



# **Mobility in China: A Chinese View of 50 Years of Acceleration**

## **Finished research**

In 50 years, daily commutes, travel and migration in China have multiplied, lengthened and accelerated at a spectacular speed. A Franco-Chinese team of researchers and artists decided to explore how city dwellers feel about these changes using images as a catalyst for memories, emotions, associations of ideas and reflections. It would appear that this increase in mobility is closely associated with the imaginary of modernity and generates ambivalent feelings, ranging from enthusiasm for change to nostalgia and anxiety.

## **Research participants**

Jérémie Descamps  
Thomas Sauvin  
Zhang Chun  
Zhou Le  
Wang Gongxin  
Marie Terrieux  
Vincent Kaufmann  
Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin  
Emmanuel Ravalet  
Dominique Desjeux

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## **I. The research question**

Mobility in China has been revolutionized in the past 50 years. Major public investments in transportation infrastructure, the country's economic boom, urbanization and the relaxing of state control over daily commuting, migration and travel have led to a dramatic rise in the latter, changing people's relationship to time, place and one another. In other

words, Chinese lifestyles have been turned upside down..

Urbanist-sinologist Jérémie Descamps, director of Sinapolis, a research and study office on Chinese cities, felt this mobility revolution had played a key role in how city dwellers are embracing modernity.

A research project was launched with a triple objective:

To understand the impact of the mobility revolution on Chinese city dwellers' lifestyles and how these changes are experienced.

To gather the Chinese's perspectives on the current situation and their aspirations for the future.

To understand the links that unite the changes in mobilities and the imaginary of modernity in China.

## II. An atypical investigation

First phase

Jérémie Descamps created a multidisciplinary research team to address these questions. Together, they developed an original, multi-phase method.

Geographer Zhang Chun began by retracing changes in inter- and intra-urban travel in China from the 1950s to the present.



MODIÈTE  
EN CHINE

The team then compiled an album of 82 iconic photographs that were emblematic of these changes from the iconographic collection of Thomas Sauvin, who viewed more than a million images of China. Discover the content of this evocative album [here](#). Sociologist Zhou Le used this album as a starting point for sociological interviews during the field survey. She went to five of China's largest cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Shenzhen and Chongqing - which also happen to be key transport hubs and serve as an example for other Chinese cities. Each city has specificities, which you can discover [here](#) :





Roughly 50 city dwellers were invited to choose and comment on five to nine photographs, which activated memories, emotions, associations of ideas and thoughts on the mobility of the past, present and future. The survey thus revealed the imaginaries of modernity associated with mobility, as well as the ambivalent feelings regarding the changes.



The results of this survey inspired artist-videographer Wang Gongxin to create a piece on

the theme of speed. The installation, consisting of shots – sometimes accelerated, sometimes slowed down – taken in the city and the countryside highlights the acceleration of urban lifestyles and how speed transforms our perception of reality. The web version of the work can be viewed [here](#).

Marie Terrieux, cultural producer, sheds light on Wang Gongxin's work in a comment:



A documentary film traces the entire process, showing how the various components were able to provide answers to the original question. By showing what went on behind the scenes during the study, it also helps highlight the difficulties that arise in multidisciplinary, transcultural projects (Franco-Chinese in this case). Finally, it shows the urban context in which the research took place through the shots taken in the various cities.

CCMMP - Images et imaginaires de la mobilité en Chine from Sinapolis on Vimeo.

Second phase

The reports produced throughout the survey were analyzed in a cross-disciplinary manner by:

Anthropologist Dominique Desjeux, who specializes in lifestyles and consumption, notably in China,

Mobil'Homme, a sociological research office specializing in mobility - and especially Vincent Kaufmann, Emmanuel Ravalet and Stéphanie Vincent.

Each proposes its interpretation of the results in light of their area of specialization.

### **III. The summary**

A summary synthesizes Dominique Desjeux's and Mobil'Homme's main conclusions and also sheds light on the Chinese's perspective through a portrait gallery that associates the texts with images. It provided an opportunity for the Mobile Lives Forum to open a series of questions on the future of mobility in China.

# MOBILITY IN CHINA

A CHINESE VIEW OF 50 YEARS  
OF ACCELERATION



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## IV. Virtual exhibition

A visual approach to the project is available in the Artisticlab section.

Discover the photo album revisited by sinologist-political scientist Jean-Philippe Bèjà, the works of Wang Gongxin, and Thomas Sauvin, and Léo de Boissignon's view on the role of images in the project : <http://artisticlab.forumviesmobiles.org/en/mobility-in-china>.

## V. Research update

## Conference

On November 9, 2017, the Mobile Lives Forum organized a conference entitled *Mobility in China: following in the footsteps of the West?*

Dominique Desjeux traced 50 years of changes in Chinese society through the changes in mobility objects (train/bus tickets, bikes, cars, etc.).

Xavier Leherpeur, Asian film critic, shows how Chinese cinema's depiction of mobility has gone from intimate to satirical to nostalgic from the 1970s to the present.

Sylvie Landriève, co-director of the Forum Vies Mobiles, focused more specifically on the current situation and the questions it raises for the future.

Watch the videos of the conference

### Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

### Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

More

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Keywords : **History of mobilities, Lifestyles, Forecasting, Collective representations, Modernity, Arts**

Disciplines : **Social sciences, Urban studies, Art, litterature and design**

Transport mode(s) : **Automobile, Airplane, Subway, Train**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://artisticlab.forumviesmobiles.org/en/mobility-in-china>

<sup>5</sup> <http://artisticlab.forumviesmobiles.org/en/mobility-in-china>

<sup>6</sup> <https://vimeo.com/141650470>

<sup>7</sup> <https://vimeo.com/sinapolis>

<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com>



- <sup>9</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/meeting/2017/11/29/mobility-china-following-footsteps-west-12272>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/lifestyle-1756>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/histoire-des-mobilites>
- <sup>13</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/modes-vie>
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- <sup>24</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/modes-transport/train-0>