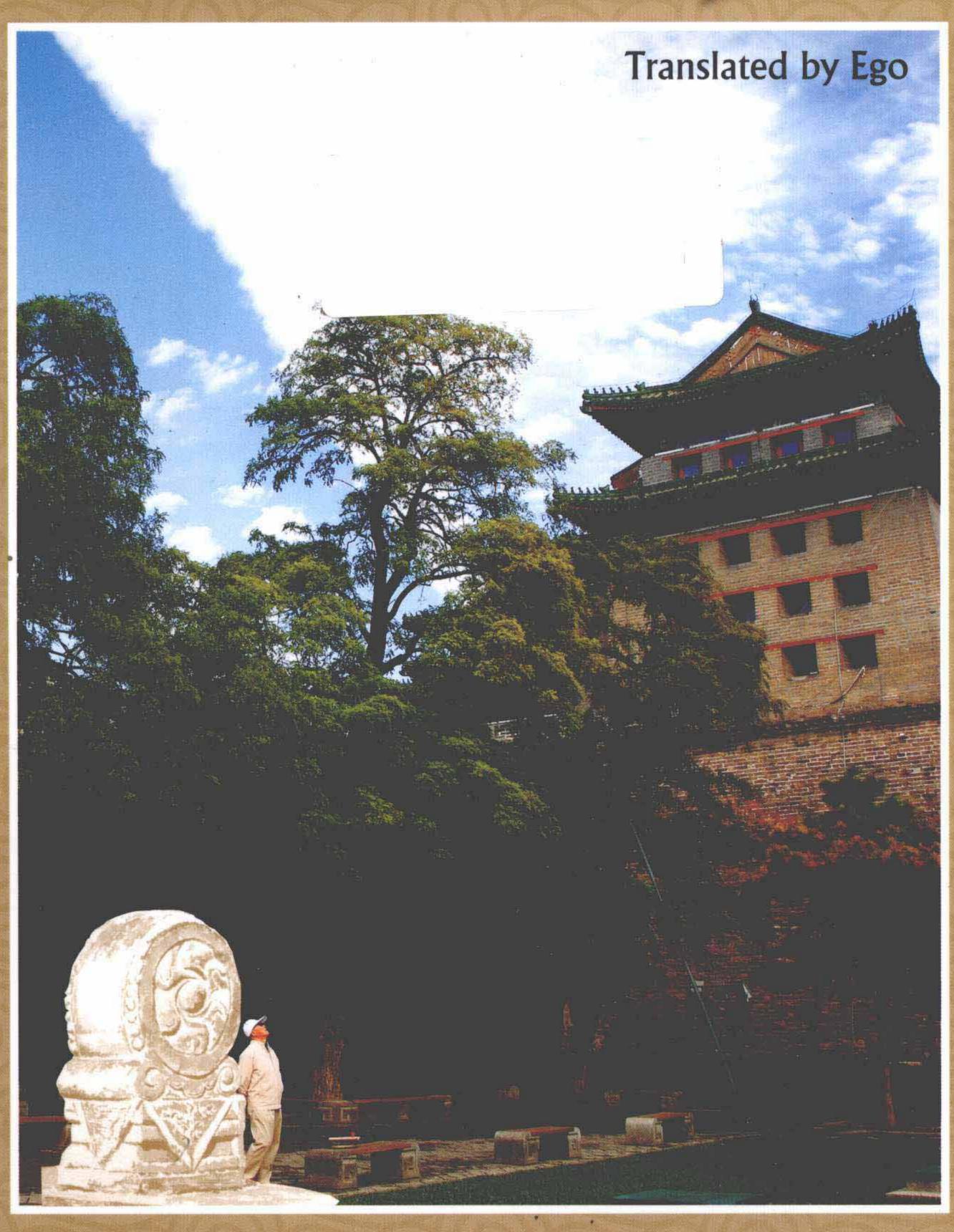
Kobayashi Sayuri

TALE BEIJING





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Translated by Ego





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CONTENTS

Preface I

2008, Messages of the Beijing Olympics 5

Beijing Pressing Ahead Despite Interference 6
Air Cleaning, the "Face" of the "Green Olympics" 8
Bittersweet Olympics Tickets 10
The Subway Network, Carrying the Dream of Beijingers 12

Thoughts on the Year of the Olympics 15
Olympic Qualifying Matches Like Formal Competitions 17

Beijing Seen in the Marathon 19

Food Safety, a Concern of the World 22

Torch Relay Finally Kicks Off 24

The "Bird's Nest"—Icon of the Olympic Games 26

Overcoming the Devastating Sichuan Earthquake... 29

Beijing Olympics Rapidly Approaches 31

2005, The Dream of Beijing 33

The Blue Sky Choir in the Park 34
Even Though the Street Has Changed... 35
His and Her Dreams 37
Foreigners Living in Courtyard Houses 39
Super Bathhouses, Perfect Services 42

2006, Wandering in the Hutongs 45

Ban Lifted on Spring Festival Firecrackers 46
Unique Loan Words 48
Admiring Cherry Blossoms in the Yuyuantan Park 50
Using Humor as the Facade 52
Copper Coins from Old Manchuria 54
Japanese-language Dubbing Competition 56
Traditional Chinese Medicine for Heat Stroke 58
Beijing, from Monet to Picasso 61
Chinese People Liking Watermelon 63
The Afternoon in a Hutong 66

Autograph Session of Kenzaburo Oe in Beijing 68
The Hardworking Students Previously Studying in Japan 71
Happy My Xth Times of Birthday 73
Pets Craze of Dog Raising 76

2007, In Love with Clapper Talk 79

Take It Easy 80

A Different Spring Festival 82

Talk Show Program with Beijing Radio (1) 85

Talk Show Program with Beijing Radio (2) 88

A Chance to Learn Kuaiban (Clapper Talk) 92

Suffering from Pollenosis in Beijing 95

Chinese Food 98

My First Attendance of Clapper Talk Salon 100

Singing the Declaration of a Real Man at Beijing Airport 105

Vacationing in a Destination Country of Tourists 110

A Glance at China's Medical System 112

Rain in Japan and Umbrellas from China 115

Steeling Oneself in a Competitive Society 117

First Snow in Beijing 119

A Fascinating Talk Show with Yano Koji 121

Diversified and Colorful Fashion for Quality Life 124

2008, In Pursuit of Bits of Happiness 127

Snow, Hutong and Akutagawa 128

Chinese Overseas Students Will Change China 131

Sino-Japanese Football Match: the Chinese TV Commentator's Spectacular

Shouts 135

Olympic City Changes with Each Passing Day 137

Work for Food Safety 140

The Mighty Trend of Real Estate: "Special Requirement of the Olympic

Games" 142

Moving to a New House (1) 145

Moving to a New House (2) 148

Moving to a New House (3) 151

Searching for Happiness at Xizhaosi Street 154

A Letter of Thanks from China Red Cross 159

Plum Rain in Beijing 162

Wish a Complete Success of Beijing Olympic Games 164

PREFACE

Ithough more than twenty years have elapsed, the memory of my setting foot on Chinese soil for the first time ever remains vivid. In the chilly February or March, 1987, I arrived at Peking University for a short-term education program. The university and its surrounding areas have since evolved into a concentration of IT (information technology) industries, dubbed the "Silicon Valley of China." Back then, however, it was a sleepy village where donkey- and horsepulled carts rolled up and down the road unhurriedly. White poplars and locust trees lining the road were leafless and dark clouds were hanging over the city. The seemingly desolate landscape made me feel a little bit uneasy.

However, something cheered me up; it was just like a brilliant beam penetrating the thick clouds to eliminate my unease. An acquaintance introduced me to a Chinese family. Although we were meeting for the first time, the family was extremely welcoming and hospitable to me, a Japanese person who spoke broken Chinese. They said, "Let's make some dumplings together." When the dumplings were ready to serve, they said, "Please help yourself." They were treating me like an old friend.

Back then in Japan, information on China was scarce. Probably as a result of inadequate understanding, China was even described as a "country hiding behind a bamboo curtain." Who were the people living in China? What kind of life were they living? What were they thinking about? Nothing was known. Anyway, it turned out that all people I met in

Beijing were accommodating, kind and considerate; they were all earnest, honest, and down to earth.

"Is it that all people are basically the same, transcending national boundaries and mutually understandable?" My experience of making dumplings with the Chinese family was a cultural impact in the positive sense.

During my first stay in Beijing, something memorable happened. One day, I was strolling down the street when I was suddenly struck by a special feeling—an inexplicable yet seemingly familiar feeling that I had actually been here and the titillation of air kissing my skin.

I later learned that my hometown, Nagano County, was the largest source of Japan's "Emigrant Group" (After the Septemper 18 Incident of 1931, Japan began to emigrate political, industrial, commercial, armed and other emigrants to China's northeast. —editor's notes) to China's old Manchuria. Many people back in my hometown have claimed that they used to live in China. Among my remote relatives, some arrived in China as members of the "Emigrant Group" and didn't return until Japan lost the war, and some have long been engaged in activities aimed at promoting friendship between Japan and China.

All people around me were deeply related to China. The inexplicable feeling that I experienced in China was probably a decree by destiny. Thus, I began to think long and hard about what I should do. My brief overseas studies during my college years turned out to be an opportunity that dramatically changed my life and the beginning of my journey to bond with China.

As such, upon graduation from college, I joined the national head office of the Japan-China Friendship Association (located in Kanda, Tokyo and now a social group with juridical person status). My duties include editing the association's journal Japan & China, and dispatching and receiving delegations. I was exposed to plural cultures and gained valuable

experience receiving and accompanying China's Tibetan Buddhism Delegation and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Government Delegation in Japan.

Since the autumn of 2000, I've been living in Beijing. I worked as a Japanese culture and education expert for 5 years in People's China, a magazine that China publishes specially for Japan. I'm now a freelancer, writing about Chinese society, culture and life for various Japanese publications.

In recent years, Japan-China relations have hit a rough patch due to differences in perceiving history. Nevertheless, my Chinese friends continue to treat me nicely. I've been busy writing about the daily life of these great people and the tremendous changes taking place in Beijing's streets in anticipation of the Beijing Olympic Games, in order to help my fellow Japanese to gain a better understanding of China.

This book contains 60 articles from the columns and essays that I wrote between 2005 and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games for Japanese magazines, China's Japanese-language supplements and my personal blog. Some of the articles have been revised. The book is a documentation of what I've seen, heard and thought about as a Japanese living in Beijing and a reflection of my efforts to understand the vast and profound China. It's also a record of my tears, laughter and the things I screwed up out of carelessness. It's a light reading that readers will be not bored stiff. I will be more than delighted if my book can prompt the reader to think more about China and Japan.

The publication of this book has benefited tremendously from the advice of senior editor Mr. Hutai Yamada. I'm grateful to China Intercontinental Press for giving me the opportunity to publish this book. I'm greatly indebted to Managing editor Miss Qin Tiantian and graphic designer Tian Lin, who have put a lot of hard efforts into the book. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Chinese and English translators for their hard work. My thanks would also go to my Japanese and Chinese friends, acquaintances and seniors for their guidance and support.

I would be greatly honored if you can read The Tale of Beijing, my stories in Beijing, till its last page.

> Kobayashi Sayuri July, 2008

Note: Ages and titles of the characters and exchange rates appearing in this book are what they were when the articles were first published.

CHAPTER I

2008, MESSAGES OF THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

Beijing Pressing Ahead Despite Interference

The first ever Olympic Games to be hosted by China are about to open in Beijing in less than one year's time from now. Construction of the mammoth main stadium, shaped like a bird's nest, is underway, the subway is expanding, and the air is getting thick with excitement as the Olympics approach. In this context, city administration is strengthening steadily.

Two days ago, I was walking in the subway aisle on Beijing's busiest street—Wangfujing when unusual signs caught my eyes. I understood the Chinese and English words—"Dangerous Articles Prohibited" and the round symbol with a red bar across it. But there were also depictions of a test tube, a skull and explosion smoke on the sign, what are all dangerous articles. But what was the skull meant to prohibit? I didn't have a clue. So



Wangfujing Street crowded with tourists.

I checked with the subway attendant and was told that they stand in turn for chemicals, toxic gas and firecrackers or explosives. Yes, I could only assume that each of them corresponded to a dangerous article.

I was worried that the overtly detailed regulation might cause confusion. I recalled a piece of news saying that China's Ministry of Construction planned to add 54 new "traffic signs" before the Olympics, and there would be 79 signs in total. Local newspapers said that the new signs would include "No Trespassing," "No Pet" and "Embark in Turn" signs for public buses and the subway, as well as a sign with a graphic representation of three overlapped people with a red bar across it, meaning "no squeezing." It's said that hamburgers and drinks are also stamped with a red bar, meaning "no eating or drinking," and wool balls bear a red bar as well, meaning "no knitting." They are so exhaustive.

In the past, when you got onto the subway train, you always saw passengers nibbling on steamed bread for breakfast, knitting a sweater, and whispering into their cell phone. There were many migrant workers as well, talking loud in their local dialects, but no one seemed to care. The carriage was like a mobile house, and everyone looked relaxed and friendly. However, all these are now prohibited as uncivilized behaviors ahead of the Olympics. The signs are set up, urging passengers to mind their manners and keep quiet.

The Ministry of Construction plans to further improve the signs, and after being approved by the State, they will be promoted throughout the country from the host and co-host cities of the Olympics. Yet, the signs mentioned at the beginning of this article were made by the Beijing Municipal Government. There were also signs made by railway and transportation authorities. Local citizens said that "administration is not centralized, and more signs will show up; hopefully, the signs will be unified and made easy to understand."

Beefing up administration means much more than prohibiting certain behaviors. Wangfujing Street, renovated ahead of the Olympics, has added 20 surveillance cameras. Upon hearing this, I looked around—there were indeed video cameras above the entrances to department stores and

banks, looking down with sharp eyes. According to the Public Security Bureau, during the Olympics, hotels, restaurants and public places in the city will be equipped with better surveillance camera systems in order to prevent crime. It's good to see public security improving, but will Beijing become a rigidly controlled society because of the Olympics? Will people here be restrained as the Japanese are and seem to be watched wherever they are?

Mr. Zhang, 41, a local government employee working near Wangfujing, asserted, "Increasing surveillance may make people feel a little bit uneasy, but the city will be safer. More foreign tourists will come. I fully support the decision to strengthen etiquette and morality to improve China's image." Laissez-faire or excessive control, going to the extreme would simply make the city unlivable. With a year to go before the Olympics, can people build a society whose administration is properly balanced? The countdown has begun.

(SUPERCiTY CHiNA, Sep. 07)

Air Cleaning, the "Face" of the "Green Olympics"

Late afternoon, Saturday. The Chinese-made Hyundai taxi is dashing down the fourth ring road around Beijing at a speed of about 60 km per hour. Although traffic is lighter than usual, this is the part of the city center most prone to traffic jams. But, today, cars are moving as swiftly as swallows, and everyone feels great.

"Traffic is much lighter. This is terrific! And you will not get tired so easily." The old driver and my friend, Mr. Lü, 43, exclaimed, "There used to be a lot of police officers on duty. But it didn't work. I just love the traffic control. I hope it will stay."

Beijing has recently started a massive traffic control, and cabdrivers like Mr. Lü were overjoyed. The traffic control is imposed in preparation for next year's Olympic Games and is aimed at preventing exhaust pollution

and alleviating traffic jams. It coincides with the "Good Luck, Beijing" Olympic test events around the country. So they are having this "traffic control rehearsal."

For four straight days until August 20, vehicles with license plates ending in an odd number will only be allowed on the roads on oddnumbered days, and vehicles with license plates ending in an even number will only be allowed on the roads on even-numbered days (the rule does not apply to police vehicles, public buses, taxis, and other approved vehicles). A vehicle violating this rule will get a fine of 100 yuan if caught at the monitoring point. I heard that for a few days in a row, about 6,000 police officers have been watching the roads with their sharp eyes. Public buses and the subway have increased services to ensure that local citizens can get about easily. The traffic control measure has taken 5 million vehicles off the roads, about one third of the city's total number of vehicles. The city's Environmental Protection Bureau has admitted that "the traffic control measure is remarkably effective in improving air pollution" and confidence has soared.

By and large, the "traffic control rehearsal" has been successful, but it has also exposed many problems. For example, the traffic control didn't stay long, for just four days. However, next year, formal traffic control will have to stay in place for a month for the Olympics and Paralympics and perhaps for three months if the time of the preparations by the delegations is added. Will local folks and the government be able to endure such a long traffic control?

In fact, during the four days, 5,600 vehicles were caught violating the regulation, a significant number. According to witnesses, some vehicles have their license plates removed before taking to the road. They must have had important business to attend to and took chances. The replication of license plates is a worrisome phenomenon. People can just swap their odd- and even-number plates and stay on the road every day. Road traffic has dropped, but the subway during peak periods is packed to overflowing. Some people say that "it would be better to improve signal control and other traffic systems first than restricting the vehicles."

This is indeed true.

Mr. Ding, 30, a salesman who had to use the subway instead of driving his own car, complained, "It's not convenient to go to work or get around. Company employees may live with it, but it would be very impolite for bosses to transport visitors with taxis. If you want to play golf or tennis after work, you may just have to endure it no matter how heavy the gear is."

How will urbanites accustomed to vehicles face the Olympics? Some foreign delegations are so concerned about air pollution that they may choose to arrive in Beijing right on the eve of the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Even so, I still hope that clean skies will return, even just for adding a little face to the "Green Olympics." I feel that Beijing's swallows deserve to fly in blue skies.

(SUPERCiTY CHiNA, Oct. 07)

Bittersweet Olympics Tickets

"You've been selected in a random draw to buy a ticket to the opening ceremony at the National Stadium."

In the e-mail inbox, a Chinese-language notice from the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) informing the selection in a random draw to buy a ticket greeted the eyes. The results of the first random draw for domestic ticket sales have just been announced. A soft early autumn breeze is blowing in town.

Li Xiangrong, 32, who worked for a mobile phone games production company in Beijing, was overjoyed. He tried his luck during his busy work, never expecting that he would actually be selected in the random draw to book a ticket to the Opening Ceremony.

"I'm so pleased! Anyway, it's the first Olympic Games in China. I'm so lucky!" Each person is only allowed to book one ticket to the Opening Ceremony, whose tickets are the mostly sought-after. An A seat sells for 5,000 yuan, but Mr. Li has been able to book an E seat, which is the

cheapest at 200 yuan. He reckons that it will be enough for him to just feel the ambience.

For the Olympics, Mr. Li has more feelings than others. He was once a professional shooter active in national competitions. At the age of 22, his seven-year professional career came to an end, and he became an office worker. Even though he is to greet the Olympics as a spectator, he would like to project the smart image of a former professional shooter, just like he was when he hit the center of the target in the shooting gallery.

"China is the host nation. Hopefully, the name will not be tarnished." China must show the power of Asia in the medal count." Mr. Li has been married for five years and now looks manlier. His wife recently gave birth to a baby girl. He said that if he failed to get a second ticket in the second round of booking after October, he would definitely give the first ticket to his wife as a gift. Mr. Li, who admits he is a model husband, laughs, his large body shaking.

The Beijing Olympics offer a total of over 7 million tickets. 75 percent of tickets are to be sold domestically (including Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and foreign people living in the mainland), and the remaining 25 percent are for foreign countries. It's reported that in the computerized random draws for the first domestic ticket booking, about 300,000 people around the country receive around 1.6 million tickets. Roughly one in 21 applicants can get a ticket to the much-anticipated opening ceremony and one in three can get a ticket to the competitions. However, tickets for the highly popular basketball, diving and table tennis events are largely unavailable.

In Beijing, the premier host city of the Olympics, everyone is talking about how to get tickets. Mr. Lin, 34, a long-term Beijing resident working for a display design firm, said, "We've just got to watch the Olympics held on our doorstep!" He applied for 36 tickets for 10 events, the largest number of tickets permitted for a single applicant, and got 18 tickets for athletics preliminaries and other events. He exclaimed, "I've got so many tickets in the draw. It's just wonderful! All my family will watch the Olympics." But, another office worker, Mrs. Chen, in her forties, is not

as lucky. She has applied for a couple of tickets to the opening ceremony for her son, who is in the middle school, but has not got any. She is not discouraged, saying, "I will definitely get better luck in the second round of booking."

The Internet is abuzz with rumors. It's said that tickets for the opening ceremony are offered for 50,000 yuan apiece, 17 times the original price, but are still attracting hordes of buyers. Authorities have been alerted of ticket scalping. They have agreed that tickets for the opening and closing ceremonies may change hands once after an approval is obtained. They have also imposed restrictions on the resale of tickets for the competitions. However, as spectators for the Beijing Olympics are expected to number in the millions, will not the sales of the tickets turn chaotic? Can spectators be properly guided? These questions have long been public concerns.

Some people feel that "China just has too many people" and have given up on being a spectator, opting for TV instead. Some people are "too busy with work and housework" to care about the Olympics. This is bittersweet story about vying for tickets. It reveals diverse values. It seems that all sorts of human dramas are unfolding beyond the arenas.

(SUPERCiTY CHINA, Nov. 07)

The Subway Network, Carrying the Dream of Beijingers

Subway Line 5, running south to north across the center of Beijing, has been in operation for more than a month. The "new face" of the subway trains, featuring a silver body and purple lines, has become familiar to people. For the past few days, the new line has carried more than 400,000 passengers per day, becoming an artery of transportation.

Subway Line 5 starts from Tiantongyuan in Changping District to the north and ends at Songjiazhuang in Fengtai District to the south,