Infrastructural Fragility, Infra-Politics and *Jianghu*

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This commentary responds to Tim Oakes' analysis of infrastructural power by examining the inherent fragility of mobility infrastructures and their political ramifications. It emphasizes the human element in creating and maintaining these infrastructures, highlighting the intricate interplay of political will, bureaucratic planning, technological know-how, and specialized skills needed for their implementation. The paper contends that the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly demonstrated the vulnerability of mobility infrastructures to rapid collapse. It further explores the concept of infra-politics, referring to subtle acts of resistance within these networks, which significantly disrupt their efficient operation. The Chinese concept of *jianghu*, representing a metaphorical space of alterity, is introduced to propose that infra-politics might evolve into alternative relational forms, challenging and potentially subverting the dominance of centralized networks.

Keywords: China; Human Impact; Infra-Politics; Infrastructural Fragility; Jianghu Alterities

INTRODUCTION

My short response to Tim Oakes' excellent discussion of infrastructural power as excessive of state power and able to generate its own (unpredictable) realities brings people and their ability to shape social and political realities back into the equation. I do this partly because a focus on infrastructures, their power, and techno-social relations they give rise to sometimes risks conjuring a 'brave new world' of all-powerful object-subjects. I find such a world not only dystopian, but also politically disabling. Its 'truth' would render the sharpest tools of anthropology, social analysis, and ideological critique meaningless. My response is thus to highlight the intrinsic, but often forgotten fragility of mobility infrastructures. These infrastructures are fragile not just because networks of roads, pipelines, and railways decay, need maintenance, lose in function, or remain unfinished (e.g., Carse & Kneas, 2019). They are intrinsically fragile because their 'agentive power' depends on the orchestration of very complex forms of human cooperation in infrastructural projects stretching vast distances in time and

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space. Such cooperation can never be realized by power alone, but also depends on an – equally fragile – political or ideological consensus. Furthermore, mobilities and infrastructural labour do not only realize infrastructures, but they also provide ample opportunities for an *infra-political* resistance to domination (Scott, 1990). Infra-politics, according to James Scott's definition, consists of acts of micro-subversion that remain hidden from open view, but that may come to prepare the ground for highly visible, organized and open forms of resistance when infrastructural 'friction' (Tsing, 2005) renders ordinary lives impossible to live. Finally, infra-politics create their own shadowy commons of disgruntled workers, political refugees, disaffected bureaucrats, vagrants, and drop-out artists of all sorts. I shall call these *jianghu*, using the classic Chinese term for water-like alterities emerging in the cracks and on the fringes of terrain.

MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURES ARE PRODUCTS OF ORCHESTRATED HUMAN LABOR

Infrastructure studies, not surprisingly, often highlight the centrality of infrastructures to the making of globalized worlds, whether as material things, socio-technical assemblages, or just as promised futures. However, mobility infrastructures – networks of roads, trains, canals, and pipelines, or similar – themselves depend on highly complex and thus inherently fragile orchestrations of political vision, scientific knowledge, bureaucratic administration, technological skills, and dispersed labor. At the same time, to paraphrase David Graeber (2013), pursuing and realizing value(s) is what "brings universes into being" (p. 219). The infrastructural revolution sustaining China's 'rise', and its recent extension into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), presents a good example for these dynamics. Initiated by Deng Xiaoping's era of 'Reform and Opening Up' (*gaige kaifang*), it created – according to plan – new connectivities first in the coastal provinces of South and East China, where it produced rapid economic growth and new mobilities, to eventually transform China into a highly mobile, urban society with an expanding middle class. Yet even this 'revolution' began in the countryside, where reform politics first re-mobilized the rural family-household (*jia*) as the country's basic economic unit. In the new environment, a family's ability to transform labor into value(s) depended on its ability to 'jump into the sea' (*xia hai*) of market relations, and soon on the mobility of a younger generation selling their labor on urban construction sites or to new factories. Importantly, it was not only long-repressed desires for mobility and prosperity that propelled peasant households to jump into the sea of an emergent capitalist economy 'with Chinese characteristics'. It was also the efficacy of the (post-)Maoist 'politics machine' with its capacity to mobilize, orchestrate and direct *infrastructural labor* in the name of a new 'national good' that crucially supported Reform China's infrastructural revolution.

The new 'Reform and Opening up' redefined the national good as a triad of economic development, political stability, and citizen 'quality' (*suzhi*). It transferred authoritarian power, under Mao based on direct face-to-face power of cadres over an immobile society divided into different units of collective production, gradually onto new infrastructures of mobility, political control, production, and financialization. This allowed China to grow into a 'society of strangers' since the 1990s. Yet this shift, in the early years of post-Maoism studies often called a 'retreat of the state',

also generated increasing, and increasingly medialized, public protests over rampant corruption, illegal land expropriations and arrests, public anxieties over a proliferation of fraud, greed, and immorality, while enforced resettlements and new forms of exploitation shattered personal hopes of prosperity and fulfilment. In 2010, a highly medialized string of suicides by young workers at Foxconn factories – a leading manufacturer of high-end electronics such as Apple's iPhones, with several mega-factories in China – made urban audiences aware worldwide of the violence that globalized infrastructures exert on Chinese working class lives.

Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 concluded three decades of 'Reform and Opening Up' that defined the post-Maoist era. His bid for new national strength and global power became clear early with his proclamation of the BRI as China's 'win-win' alternative to US-led international development. This promoted Chinese infrastructural expertise, products, money, and manpower as central to the realization of mobility networks between China, Eurasia, and the global South, and within these regions, on a massive scale. In addition, domestic investments into 'smart' infrastructures of mobility increased both the efficacy of grand planning and the possibility of near-totalitarian control in a hypermobile society. 'The Chinese Dream', Xi's comprehensive political vision for national renewal, harmonic development, and advanced civilization (a vision promoted for regional adoption in the global South alongside the BRI), calls on local governments, companies, and citizens to engage in infrastructural labor in support of these national goals. Whereas Mao's revolutionary grip on society depended on mobilizing Chinese citizens to engage in socialist labor and class struggle, also by way of enforcing near total immobility through the *hukou* (household registration system), the new infrastructures have turned the political terrain into a space of planned circulation that generates labor, economic value, and – with the help of modern surveillance techniques – mobility data for political mining.

INFRASTRUCTURAL COLLAPSE AND INFRA-POLITICS

In *Oriental Despotism* (1957), Karl Wittfogel famously argued that in ancient 'oriental' societies, large-scale irrigation often resulted in centralized, autocratic forms of domination. He specifically linked China's complex irrigation systems for rice cultivation to its history of centralized imperial rule, highlighting environmental and technological impacts on societal development. Wittfogel's theory received much scholarly criticism – for being a product of Cold War anticommunism or Western Orientalism, for being historically inaccurate, and, as I remember from the early years of 'Reform and Opening Up', also for being proved wrong by history. Xi Jinping's new absolutism, China's massive investments in the domestic, its regional and transregional infrastructures of connectivity and hypermobility, its political clout and influence in Asia, and its rise as a global 'authoritarian alternative' has re-kindled interest in Wittfogel's theory. For different reasons, academics interested in water infrastructures and hydro-socialities, and those working on infrastructures as techno-social systems, have also found reason to engage with Wittfogel's work (Ley & Krause, 2019).

But in 2023, China's infrastructural investedness, and the political imaginary of unlimited potential and total control that it projects, also appears as a political liability. The COVID-19 pandemic, now traced back to a crowded wet market in Wuhan,

saw Chinese hypermobility go from boom to bust in only a couple of months. The scandal produced by initial efforts to sanction whistle-blowers, repress information and harass citizens circulating investigative videos on social media, the draconic lockdowns, testing schemes and 'immobility regimes' enforced on China's more than 1.5 billion citizens, the grounded airplanes, closed factories, interrupted commodity chains, closed borders, and, finally, the popular and generally peaceful 'white paper' protests[1] that, like water breaking through a dam, forced Xi to abruptly abandon his strategy for total virus control all suggest how little it might take for mobility infrastructures to collapse. And there is more. Droves of well-educated young people, for example, facing the prospect of obtaining meaningless jobs with extreme workloads, already before the pandemic chose to opt out by way of *tangping* (literally "lying flat"), a new term that implies a conscious exit of the 'rat race'[2] in order to lead a life and follow one's own interests. During the pandemic, the trend of lying flat then morphed into a wave of *runxue*, running away from China for good. *Tangping* and *runxue* are just two of recent internet buzz words that popularized infra-political tactics among the young generation – the tip of an iceberg of less prominent infra-politics that do not go viral but nevertheless constantly create disruptions in the smooth connectivity of infrastructural mobility networks. Infra-political tactics, in addition, might coalesce into forms of relationality that follow different rhythms, create differently shaped social and political spaces, and project a communal perspective against a central perspective. In Imperial China, Neo-Confucian elites often chided all kinds of folk practices, but especially those pertaining to ritual or religious life, as subversive of the proper order. This was because rural 'folks' twisted elite rituals to serve their own needs, and instead of investing in self-cultivation and textual study, folk rituals sought to harness a deity's or natural formation's magical power (*ling*) for local ends. Local infrastructures, which linked village communities into larger temples, irrigation systems, or marketing networks, and that served regional transport, trade, and kinship mobilities, met and merged with the infrastructures of the imperial state and its bureaucracy at the lowest administrative seat, but never fully transformed into them. Sometimes, of course, local roads also crossed into uncharted territory, as a result of people seeking prosperity, security or simple survival by settling on or beyond China's imperial frontier, while coastal people sought riches by engaging in private maritime trade across the South China Sea. Many of these activities were deemed illegal or even criminal at the time. In contemporary China, where mobility infrastructures are products of centralized planning – fugitive, escapist, and self-directed – infrastructural work has by definition an infra-political or *jianghu* dimension.

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1 The White Paper Protests, or A4 Revolution, started in China in November 2022 against the zero-COVID policy. Protesters used blank white paper as a symbol against government censorship, expressing their grievances and demanding political reform and free speech.

2 In Chinese, *neijuan* ('involution') is a popular new term for extreme competition and overwork, particularly in use among the younger generation. It embodies the pressures of a hyper-competitive environment, especially the relentless pursuit of success, with efforts not always yielding significant rewards or progress (see Wang & Wang, 2021).

JIANGHU RELATIONALITIES

> Akiko looked up Jianghu on her phone while riding the train home that night. Originally Jianghu referred to traveling folk who used the waterways beyond China's major cities. They were a society beyond society, made up of artisans, bandits, magicians, and martial artists. She quite liked the word and found that a search for Jianghu online revealed Chinese martial arts TV shows where women can fly, and gritty arthouse films about accidentally falling into the criminal underworld. She learned a new Chinese saying, "cast into the Jianghu, one must make compromises," and read an article by a professor about how the Jianghu proves that some words cannot be translated. She started collecting images of the Jianghu on her phone, and posted a few of her favorites to her friends on WeChat, jokingly asking "Is this Jianghu? Is this Jianghu?". (Coates, 2020)

Jianghu, which literally translates as "rivers and lakes", is, as the quote above demonstrates, not a thing, an activity, or a kind of person. With a lineage of over 2,000 years (the Daoist philosopher-poet Zhuangzi is supposedly the original source), it rather encapsulates a particular relationality to the world that escapes order, structure, or representation. *Jianghu* is best understood as any historical order's alterity, a reason why it can signify a particular attitude and agency, and also all kinds of rebellious and mysterious underworlds – of fugitives, rebels, vagrants, prostitutes, fortune-tellers, criminals and even *wuxia* fighters. *Jianghu* is lived and practiced ambivalence, always escaping political or legal efforts of categorization, regulation, and control. The nearest academic equivalent I found is Harney's and Moten's (2013) term "undercommons", developed in their book of the same name. Undercommons refer to a metaphorical space where marginalized individuals and communities engage in forms of social, political, and intellectual resistance. Here, 'fugitive planning' allows alternative forms of knowledge, social relations, and solidarity to be developed outside the purview of mainstream structures (or indeed, infrastructures). As Tim Oakes points out, infrastructural power is captured by the state, but it also always exceeds state power. I suggest that *jianghu* relationalities and infra-politics may proliferate in this excess. To paraphrase Alexei Yurchak's (2013) ironic book title on the collapse of the USSR, infrastructural power may seem forever, until it is no more.

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