Under Construction
Visions of Chinese Infrastructure

We shall sing the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, or rebellion: we shall sing the multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis; shall sing the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons; bloated railroad stations that devour smoking serpents; factories hanging from the sky by the twisting threads of spiraling smoke; bridges like gigantic gymnasts who span rivers, flashing at the sun with the gleam of a knife; adventurous steamships that scent the horizon, locomotives with their swollen chest, pawing the tracks like massive steel horses bridled with pipes, and the oscillating flight of airplanes, whose propeller flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,
The Manifesto of Futurism
(1909, translated by R.W. Flint)

Although the smoking serpents of erstwhile have been replaced by the sinuous lines of aseptic high-speed trains, and steamships have long disappeared from the horizon, these words penned by an Italian poet at the beginning of the twentieth century are a surprisingly apt description of the infrastructural frenzy that has overcome China in recent history. Rushing to catch up after the political turmoil of the twentieth century, over the past four decades the Chinese authorities have been remoulding the urban and rural landscapes in the service of economic growth. Starting from the township and village enterprises and special economic zones of the 1980s, factories have sprung up everywhere in China, boosting a new industrial revolution that has carried the country’s economic miracle well into this century. This was before the Party-state decided that it was time to launch a new green tidal wave of revolution in the now-postmodern metropolis, in an attempt to sever the pillars of spiralling smoke that used to link these plants to the sky (but in so doing, also forcing an entire working class to set their eyes to the ground). New highways and high-speed railways now crisscross the country, enabling the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, and (little) rebellion to travel with an ease and a speed never experienced before. Bridges of unprecedented length span rivers and seas, bringing together places and people that do not always desire to be connected. If there is a place where the futurist utopia of the early twentieth century has come to fruition, it is China.

It is to this infrastructural fever that we dedicate this issue of the Made in China Journal. In the special section, guest edited by Tim Oakes and Alessandro Rippa, Jonathan Bach focuses on the special economic zones that have played such an important role in China’s development trajectory, asking whether they reflect the morphology of the socialist city. On a similar note, Tong Lam looks into the so-called special zones or areas that were designated for war preparation and economic/technological development in the socialist and post-socialist eras respectively, pondering the promises of the future that they once represented and the implications of the trail of ruins and foreclosed possibilities that they left behind. Hallam Stevens considers ‘digital infrastructure’, illuminating ways in which physical and digital infrastructures in China are tightly interwoven, and highlighting the importance of examining the relationships between digital infrastructure, human bodies, and labour. Dorothy Tang reflects on the conceptual history of landscape, mired as it is between the dualities of poetics and utility, paying particular attention to the ‘Sponge City’ practice as an innovative technology in
contemporary Chinese landscape architecture. Amy Zhang examines recent investment in municipal waste infrastructure and argues that, absent citizen participation, recycling programmes and waste collection are nevertheless achieved by workers who mobilise their labour, constituting a mundane, low-tech infrastructure to recuperate and circulate waste. Alessandro Rippa recounts how in Tengchong—at the China-Myanmar border—as large parts of the old town are destroyed to make space for new buildings, groups of people dig through the rubble looking for precious jade, a phenomenon that illuminates the ‘desire’ that lies at the core of China’s infrastructural development. Finally, Andrew Grant takes the example of Xining city to examine the ways in which contemporary urban infrastructure uneasily coexists with traditional Chinese and Tibetan cosmic infrastructures.

The issue includes op-eds on the legacy of the 1919 May Fourth Movement in today’s China by Fabio Lanza; the implication of the recent abolition of presidential term limits for Xi Jinping’s succession by Ling Li; the importance of a politics of solidarity to break the recent impasse in Hong Kong by Jake Werner; and the latest changes in the Chinese civil society landscape by Holly Snape. In the China Columns section, David Brophy examines the discourse developed by the Chinese authorities to justify the repressive policies towards the Turkic-speaking Muslims of Xinjiang, highlighting how Beijing taps into a global discourse of counterradicalisation that has developed in the context of the US-led War on Terror. Li Xiaotian analyses the potential and limitations the 996.ICU movement to produce solidarity among the workers in the Chinese tech sector. Finally, Jasmine Wang looks into the attitudes of the rich in China towards the poor, using the case of the recent evictions of migrant workers in Beijing as a focal point.

The Window on Asia section offers one essay by Erik Mobrand about the progressive turn in South Korean politics, an historical shift for a state that has long given priority to business interests. The cultural section includes two articles. In the first, Zandie Brockett and Alessandro Rolandi outline the principles and practices of the Social Sensibility Research & Development Department at Bernard Controls, which aims to use process-based art-making and research to reimagine how art can serve as a vehicle for the social imagination in the setting of a Chinese factory. In the second, Zeng Jinyan converses with movie director Ying Liang about how his life in exile has shaped his latest work.

We wrap up the issue with two conversations, one between Loretta Lou and David Graeber about Bullshit Jobs, David’s latest book about the proliferation of useless (if not outright harmful) jobs in this late stage of capitalism, and the other between Ivan Franceschini and Antonella Ceccagno, about City Making and Global Labour Regimes, the result of Antonella’s in-depth ethnographic study of the Chinese community in Prato, Italy.

The Editors