

## **The Underground Spectacle and Interior Design** **—— An Analysis of Designs and Discourses Around Beijing Subway**

### **Abstract**

The urban subway system and the high-speed railway have become two spectacles of transportation in China. The Chinese government aims to use it as a name card for China on the international stage. Since 2008, apart from the function of daily commutes, interior decoration, and public artworks have caught the attention of the media and the public. This paper takes Beijing Subway as an example and examines the meanings and influences of its interior public artworks. Besides aesthetic values, public artworks carry symbolic meanings that go beyond the field of art. Instead of depoliticization, the public artworks of Beijing Subway have been re-politicized, serving the goal of the city and the nation. Acting as a display of cultural symbols, these artworks contribute to the accumulation of symbolic capital for China internationally.

**Keywords:** Transit culture, Public art, Beijing Subway, Urban spectacle, Symbolic power

### **Introduction**

The construction of the Beijing Subway started in 1965. After decades of continuous efforts, the Beijing Subway includes 24 active lines and 427 stations with a length of 761.79 kilometers in 2023, covering most of the urban and suburban areas of Beijing (MetroDB 2023). The project is still expanding and expects to complete 11 new branches/lines and 88 stations by 2027 (Sun, July 9, 2022). Compared with metro cities globally, the Beijing Subway system has been listed as one of the largest metro transportation systems around the world. According to Union Internationale des Transports Publics (UITP), in 2021, the Beijing subway was ranked the second longest metro network around the world with 653 kilometers, next to Shanghai with 41 kilometers. Beijing and Shanghai were the only two cities that had metros exceeding 550 kilometers. Seoul took third place with 527 kilometers. London had the longest metro network outside Asia-Pacific, ranking number six with a length of 440 kilometers (UITP 2021). In 2022,

the *Official Plan of Phase III Beijing Rail Transport Construction* (北京市轨道交通第三期建设规划 (2022-2027)) was published which showed no intent to decelerate the speed of construction (Sun, July 9, 2022). According to MetroDB data, Beijing currently has 15 branches under construction while Shanghai has 5. Although the 2023 average daily passenger flow of Shanghai Metro exceeds Beijing, Beijing surpasses Shanghai in terms of maximum passenger flow with 13.8 million rides per day (MetroDB 2023). Therefore, Beijing Subway has been the top-level mega project of urban transportation on both national and global scales. Like skyscrapers and other urban spectacles, Beijing Subway's extraordinary volume and indispensable role in daily commutes make it influential in many aspects of urban life, such as urban landscape, urban livability, and city image. In this case, Beijing Subway always bears more significance than its essence of transporting people in the city.

In the official propaganda, Beijing Subway, together with the high-speed railway, has been marked as representative of China's economic development and improvement of living standards. Beijing Subway appeared in a news report for the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party of the Communist Party of China (中国共产党第十二次全国代表大会). It states that the development of Beijing's rail transit "is one of the best footnotes for interpreting the great changes in China's new era over the past decade" (Zuo 2022). In the key document called *Transportation Development and Construction Plan for Beijing during the 14th Five Year Plan Period* 北京市“十四五”时期交通发展建设规划 raises and prioritizes the concept of *integrating city and station* (站城融合) (Sun, May 9, 2022). The goal for Beijing Subway will not only focus on lifting the speed but also aim at improving the "urban life on the rail 轨道上的都市生活" (Sun, May 9, 2022). Art becomes a significant part of developing the atmosphere of the Beijing Subway and thus the livability of Beijing.

The interior decoration of the Beijing Subway has caught the constructors' attention from an early period. Constructors and arts of Beijing Subway started to combine public space and

art in the last century. In the 1980s, six murals were set up in the stations of line 2 of the Beijing Subway, pioneering the setting of public art in metros in China. After that, the development of interior decoration decelerated. Then, because of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the number of decorated stations rapidly increased. In 2012, under the lead of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Municipal Committee and the Beijing Municipal Government the project of *The Public Art Planning for Beijing Subway* 北京地铁线网公共艺术品规划 was released. All major units associated with the subway construction were involved. The National Academy of Fine Arts and the Chinese Mural Society completed it under the guidance of the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission and the Beijing Subway Corporation (Beijing Municipal Planning Commission 2014). In 2015, *The Conceptual Planning of Public Artworks for the Beijing Subway Network (2015-2021)* (2015-2021 轨道交通全网公共艺术品概念规划设计) was formulated. It expects to set public artworks in 66 of the 107 new stations, which makes subway stations with public art installations account for 61.7% of the total number (Li and Liu, 2022). The journalist Jingping Hu comments that culture is the soul of the city and public artworks are the name card of the city. By emphasizing the integration of art elements into urban construction, Beijing Subway, some stations of the Beijing Subway have achieved the goal of turning the subway stations into cultural stations (Hu, February 21, 2022).

In this paper, I will focus on the interior decoration and public art of the Beijing Subway. I will discuss how the Beijing Subway public art connects with government agencies and how public artworks embody and present Beijing's urban culture in this special space by analyzing first-hand subway artworks and media discourses in news reports and editorials. The space of the subway station is unique because it is an underground public space for subway passengers. Artworks in this space could be eye-catching because they might be the only pleasure to the eyes in this closed, empty, and regular space. However, they could also be invisible because this space is underground and has fast streams of people and high traffic flow. It is not the perfect

space for art appreciation or art consumption. Therefore, the emphasis on public art in this particular space becomes worth discussing. Different from the way of building urban metro lines in other countries, the construction of the Beijing Subway is managed by the state-owned company under the direction of the CPC Beijing municipal committee and municipal government. Rather than profit for the company, the running of Beijing Subway could help the government fulfill its goals, such as building the image of the city and the nation.

Furthermore, I will understand the artworks in Beijing Subway from the background of globalization and global city. Beijing is not only the capital of China but also a megacity around the world. According to Ong, hyper-building is about the world aspirations of the state. It refers to the infrastructural enrichment of the urban landscape to generate speculations on the city's future and identifies a mega-state project that transforms a city into a global hyperspace (Ong 2011, 224). Artworks in the space of hyper-building have aesthetic meanings that may symbolize other aspects of meaning. Beijing Subway is a mega-project. But it's also hidden under the ground. In this paper, I will further explore the function of the display of transit art and its relationship with image building, city branding, and international competition.

### **Turning Beijing Subway into a Mega-Project**

Beijing, as the capital of the People's Republic of China, has an undeniable political significance that affects many aspects of urban life, including the building and running of the Beijing Subway. Unlike most of the urban metro lines, the construction of the Beijing Subway is originally for military use to ensure local and national safety. The central and Beijing municipal CPC committee and the municipal government were deeply involved in proposing and implementing the construction of the underground railway. After the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1950s, China and the CPC began planning to build urban underground railways in Beijing, Shenyang, and Shanghai. According to a book named *Responsibility and Mission: the Development History of Beijing Subway* written by the Beijing Subway Operation Corporation, this notion was first proposed by the Beijing municipal CPC

committee in 1953. In October 1956, the Beijing Subway Preparation Office was officially established. In January 1965, the *Special Report on the Recent Planning Plan for the Construction of Beijing Subway* 关于北京地下铁道建设近期规划方案的专题报告 indicated the construction policy which was "focusing on adapting to military needs while also taking into account urban transportation" (Beijing Subway Operation Corporation 2011, 121). The first subway line was put into use in 1969, but the Beijing Subway didn't open to the public until 1981. Similar to the subway, the predecessor of Beijing Subway Operation Corporation is the Railway Corps Beijing Subway Operation Management Office 铁道兵北京地下铁道运营管理处, whose function is to give priority to combat readiness and also give consideration to traffic.

After several decades of development, the Beijing Subway considers more social and economic needs. The transformation of function happened around the Reform and Opening up, when the CPC committee decided to shift the focus on the operation and production. In 1981, the separation of government and enterprises was implemented. Thus, the Beijing Public Transport Bureau became the Beijing Public Transport Corporation, and the Beijing Subway Operation Management Office became the Beijing Subway Operation Corporation. From the 1980s, the direct operation and management agency of Beijing Subway has become a state-owned company that is directly subordinate to Beijing.

However, it is still strongly impacted by national and local strategies. Like other state-owned companies, the Beijing Subway Operation Corporation has set up a CPC branch committee in the corporation which is supposed to learn the instructions from the central party, organize the grass-root party-building activities, and direct and supervise the operation of the company. Xie Zhengguang, the Secretary of the Beijing Subway CPC Committee and Chairman of Beijing Subway described the relationship between the company, the Beijing municipal government, and the CPC in a report. The report is published on the official website

of the *State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality*. It's titled *Adhere to the Party's Leadership and Strengthen Party Building, Leading the Capital Subway to Achieve High-Quality Development*. In the report, Xie emphasized that the company would unwaveringly adhere to the leadership of the Party, consciously maintaining a high degree of consistency with the Party Central Committee in terms of ideology, politics, and actions (Xie 2018). Also, he mentioned a slogan that Xi Jinping proposed in 2014 during his inspection tour in Beijing, ensuring the continuous political ties between the Party, the municipal government, and the Beijing Subway: "Thinking Beijing, one must first do it from a political perspective" (Xie 2018). In the highly politicized environment, the boundaries between the Party Committee, the municipal government, and the state-owned enterprise have become blurred. In terms of Beijing Subway's goal and mission, the three speak in a unified will.

Another example is the comparison between the Beijing Subway and the Shanghai Metro. Both of these companies, like underground railway companies in other Chinese cities, are state-owned enterprises. However, the Beijing Subway shows a stronger politicizing tendency. Both of them posted their statements of social benefit on the official website which state their missions and goals besides making profit for the company. The statement of Shanghai Metro included eight categories: legality, profitability, service quality, environmental protection, technological creativity, safe production, workers' rights, and public charity (Shanghai Metro 2020). The statement of Beijing Subway also contains serving the development of the Capital Beijing, safe management, quality, creativity, low carbon, environmental protection, legality, workers' welfare, and public charity (Beijing Subway 2022). Shanghai Metro put legality and profitability in the first and second place, signifying the importance of the responsibilities of a company. On the contrary, Beijing Subway emphasized serving the city's development and safety control, implying a subordinate position to the city of Beijing. Moreover, Beijing Subway and Shanghai Metro showed different understandings of public charity in their

statements. Shanghai focused on cultural publications, such as decorating cultural trains, holding picture exhibitions, and designing local cultural murals in stations (Shanghai Metro 2020). However, Beijing Subway aimed at promoting rural revitalization of peripheral rural areas and offering industrial assistance to nearby Inner Mongolia Province according to the requirements of the Municipal State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (Beijing Subway 2022). As for cultural contribution, Beijing Subway shortly mentioned in the first category (serving the development of the Capital Beijing) to help establish the city image for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, and the second category (safe management) to improve livability through multi-media methods. Compared to other state-owned subway company, Beijing Subway still pays more attention to national strategies and Beijing's policies instead of the corporation's own operations. Although Beijing MTR Corporation does emphasize profitability like a standard company, Beijing Subway Operation Corporation still operates an overwhelming number of lines of Beijing Subway.

This synchronization with national policies has promoted the construction of the Beijing Subway. Its huge shift from urban underground railway lines to the mega subway system took place in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. After the successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in 2001, the Games quickly became one of the core strategies for China. The Chinese central government viewed it as an opportunity to make other countries see the "real China" and improve the Chinese international image (Zheng 2007; Liu and Wang 2008; People's Daily 2008). The Beijing Subway system can not only help solve the traffic jams but also help Beijing quickly become outstanding in the world. The Beijing Subway Operation Corporation held an oath-taking rally before the beginning of the Beijing Olympics in May 2008, which suggests its echoes to the national strategy. The rally was attended by leaders from municipal government agencies, including the Municipal State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, Municipal Federation of Trade Unions, Capital Civilization Office, and Municipal Transportation Bureau, where staff from the Beijing Subway Operation

Corporation swore to "serve the Olympics, safeguard the Olympics, and devote to the Olympic" (Beijing Subway Operation Corporation 2011, 532). Based on the bid slogan *New Beijing, Great Olympics*, Beijing accelerated the construction of the subway network. In the 32 years before 2001, Beijing had only built 54 kilometers of subway lines 1, 2, and Fuba. In the seven years preparing for the Olympics, the 13th, Batong, 5th, 10th Phase I, Olympic branch line, and airport line were opened, with an operating mileage of 200 kilometers, which marked the formation of networked operation of Beijing Subway (Beijing Subway Operation Corporation 2011, 563). Nowadays, it continues to grow and become the second-longest metro network in the world (UITP 2021). In terms of size and volume, the Beijing Subway has unquestionably become a meta-project.

Moreover, with the development of railway lines, many public artworks were designed and set up in these stations. The inner decoration of multiple stations along Line 5 highlights regional cultural characteristics, and the Olympic branch lines present a combination of Chinese culture and Olympic culture. In 2012, *The Public Art Planning for Beijing Subway* edited by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Resources regulated the public artworks in subway stations (Li and Liu 2022). Each line should be designed under a distinctive theme. From 2007 to 2015, hundreds of public artworks were set up in more than 60 stations, including murals, sculptures, paper-cutting, installation art, and integrated art (Li and Liu 2022), which formed the basic landscape of the interior decoration of Beijing Subway. Besides government planning and transportation agencies, Beijing Urban Sculpture Construction Management Office was also involved in the designing and building process (Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Resources 2012). As a part of Beijing Subway, the design of the interior artworks of Beijing Subway is also highly influenced by policies and the will of the city. This characteristic of the interior design of Beijing Subway rapidly integrated with the need of building local and national image and improving urban livability. With a function of cultural display, the interior artworks of Beijing Subway try to



present images of Beijing and China to its audiences.

### **Endowing cultural values to Beijing Subway**

The reason for setting up transit artworks on a large scale could be various. Artworks were initially expected to provide a delightful distraction from the routine drudgery of commuting for subway passengers (Ström 1994; Yang and Cho 2019; Land Transport Authority 2021). The proper interior design decorates the empty tunnel and highlights the specific location. From the perspective of management, public artworks are designed to improve comfortableness and attract ridership (Hess 2008). Also, the aesthetic value and the symbolic meaning of artworks can be used to mark significant places and connect the underground space to the "real" city above (Ström 1994: 10). As a result, transit art is also expected to deepen the city's brand image (Enright 2016), develop "transit culture" (Jaffe 2014), and enhance the regional identity (VanderSchaaf and Kayzar 2021). Philips also pointed out that artworks in the space of transportation usually avoid controversial parts to minimize the risk of facing scrutiny (Philips 1998). This is also the reason that these projects get financial support from governments. To meet the goals of urban planners, public artworks are designed and placed with purpose and get castrated for some radical parts of being an independent artwork. Enright summarized four common reasons for transit authorities to support art in subway stations: image enhancement, creative placemaking, urban regeneration, and cultural sustainability (Enright 2023).

The close connection between public art in transit and city development brings attention to the discussion of urban justice. With the development of transit art, scholars realized that public art has gradually become "an 'expedient' pretext for 'sociopolitical amelioration and economic growth'", especially in contemporary transport (Harrison 1981; Yúdice 2003; Enright 2016). Enright suggests that with the popularity of the instrumental value of art, its critical potential has been diminished. Therefore, artworks have increasingly become depoliticized and been used to "stylize policy-making and investment and to defuse and mask conflicts over urban and infrastructural development" (Enright 2023, 68). Enright examined the planning of *Grand*

*Paris* and argued that artistic decorations in the space of the public transit system blur the boundaries, leverage cultural capital, and contribute to further social polarization (Enright 2016). Enright viewed contemporary public transit as "an important modality of urban power and site of struggle and contention" where transit art plays "the crucial mediating role". In this special field, on one hand, public artworks can illuminate political dynamics; on the other hand, they can hide these expressions of power and relegate them to extra-political realms. (Enright 2023, 68-70).

As the capital of an authoritarian country, Beijing requires Beijing Subway to first meet the need of the city and its development. The internal decoration of the Beijing Subway becomes a strong and distinctive display of the city and the nation. Public artworks in subway stations won't be "depoliticized" but re-politicized if they aren't created for political purposes. The process of re-politicized isn't an inside-out process that is driven by the instrumental value of artwork itself, like the process of depoliticizing and hollowing public art. Instead, it's defined by the official documents and media publicity which provide the framework before starting the design, as has been discussed in the last section. With its special location and the Olympics as one of the biggest driving forces for development, Beijing Subway has been expected to be the display window for Beijing and China (People's Daily 2008; China News 2008; Zhu 2021). In 2023, most articles about Beijing Subway murals in Chinese media emphasize the cultural contents they carry. Therefore, image building and display become one of the major goals for public artworks in Beijing Subway. Apart from this, multiple pursuits interweave in these artworks.

Beijing Subway and its partnership operating companies post and update the images of interior design on their official websites. Currently, lines 1, Batong, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, Changping, Yizhuang, Fangshan, the Airport branch line, and the S1 line are operated by Beijing Subway Operation Corporation (Beijing Subway 2023). Lines 4, 14, 16, 17, and Daxing are operated by Beijing MTR Corporation, the joint-venture company for branch operation,

with Beijing agencies holding the most stocks (BJMTR 2023). Although the focus of operation for Beijing Subway Operation Corporation and Beijing MTR Corporation could be slightly different, the internal public artworks in these subway lines haven't shown distinctive differences in themes and contents. Affected by the date of construction and the location, the interior designs in different stations are unique. But the themes of internal subway artworks could be divided into five categories: 1) Beijing local culture, 2) Major policy, 3) General Chinese culture, 4) Sense of technology, and 5) Urban leisure culture. Usually, a station has one artwork, and some may have two or four pieces. The density of public artworks in each station is low, which means that a single artwork should try to satisfy all the aims of the designer.

The artworks with cultural themes account for the largest proportion of the total number. Public artworks in Beijing Subway still focus on the publicity of mainstream culture. Surprisingly, although the influence of government planning in the construction process is significant, public artworks with straightforward policy themes are not that common. The Olympic Games and the Belt and Road Initiative are two major themes of this category. Line 8, which passes major Olympic venues and stadiums, is originally built for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. However, apart from the Olympic Park station and Olympic Sports Center station which have clear Olympic cultural symbols (Figure 1), the other artworks are all themed on Chinese culture. Similarly, the jin'anqiao station of line 6 has a wall and ceiling decoration called *Focusing on Winter Olympic Games* (Figure 2), while most stations in line 6 have decorations of landscape (Figure 3) or character group portrait (Figure 4) in the Chinese style. In addition to these three categories, there are scattered station artworks representing the technological "young" Beijing and modern urban life. The theme of technology often sets in stations located in the suburban technology industrial zone in correspondence with the offices and industrial plants above (Figure 5). Also, the design of the Beijing Subway leaves room for the instrumental function of public art. Stations such as Qingnian Lu (Figure 6) and Ciqu (Figure 7), set up public artworks to help busy passengers relax their minds and gain energy.



Figure 1 The interior decoration of the Olympic Sports Center station has Olympic elements (Beijing Urban Sculpture Construction Management Office, [2008?]).

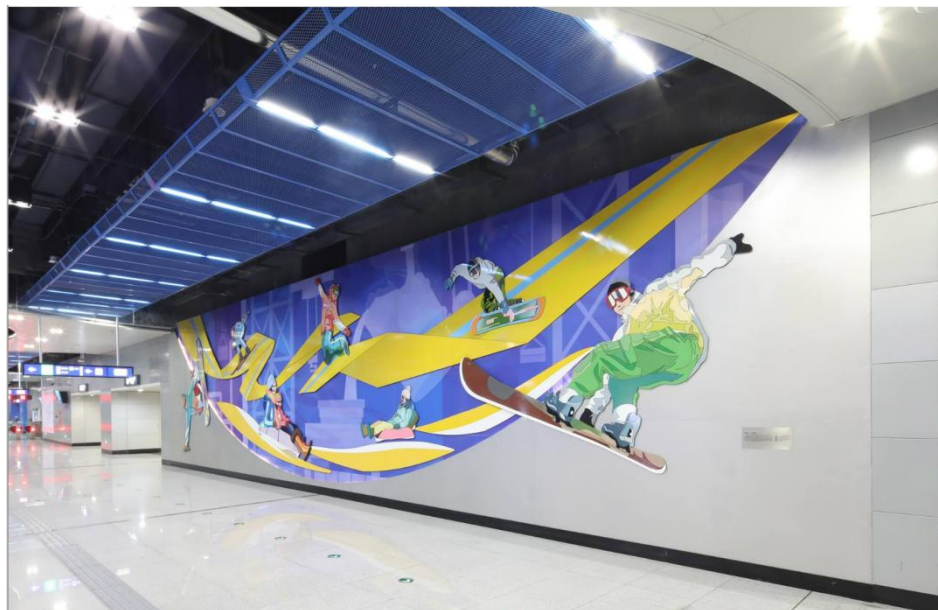


Figure 2 The sports decorations of jin'anqiao station signify the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games (Guo et al, [2020?]).



Figure 3 The wall painting named *Spring Breeze* in Dongxia Yuan station of line 6 uses traditional kite patterns in Chinese New Year Picture (Wang, n.d.).



Figure 4 Dongsi station builds a set of murals named "Dongsi Memories". Murals and character reliefs in Dongsi station depict busy life and local business culture in downtown Beijing in the period before the People's Republic of China (Li, n.d.).



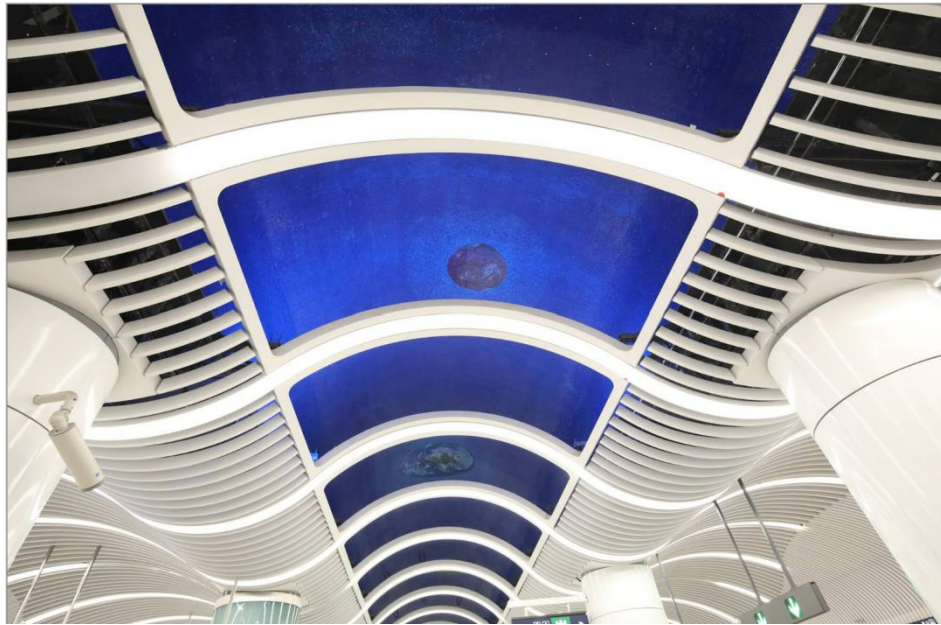


Figure 5 Huojianwanyuan station of line 8 is located near the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, the birthplace of China's space industry. The dome of the station hall displays the eight planets in mosaic art, representing the exploration of the unknown world (Tang, n.d.).



Figure 6 The mural is called *Pulse of Spring*. It uses green color to smooth the anxiety of urban people and symbolize youthful vigor (Chi, n.d.).



Figure 7 The artwork takes the tree of life as the carrier, expressing that people use "smart chips" to integrate and preserve the memory fragments of life through data. The artistic shape of the tree implies the inheritance and innovation of scientific and technological culture and the newly emerging meaning of life (BJMTR, 2022).

Philips argues that public artworks in transit space are incomplete because designers purposefully minimize the risk (Philips 1998). On the examination of Beijing Subway public art, incompleteness refers not only to the loss of the critical part of art but also to the formalistic characteristics of artworks. In the interior design of the Beijing Subway, cultural patterns and pictures are carefully picked and created to symbolize Beijing's local culture and Chinese culture. With the process of displaying culture, the public art in Beijing Subway also define and strengthens the representatives of Beijing's local culture and Chinese culture. These artworks label these art elements as Beijing or China. For example, the bird-shaped kite pattern in Figure 3 is a kind of traditional kite pattern which is one of the themes of the art of New Year Picture. The mural puts the bird-shaped kite pattern processed from the New Year Picture in the plain background of the sky, emphasizing the Chineseness with the help of the unique style of New Year paintings. The group portrait painting in Figure 4, together with other stations located in the inner city, such as Qian Men and Tian Qiao (Figure 8), enhances the local business culture in

*Old Beijing* 老北京 as the image of traditional Beijing.



Figure 8 The mural shows various hawkers doing small business in Hutongs, which represents the civilian culture in *Old Beijing*. In addition, the mural also uses the styling of the New Year Picture to increase the sense of folk culture (Niu, n.d.).

Using similar methods, many artworks borrow other types of traditional Chinese art, select certain cultural elements, and transplant them with their original style into murals or sculptures. Then, these cultural elements leave their original contexts and become symbolized as the representative of Beijing's local culture or Chinese culture. Folk art such as the New Year Picture, paper-cutting, and clay figurines are also used in murals to represent local culture. Also, in the station of Beitucheng, patterns and colors of blue and white porcelain are used to decorate columns and walls. Moreover, the color, style, and patterns of calligraphy and ink painting are frequently presented in public murals to represent Chinese culture. Traditional ink painting and the patterns of traditional royal palaces are always used to depict grand historical scenes or giant landscapes to express the national spirit (Figure 9). With these cultural symbols, Beijing Subway is not only a landmark itself but also a combination of multiple cultural symbols representing Beijing and China.





Figure 9 The mural is called *Gallopng Horses*. It uses a traditional red and green color technique, with yellow as the main color and gold as the background to contrast. It also uses the structure of ink painting and the masterpiece of horse ink painting as a reference. The sturdy horses, rushing forward in the vast prairie, represent a vibrant national spirit (Zhu, n.d.).

### Global Beijing, Symbolic Power, and City Branding

In Chenggongzhuang West station, a set of murals named *Meeting the World* implies the hope of building a global city (Figure 10). The murals are framed by a map of the world, which is the work of Matteo Ricci more than 400 years ago, and the half-covered Romanesque window arches. The metal relief of earth situated at the center of the mural suggests the ambition to participate in world affairs. The mural named *Towards the World* in Dongsi Shitiao station of line 2, as one of the earliest subway murals built, shares similar wishes.



Figure 10 The murals *Meeting the World* in Chenggongzhuang West station (Tang, n.d.).

Beijing Subway, located in the capital and one of the megacities of China, has been

designed to enter the global stage. The numerous reports about building a national image before and during the 2008 Olympic Games prove the point (Zheng 2007; Liu and Wang 2008; People's Daily 2008). Ha and Caffrey's paper also reveals the top-down image-building project and its influence on Beijing residents for the 2008 Olympics (Ha and Caffrey, 2009). The audience for these transit artworks is considered to be not only local passengers but also visitors from all over the world. Therefore, Beijing Subway becomes the window of China to the world. In this context, the symbolized murals about Beijing and Chinese culture become effective advertisements and name cards.

Bourdieu's symbol capital theory explains how the public art of Beijing Subway participates in the image-building process in international contexts. Bourdieu proposes three major objective capital which operates as a social relationship in the exchange system of society: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Symbolic capital is a manifestation of these three capital. However, it is also relatively independent and ranks alongside the other three as the fourth type of capital. Although Bourdieu mostly discusses them on a micro level, it can be used to discuss city branding and global competition viewing a city or nation as an individual. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital can be understood as a scarce resource that is socially recognized, capable of producing, reproducing, and accumulating honor, reputation, spirit, particularity, or sacredness symbolically (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1989). This type of capital is not physical, but intangible and symbolic, which can enhance the influence of legitimacy, credibility, and credibility. In his view, symbolic capital cannot be separated from a complete set of recognition and social evaluation systems. It is accumulated through the recognition of privileges and reputation in its production and reproduction process for a long time.

Bourdieu acknowledges symbolic capital, suggesting that symbol signifies power and has a strong influence on the power system. Guy Debord discussed the symbol in the context of consumer society. He argues that when capital accumulates to a specific level, it becomes an

image (Debord 1992). In the era of media, under the profound influence of media and consumption, social reality and images are separated. Images themselves form a system and replace the real world. The fake world that purely contains images is an illusion constructed from perceptual visibility. The urban spectacle that is composed of symbols and images creates this kind of illusion. These exaggerated symbols and images stimulate consumer desires, building a society where symbols surpass objects, replicas surpass the original, appearances surpass facts, and phenomena surpass essence. In other words, the urban spectacle is the image that, if accumulated to a certain extent, can also become capital.

Saunders believes that urban spectacles are the commodification of architecture or design (Saunders 2005). Their purpose is to lure consumers, which is captivating, flashy, stimulating, and satisfying for a quick experience. Eisenman points out that the imagination, consumption, and popularity of architecture are the three characteristics of urban spectacles (Hartoonian 2012, 57). Tamari uses the Tokyo Olympics as an example to reveal the interaction between star architects, urban spectacles, and making global brands (Tamari 2005). These theories are usually used to discuss economic and social topics in capitalist countries. However, with globalization and the widespread economic logic, these terms and theories can explain the mechanism and effects of public artworks on the Beijing Subway.

Different from the urban spectacles above, Beijing Subway is the urban spectacle that doesn't make stimulating consumption and gaining profits the primary task. In an environment where politics is overwhelming, the purpose of urban spectacle shifts to serve the political aims. Koch studied the construction of the new spectacular capital of Kazakhstan and argued that urban spectacle is an important element of political systems all around the world (Koch 2018, 147). The urban spectacle is always political. In the authoritarian country of Asia, urban spectacle relies on the metaphor of synecdoche. The synecdoche of the capital city of the country representing the entire country turns the city and urban spectacle into a geopolitical claim (Koch 2018, 28-33). The authorities build spatial imaginaries, tropes, and metaphors

upon urban spectacle and make them representative of politics. Koch called them the embedded technology of power (Koch 2018, 151). In the case of the Beijing Subway, the politicized environment is manifested in the process of designing and building the Beijing Subway. The Beijing municipal government, its agencies, and the state-owned enterprises are the main responsible parties for planning and implementing Beijing Subway's construction. Therefore, the Beijing Subway, as an important urban transportation system, has been able to deeply participate in and serve the significant events that occur in the city and the country, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the rise of suburban innovation parks, the construction for the Belt and Road Initiative, and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, and take advantage of these moments to develop itself. Instead of attracting customers and making profits, the priority of Beijing Subway has always been to relieve urban traffic problems and demonstrate the strength of the city and the nation. Media reports and discourses deepen the representativeness of Beijing Subway and its connection with politics. In the era of media, media is still a favorable tool for symbol dissemination. It not only symbolizes Beijing Subway as the name card of Beijing and China but also spreads the symbolic cultural elements in public artworks to a broader audience. Public artworks in Beijing Subway have also symbolized the representative of the culture of Beijing and China. They strengthen the images and symbols of culture, help establish them as a scarce source worldwide, and help build the national image on the international stage. During this process, symbolized public artworks help accumulate the symbolic capital for Beijing and China on the international stage. Viewing the nation as a brand, the increase in symbolic capital will eventually lead to the rise of power and voice in international affairs. Both Beijing Subway and its public artworks are simplified and deducted as two-dimensional images and symbols and participate in the process of image building and brand building for Beijing and China. That's how the public artworks in Beijing Subway participate in city branding and global competition and contribute to China's international image and reputation. Rather than being a decoration for a building or an artistic installation,

the public art in Beijing Subway has become an instrument and medium for political propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

The public art of the Beijing Subway is highly politicized because the urban meta-project is highly politicized. The Beijing Municipal Party Committee, the Beijing municipal government, and its agencies are involved in the whole process of the construction of the Beijing Subway. Therefore, the driving force, design, construction, and supervision of the Beijing Subway are all strongly connected with and influenced by policies. The construction of public art in the Beijing Subway follows guidance drafted by government agencies. Therefore, public art becomes a mild pleasure and a simple cultural symbol. The artworks in Beijing Subway stations can be divided into five categories. But they are all designed for the same purpose which is building the cultural image of Beijing and China. From these artworks, Beijing intends to build an image of a city with a long and powerful civilization, unique local culture, vigorous youth, and modern technology.

The paper also discussed the way of building images in public artworks of the Beijing Subway. The artworks are highly symbolized. The contents of artworks are simplified to several symbols, and the artworks don't have a distinctive and special style themselves. Instead, they select, borrow, and symbolize art elements from traditional forms of Chinese art. By doing this, the interior decoration highlights the cultural symbols and thus makes them representative of the culture of Beijing and China. In the international context, these cultural symbols enhance the image of Chinese culture, help accumulate symbolic capital, and thus may increase the power internationally.

In terms of further research, this paper focuses on the artworks themselves, core policies, and media reports, but it doesn't closely discuss this question at a micro level. With a maximum passenger flow of 13.8 million rides per day (MetroDB 2023), it's doubtful that passengers pay attention to these artworks in subway stations. Are they ghost artworks that are only set up for

policies? Is there any distance between the potential audience and the real audience? Based on my observation in Beijing Subway, most people pay more attention to their phones than the decorations. However, it needs more concrete evidence to deepen the assumption.

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