and achievement. It evaluates an individual’s ability from what he manages to achieve — the end-result. It is not how he acquires this achievement or wealth that matters but the materialized results. It is a discourse that de-emphasizes the role of structural factors and places emphasis on the individual’s capacity to achieve wealth and success. *Benshi* is a biopower that normalizes the value of achievement over structural factors. It motivates one toward success.
have categorized these elements into two areas: first, on deteriorating urban conditions (destruction, expensive housing, an increase in the number of internal migrants, traffic congestion, poor air quality, and expensive living condition); and, second, on the idea of a vanishing *old* Beijing.

Media workers and experts of China studies have written extensively, often enmeshed with severe criticism, about rapid housing demolition in Beijing, especially in the lead-up to the Olympics. Take for example, Broudehoux who writes, “This loss of homes and communities is compounded by the distress at being powerless and disenfranchised. … In recent years, several individuals have committed suicide in the city’s public spaces, often through spectacular self-immolation.” (2007: 389). Similar criticisms are also found in Acharya (2005), Lai and Lee (2006), Marvin (2008), and Donald (2010). Taking away people’s homes to make room for the Olympics deserves scrutiny; but equating demolition with total destruction and desperation seems to be another form of extreme. So far, the demolition of *hutong* caught the most attention as *hutong* have been widely associated with the fabrics of traditional Beijing. A taxi driver who lived with his father in a *hutong* told me:

> Yes, fear of demolishing the *hutong*, (why?) the compensation is very little, only RMB 600,000–800,000 [approximately EUR 59,739 to 79,692],

> housing today is very expensive, [with this amount] we would not be able to buy any apartment. (How long have you been living in a *hutong*?) I and my father live in this *hutong*, near Tiananmen, it is now part of a cultural relic protection zone, for forty years now . . . Ai! [a heavy sigh] but the living conditions in a *hutong* are very poor, only 10 something square meters big, toilets and washroom you have to share with the others, very filthy! We are poor, nothing we can do about it!

His view indicated a rather complicated feeling toward demolition: He was worried, on the one hand, about the amount of compensation that was too little to buy a new place in the market; but on the other hand, he highlighted the far-from-ideal living conditions in

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159 Calculated at the exchange rate of EUR 1 to RMB 10.038, on September 18, 2009.
160 Depending on the area, a one-bedroom apartment in the inner city like Chaoyang district, for instance, would cost RMB 1 million.
the hutong, which he described as unhygienic and filthy. The latter was hardly mentioned in the media or in any academic writing.

Most residents of demolished housing would complain about the insufficient amount of compensation. A taxi driver explained to me why the compensation would never be adequate:

If your place is demolished, they give you this amount, you could only buy a place far away from the center, you won’t be able to afford the new apartments in the center. . . . the government gives you around RMB 20,000 to 30,000 [approximately EUR 1,993 to 2,989] per square meter, and a place like this (hutong) is about 10-something square meter, you do the calculation. Also, [the government] has to pay this compensation fee for every family, that’s not a small sum. . . . but, with this RMB 400,000-something [approximately EUR 39,858], is it enough to buy a new apartment? An apartment in one of these high-rise buildings [in Chaoyang (朝阳区) district] costs at least RMB 2.3 million . . .

Demolition and property development are the direct results of economic development in a city. Because of the economic opportunities that Beijing offered, there had been an increase in the number of internal migration to the city. This internal migration had led to an increase in property price. Taxi drivers often said that there were not many real Beijingers in Beijing. They said that one might come across one or two old Beijingers wandering in the allies of Nanluoguxiang (南锣鼓巷); but most of the Beijingers had long been pushed to move to Chongwen District (崇文区) and Xuanwu District (宣武区), or even to the countryside of Beijing such as Yanjiao (燕郊). They explained that the real Beijingers were usually not well-off; they could not afford cars or apartments in downtown areas. Once, when a taxi drove by some high-rise buildings in Chaoyang district, the driver said, “Like these apartments in high-rise, 70 to 80 percent of the buyers are non-Beijingers.” On another occasion, a taxi driver pointed out that “the real Beijingers can’t afford any of these [apartments], these are all bought by businessmen coming from outside Beijing, they bought these apartments.” Sometimes, they portrayed this phenomenon with
a mixture of envy and resentment: “Houses in Beijing, put it simply, are not cheap . . . on average it costs RMB 20,000 [approximately EUR 1,993] per square meter . . . that is not difficult, if you have benshi, then you earn more; for those without benshi, you’ve got to accept [those with benshi] eat meat and you [without benshi] could only have a bit of soup.”

The income of taxi drivers depended on the presence of the better-off outsiders; they often said that most of their passengers were non-Beijingers who visited Beijing for work and for leisure. Without them, their income would be a lot less; however, when it came to urban living conditions, they grumbled about the presence of these outsiders.

An increase in population was often viewed as a contributing factor to all kinds of unpleasant urban conditions. Deteriorating traffic condition, poor air quality, and expensive living conditions were often mentioned together. Traffic congestion had been a headache to most people residing in Beijing, and it was underscored as a negative aspect of urban development. A driver once told me about the nickname of Beijing: 首堵 (shoudu), the number 1 city of congestion (it is a homophone of 首都 (shoudu), the capital). In the run-up to the Olympic Games, Beijing’s traffic conditions was a headache for the organizers, prompting them to implement the odd-even number scheme to ease traffic conditions. Taxi drivers, whose income was directly related to time and speed, often complained about the traffic jams and their moods could get foul. A taxi driver said:

Too many migrants in Beijing, Beijingers get particularly confused and [the city of] Beijing becomes very chaotic. I am not against migrants, being a Beijinger, I shouldn’t say how migrants in Beijing being this and that, I don’t mean that. Today there are too many people in Beijing, why traffic jams every day? [It is] not only because of the number of cars, the central issue is that there are simply too many people. Without so many people, how could there be so many cars?!

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161 Beijing has been a city of constant changes; hardly any resident could tell me when the traffic congestions got so bad, except taxi drivers. Many mentioned that it started around the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003. One said, “堵车感觉是从非典之后 (I have the feeling traffic jams started after SARS).” Because local people were afraid of the crowds and public transportation, many bought automobiles to avoid using public transportation. The others mentioned that it was since the new millennium.
Taxi drivers read the arrival of internal migrants as the contributing factor for deteriorating traffic conditions, as can be seen in this driver; even though he emphasized that he was not being discriminatory.

Many taxi drivers, although they dwelled and drove in the city, were originally from the countryside. Whenever they complained about the unpleasant living conditions in the city, they would mention their “home” in the countryside — why they chose driving a taxi and why they preferred the countryside more. They often said the air quality was better at “home,” the landscape was beautiful; whereas in the city, it was seen as “too overcrowded, too chaotic, too complicated.” The following is how a taxi driver compared the urban living quality to that of the countryside:

In the countryside I have land, but what do I have in the city? Isn’t it true, [in the countryside] I have land to grow things [for myself]; I can only buy in the city. [We all] need to pay property management fees and this and that, right? In the countryside [I have a house] with five rooms, at least [I] don’t need to pay anything for my place; at least it is different from the city centre, pay property management fee per every square meter. Don’t you agree?

Living in the center of Beijing was translated into a less desirable living quality: less living space and costly. A taxi driver once pointed out, “I spend less, unlike in the city, like living in this high-rise apartment, I can’t even pay the rent, not to mention living a decent life.” Paradoxically, it was the rapidly developing and costly urban environment that sustained their livelihood and made their “home” more pleasurable.

This dystopian vision of urban life was often presented with a sense of nostalgia — about an “old” Beijing disappearing. Some drivers described how uncomfortable they felt about the new Beijing:

The Beijing we see on the road every day, so many shopping malls, I see these with a sense of discomfort, if you go to the old parks, you see how people in the past thought, [you] feel particularly good, if you go to the Forbidden City, the Temple of
Heaven, to different parks, [you see] flowers and greens, [you feel] particularly good. If you walk around the shopping malls, [you] don’t feel that blissful.

Taxi drivers often made comparison between the old and the new. The old would always be represented by the cultural relics or parks and the new would always be shopping malls or places with bars and restaurants like Sanlitun (三里屯), a place sometimes described as “filthy, dirty, and polluted.” The old represented by the past and having leisure time in the park was depicted as a “good life”; this good life referred to moments of, for instance, “sitting in the park, in the pavilion, drinking beers, having some BBQ-meat, in a cool summer breeze, having a good life.” The new was portrayed as something that took away the old characters of Beijing: “The old architecture here are all gone . . . only in Nanluoguxiang there is a bit of old Beijing, the rest is gone . . . everywhere you find high-rise buildings, high-rise buildings could be built anywhere.” The new Beijing stripped the particularities of the ancient city many of them took great pride in.

This old-and-new division runs the danger of assuming a past that one can refer to. Another taxi driver said to me, “How does the old Beijing look? I really can’t recall.” His words saliently pointed out the fluidity and instability of this idea of old Beijing: Which point of history are we referring to? How do we measure the old and the new? Yesterday is today’s past. The past exists only if we call it into the present.

So far, I have shown how the discourses of positive Olympics-led development and of progress in urban changes were met by the less celebratory discourses of deteriorating urban living conditions and a vanishing old Beijing. A taxi driver said, “Each [new and old] has its own value. I still prefer the old Beijing, [things that need to be] modernized must be modernized, [Beijing] can’t remain the same.” Urban changes might not be the most desirable option but it was an inevitable step if the city was to be modernized.

**Narrating the Olympic Experiences**

An impersonal attitude is said to be a key attitude in dealing with metropolitan life and to keep one’s individuality and autonomy (Simmel 1950 [1903]). To Benjamin (1969), this impersonal attitude and yet empathic relation is a key character of the _flâneur_ so that he
has the capacity to identify or understand things and people of different positions. This impersonal attitude does not exclude him from feeling the crisis emerging around him. The taxi driver flâneur, like everyone else, has multiple identities: He is a driver by profession, he is a resident of Beijing, and he is also a national of a country. This means that he shares empathic relations with the collective memory and experience of his surroundings. In what follows, I am going to discuss the ways in which taxi drivers narrated their views on the importance of hosting the Beijing Olympic Games and the related trainings placed upon them. Like the discourses mentioned in urban changes, discourses of gaining international recognition and of raising suzhi were met by discourses of demanding training on taxi drivers and of tight security control.

Gaining international recognition, importance of raising suzhi

The majority of the taxi drivers I interviewed took great pride in China hosting the Olympic Games. They often described that having this opportunity to host the Games was not an easy thing, and it was something highly prestigious in the international arena. Many saw it as a valuable advertising opportunity for China to promote itself to the world:

These Olympic Games are China’s biggest advertising opportunity, loss or gain, [we can’t] look purely from this economic perspective, how many foreigners, foreign media will be here in China to see China with their own eyes.

The significance of the Olympics to China justified the money spent on the Games; my interviewees often described this as a “necessary” investment. Taxi drivers expressed the significance of the Games in many ways. One used the allegory of decorating one’s house to welcome the guests, “If a person gets rich, he’d like to have his house decorated nicely. Don’t you think so? After all, Beijing is the capital of China.” Another compared it to people’s consuming behavior, “like people’s consuming behavior, some spend more, some spend less, if we want to show our development, then there is this need.” A shared idea was that China had gained much political and economic power, and it should seize the
Olympic Games to showcase it, to show the world how China had grown so much in such a short period of time. Here is an example how a taxi driver narrated this pride:

Since the Asian Games in the 1990s, in only a decade or more China can already host the Olympic Games, this development is a lot faster than India. India has hosted the Asian Games a long time ago, but even today they still don’t have this ability. . . . I think give the Chinese economy ten more years to develop, [China] not only can outshine Germany, but also Japan.

This said, it does not mean that the potential economic gains of the Games were insignificant. Rather, the economic gains were enmeshed in the national significance of hosting the Games. Taxi drivers would easily narrate some potential economic gains of the Games: speeding up economic development, raising living standard, as well as improving urban infrastructure and transportation.

The recurrent emphasis on the importance of showcasing China gave me the opportunity to ask them to elaborate more. One frequent response, usually said in a matter-of-fact way, was that China used to be so weak and backward. They would often refer to the phrase “the sick man of Asia” when they described China’s past humiliation. This discourse of national humiliation did not lose its discursive significance as China grew stronger. Quite the contrary, this phantom of the past had become highly integrated into people’s everyday lives. Hosting the Games was narrated as pride, a pride derived from international approval:

Quote 1: Hosting the Olympic Games symbolizes the relatively fast development of a country, I think if it were ten or twenty years back, China would never have been able to host the Games, isn’t it? Even it bid for ten times it would not be possible to get the bid, today if the international community recognizes you [China], appreciates China, China has gained much strength, with this strength [China] can host a good Olympic Games, that is the reason why the International Olympic Committee assigned China to host the Games, the International Olympic Committee is an international organization, isn’t it?
Quote 2: We Chinese value this Olympics significantly. (Yes, why? Why that important?) The Olympics is an important turning point. If the Games are held successfully in China, that means China has ascended, a powerful country, also economically speaking. (Why relying on the Olympics Games?) That is a matter of a nation’s power, isn’t it? If it’s held successfully, that means this country, not only in terms of economy, but also in terms of political power, is comparable to countries like the U.S. and those in Europe. Foreign countries will no longer look down upon you. You saw the events [contestations during the Torch Relay] right before the Olympics in Europe, France, Britain? Won’t you get really mad seeing that? Did you watch television?

China’s recent development would only be seen as achievement if it was recognized by the other countries. China’s first Olympics on its soil had to be impeccable. When this expectation was severely challenged by the worldwide media contestations in the months right before the Games, most people viewed it with much anxiety and concern.

I remember that taxi drivers were particularly cautious about whom they talked to and what they talked about. One driver recalled his encounter with a British passenger whom he later found out to be a journalist. This passenger hired him for a day and asked him to drive around the city to find Chinese people who broke traffic rules or laws. The driver said that there were so many things happening in Beijing and in China, but that British journalist and other Western media only wanted to report negative things. Others expressed similar views: “The Western media have so many negative reports [about China]; moreover, many Western countries do not like to see China become a developed country, from the bottom of their hearts, they don’t want to see China become a strong nation.” Many taxi drivers argued that the West and some developed countries were jealous of China’s ascending political and economic power; and to “tame” China, they had to find China’s wrongdoings. One could probably recognize this cautiousness recommended by the official “driving civility” guidelines (Palm Book: 223; Guide Book: 34). This behavioral guideline became a learned daily practice as China engaged fiercely in a media battle with the West.
Sharing the importance of the Olympics for China and sensing the country in crisis, some drivers expressed the importance of raising the quality of the population (tigao renmin suzhi 提高人民素质) so as to present a good image of China. The word suzhi appeared habitually in my conversations with taxi drivers. *Suzhi* is generally understood as (human) quality (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2007) and is often used together with *renmin*. *Renmin suzhi* is the population’s quality. Despite its common usage in people’s daily lives, the word *suzhi* by itself does not say much, as Kipnis (2001) writes, “the term ‘quality’ [*suzhi*] is vague enough to allow considerable divergence of interpretation” (10). Most of the taxi drivers would often hesitate and then they would describe *suzhi* as civilized behavior and good manners.

Both Anagnost (2004) and Kipnis (2007) propose that the term should be understood as a discourse. To Kipnis, *suzhi* discourse “refers to the myriad ways in which this notion of human quality is used in processes of governing contemporary China” (384). Anagnost (2004) traces the genealogical usage of the term. She mentions that *suzhi* gained much discursive power after the economic reforms and in the 1980s; but it was in the early 1990s that *suzhi* gained an ascending political discursive power. By then, according to Anagnost, “population quality had become a key term in the party-state’s policy statements and directives to cadres, even as it began to circulate more broadly as a general explanation for everything that held the Chinese nation back from achieving its rightful place in the world” (2004: 190).

Many drivers believed that the quality of Chinese people — in terms of politeness, manners, cultural knowledge, and behavior — was not up to par with the West: “Why foreigners look down upon us, China, is because of our low *suzhi* (素质低), because of this. You don’t have high *suzhi* (高素质). Then host an Olympics helps raise most Beijingers’ *suzhi*. Many were therefore convinced that the Games offered a good opportunity to raise the *suzhi* of Chinese people. This discourse on raising people’s quality was seen as something particularly important for the Chinese who worked in the service sector — the “window” industry, a taxi driver said:

Demanding [requirement], [it] has its advantages. (Why?) Because hosting the Olympics, a person’s *suzhi* has to be better . . . *suzhi* must be raised, taxi-driving belongs to the “window” industry, *suzhi* must be raised, force you [to do so].
(Raising [suzhi] for foreign visitors during the Olympics? Or, overall for China?) I think both. For China it shows a good image of China, for foreigners taxi-driving is a window industry, let foreigners see, right?

Many interviewees believed that taxi-training was a good way to raise their industry’s overall suzhi. Some even mentioned it in a “matter-of-fact” way: “It’s Olympics — how can one not learn?” This training aiming to raise suzhi was not new; but it gained much urgency as the Games approached: “[Training] has been there for some time, [it] wasn’t taken that serious. Now hosting the Games I feel that it’s taken quite seriously.”

The same applied to the English-learning requirement of Beijing taxi drivers. Drivers had to learn some basic English if they wished to become taxi drivers. However, it became much more serious and special materials were tailor-made for the Olympic Games, with a specific target audience in mind. The contents included therefore a series of topics ranging from welcoming dialogues to examples of the best Chinese cuisine. Taxi drivers often saw English-learning as an important element of raising suzhi: “In general, people’s suzhi has improved. Take us [taxi drivers] for example, many of us are learning English for the Olympics”.

Training too demanding, security too tight

The majority of taxi drivers would agree that raising suzhi was important for China to accomplish an impeccable Olympic Games; but when it came to practicalities and implementation, the campaigns to raise their suzhi could be dauntingly difficult, rigid, and demanding for the taxi drivers. A taxi driver said, “I think it does not need to take it so seriously, take public transportation for instance, it’s only a matter of traffic management, you ask people to queue, some have low suzhi, they won’t queue, the bus arrives, they push through the crowd. What could you do, you can’t scold at them, if you do, there would be fights.” The regular emphasis on gaining international recognition and raising suzhi were articulated in parallel with the discourse of demanding training and the discourse of tight security.
There was a mixed feeling toward the taxi-training. Some found certain aspects easier to manage than the others. For instance, many saw it as relatively easy to meet the regulations of keeping the taxis clean and tidy, and of wearing a uniform. Others complained about the other demanding requirements placed on them:

They use examinations to make sure that we learn, we are familiar with [road] directions, that’s ok, for taxi drivers it’s not so much a problem to find the good directions, the main issue is your personal appearance, service attitude and the like. *(Do you find these demanding? You also need to learn English?)* Demanding, very demanding . . . how to say it. We need to listen to everything the passengers say. We can’t say much. Being in the service industry is like this, isn’t it? *But* being too impolite is not acceptable. Impossible demands we are definitely not going to accept. In normal circumstances we normally accept, impossible demands then we won’t agree.

To be familiar with road direction was their job nature but the other requirements like the way of carrying themselves and their service attitude could be challenging. The Beijing Traffic Management Bureau had six to seven checking teams to go around the city to check if taxi drivers met the official requirements. Taxi companies, especially the established ones,\(^{162}\) took the regulations very strictly. In order to have the regulations implemented, punishment and fines were enforced, and some found these too harsh: “If drivers were caught being untidy, breaking traffic regulations, having passengers complaints, illegal parking, etc. . . . apart from paying fine, sometimes, taxi drivers would have to spend three days in the taxi company and learn how to ‘correct’ their inappropriate behaviors.” Appeals would not be possible, there was no union for taxi drivers, and even if there were, a driver said, “Labor union, no use, labor union is also part of the communist party.” A taxi driver exclaimed that taxi drivers were the powerless people in the society, their voices would never be heard and no-one cared about their existence. In complaining about his powerless position, this taxi driver was articulating his discontent and resisted the

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\(^{162}\) These were, for example, 首汽 (Shouqi), 北汽 (Beiqi), 金建 (Jinjian), 银建 (Yinjian).
civility campaigns, which asked them to “speak decently” and “not to gossip about other people, or complain about his seniors or spread rumors.”

The requirement of learning English was a recurrent theme mentioned by the taxi drivers. They responded to this requirement in diverse ways: Some took it lightly with humor — “We memorized [the answers] for the exam... I am not afraid [to speak English], I am only afraid that he will not understand [laughs], I am not afraid.” Many expressed how difficult and demanding it was:

Especially difficult. To us we don’t have time to read, then we really spend extra effort, we play cassette tapes [while driving], listen and learn, quite difficult. . . . how to put it, this time we study for a month. . . . every lesson lasts for 45 mins., 50 mins., two lessons per day. . . . we learned English before, but not much. This time the requirement is broader, that means more troublesome. I still don’t dare [to speak English], because most foreigners in China today speak Mandarin, also they have an address card, let us read, that is ok enough. Foreigners are often quite humorous.

Learning a foreign language took time. This was particularly challenging and demanding for taxi drivers. To them, time meant income. This was also the reason why they disliked traffic jams so much. The majority of them worked more than ten hours per day, some sixteen hours. Without the opportunities to practice, learning English was “especially difficult.” Quite a few mentioned that it was almost an impossible task for someone of their age and of their working class background:

I studied but [learning] this English thing is a bit... [hesitation], not that you have some culture then you can speak English, isn’t it? Not possible for those who have only primary education, suddenly you ask them to learn English, [when one reaches] fifty he can’t really learn. That is why, those like us who don’t have much education, we who work in this industry are lower-class people, lower-class people, means that our education level is particularly low.
Many stated that, even if they passed the English examination, they still could not use the language to chat with passengers: “What we learn [in the Olympic English materials] is not enough, it’s hardly possible to communicate.” With all the effort spent on learning English and sitting for the examination, many said that they could only say things like “thank you,” “ok,” “bye-bye,” or “welcome to China.”

A driver told me that the stringent examinations in the early period of implementation had a very high failure rate: 50 percent failed. Those who failed could not work till they passed the English exam. It became a headache for the taxi companies and the municipal transport management bureau. After a while, the taxi companies and the authority responsible for the English examination made sure that those who sat for the examination for the second time would pass. But how? The driver’s reply was “Put it this way, [we] managed.” He implied that taxi drivers, along with taxi companies and the teachers, cheated in the examination. This revealed one of the taxi drivers’ tactical ways of circumventing the disciplinary power placed upon their bodies and actions.

The Games’ assigned significance to China, coupled with the media contestations since early 2008, had made the BOCOG and the government engage in “the risk discourse” (Yu, Klauser, and Chan 2009) that emphasized the importance of a safe Olympics (平安奥运). To ensure that the Games would be smoothly held without any unexpected complication, the government put forward a number of policies; for example, restricting incoming visitors from other parts of China and tightening the visa application procedure. Some taxi drivers had initially expected better income during the Games. However, the tight security control had dashed their hope: “[More] business? Couldn’t tell. You said that there would be more people, but in fact not many. Most people from outside Beijing are not allowed to enter Beijing, many exchanges and trading have to stop, people are gone.” Most taxi drivers would complain about this, but in the end, they would also say, “but there is no other better way.” Some taxi drivers were quite happy that the Games were successfully held and life in Beijing could return to its original state: “[During the Olympics] the city was indeed a bit empty, but now it gets better. Because it was also the time when students had holidays, many business people from other parts of China were

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163 Migrant workers without residence permit in Beijing were also sent back to their hometown. Only those who had permits and who were hired to maintain the cleanliness of the city could stay.
not allowed to come, they were gone, now they are all back in town. No control anymore, all came back, the city gets more lively again. You see now most passengers are students, because schools start again, more lively, and a big part of our business these days is from students.”

Taxi drivers, like the flâneur, were situated within a particular context: place — the Olympic city, and time — the eventful Olympic year. In times of perceived national importance and national crisis, they would also articulate the importance they saw in the event, the tension they experienced in the process, and the urgency they felt of improving “suzhi.” One prevailing discourse in the West insists that ordinary Chinese people are the passive audience of the government’s propaganda machine and that they are either controlled or brainwashed by the authoritarian party-state. As my analysis has shown, it is more intricate than this top-down approach suggests.

DRIVING IN THE CITY: NEGOTIATING THE PRACTICES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Popular media and academics, despite their interests in examining urban changes in Chinese cities, often overlook the subtle and procedural aspects of fast-changing cities and the views from the very people who dwell in these cities. The various state-initiated measures that aimed at shaping taxi drivers’ way of being show that the drivers embodied a significant component of a city: The taxi drivers were not only driving in the city but were also helping to drive Beijing to the league of global cities. Seeing the Beijing taxi drivers as Benjamin’s flâneur is to subvert their marginality and to attach importance to their observations, experiences, and narrations of the everyday lives in the capital. By giving center stage to taxi drivers’ oral narration is not to claim that they were telling the truth and therefore offering “authentic” opinions. In fact, the flâneur persona is not famous for his “truth”-telling skills; rather, he is known for his “fictional type,” in Buck-Morss’ words, “(s)he is a type who writes fiction” (1986: 111). What the taxi drivers said could be what Yurchak posits as “performative utterances” (2006: 19), which are not about true or false but statements that suit the appropriate circumstances. What lies central in taxi drivers’ oral narrations are: Firstly, one should be warned against simplistic readings of urban changes; and second, how the marginalized urbanites could engage with the surrounding in multifaceted and tactical ways.
Taxi drivers’ readings of the Olympics-related urban transformation reveal a less clear-cut and a rather complex picture. The discourses of positive Olympics-led development and of progress in urban changes go in tandem with the dystopian discourses about deteriorating urban living conditions and a vanishing old Beijing. The Olympics might have fastened the pace of urban change, but changes did not happen only for the Olympics. After nearly three years, I visited Beijing again in the spring of 2011, the taxi drivers I talked to often referred to the 2008 Beijing Olympics as a distant memory. One of their responses is worth quoting here: “Olympics? Olympics was a thing of the past! How many years it has been? Beijing has undergone enormous changes. We don’t talk about the Olympics anymore; Beijing is changing everyday and there are other things that concern us.” Complaints about fast changes in Beijing lingered on in everyday lives, one taxi driver said: “Isn’t Beijing the heart of China? With the explosion of incoming migrants and the increasing number of cars, this heart will soon or later have a fatal heart attack.”

Urban changes are the norms rather than the exceptions. Beijing, like most of the cities in Asia, is constantly changing and evolving; and these changes are much more complicated than simplistic readings that see them as exploitative power imposed on the people. During my visits in some of the hutongs near the Qianmen area in Beijing in 2011, some of the very people who resided there (I will give a detailed discussion of Qianmen in chapter 6) expressed their hope that they wished the government would go on with the demolition plan and that they could receive compensation so as to move out and live in a better environment. Having gone into detail in quoting these rather neutral stories does not mean that I turn a blind eye on the destructive aspects led by urban change; rather, to reiterate, once again, urban changes are complicated processes and one should avoid reading them as simple logics, seeing the people as the powerless mass versus the powerful state or capitalists. The reality is much messier than what one could imagine.

This leads to my discussion about the positions of the taxi drivers — marginalized but not necessarily passive or oppressed. Taxi drivers as subjects interacted with the governing strategies, tactics, and the surrounding discourses in multifaceted ways, and these interactions were more dynamic than “the state versus the people (taxi drivers).” The process was intertwined and intersected with various factors such as nationalistic sentiments, international politics, identity politics that involved regional, ethnic and gender identities, and so on. When China was severely criticized by the outside world, this worked
to strengthen the discourse that China hosting a great Olympics was essential for the country to acquire international recognition and that all Chinese needed to work together toward this goal. A sense of urgency was induced; taxi drivers saw the importance of improving the population’s *suzhi* to present a better image of China to the world. What we witness here is how external circumstances added strength to the discourse of *suzhi*. This speaks also for the dynamics of discursive formation: The strength of a discourse does not derive from a single origin or a single entity, but one that involves a field of, often opposite, themes and actors (Foucault 1989 [1969]). The emphasis on the importance of the Olympics to China and the importance of raising *suzhi* went jointly with other discourses as taxi drivers also grumbled about the demanding taxi-training and tight security control.

As Alexei Yurchak writes on late socialism, “discourse and forms of knowledge that circulated in everyday Soviet life not as divided into spheres or codes that are fixed and bounded, but as processes that are never completely known in advance and that are actively produced and reinterpreted” (2006: 18). Referring again to the articulation of *suzhi*’s importance to China, the questions involved should not be whether the drivers actually believed in the practices revolving around the discourse. Instead they articulated what seemed felicitous to say at that point. This performative way of dealing with their everyday lives could also be applied to the ways they complied to the official requirements. For instance, they performed the acts of wearing uniforms as it was required and seemed appropriate for China’s Olympic image; yet they need not believe in the very idea of uniform, as many of them would roll the pants up to the knees when it was hot and it could not be easily seen by traffic controls or passengers. They performed the good image for China yet not without subversion. The drivers did not have to believe in the disciplinary and governmental tactics but what we witnessed were the dynamic ways of negotiating their everyday lives, and the various governing strategies and tactics that aimed to transform them. Everyday life involves a lot of dynamics and is never predetermined. It is constantly and “actively produced and reinterpreted,” as Yurchak suggests (ibid.: 18).