

# Impact of commercialized urban spaces on the public



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In the case of Shanghai and Hong Kong, how does commercialized urban space in Chinese metropolitan cities affect the public, from the aspect of culture, the economy, and urban planning?

In recent years, the outdoor advertisement has been deeply rooted in the representation of cities in China. Ranging from traditional large display like billboards and LED screens at public plazas or squares, to the incorporation in everyday objects like the back of front row seats in taxi, poles at the bus shelters, windows or walls inside the subway trains and stations etc., the medium used to convey consumerist values is getting increasingly creative, as advertising companies are competing to stand out not only in content but also in the form to promote their products. To some extent, outdoor advertising symbolizes the flourish and progress of the Chinese economy, transforming urban spaces into sources of potential profits for the business. Yet, it is also an ideological manifestation, implying a society making use of collective resources to communicate dominant social preferences.

Regardless of residents having democratic accessibility or not, the genuine aspect of a so-called “ public realm” has long been monetized, replaced by the public-private partnerships in exchange for the maintenance and sustainability of city infrastructure. Moreover, this also raises controversies over the role of government agencies or authorities to play in regulating the outdoor media landscape, as their partial interest may be quite similar to — if not the same as — the advertisers’.

As one of the fastest growing industries in China, outdoor advertising has thrived on average more than 26% per annum in the last two decades (Iveson 153). With technology fueling the advancement of billboard

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construction and deployment, the public space has been recognized for its socioeconomic potential to propagate consumerist values and political ideologies. As a result, advertisers and campaign agencies pay increasing attention to not only “spatiality” in terms of physical dimensions, but also to the “temporality” – movement and demographics mapping (Koeck et al. 1405). These two factors are deeply integrated into their marketing strategies to enhance the performance of message conveyance, turning the urban realm into a series of visual spectacles. Shanghai subway, for example, is no longer just a place of transit or commute, but also a potent discourse in favor of commercial forces. Thanks to the hyper-interactivity and population density (i. e. the “spatiality” aspect), subway advertising is able to reach a variety of potential consumers as they go about their everyday lives. More importantly, subway commuters – who are mostly young, middle class, and urban residents – are specifically targeted, as they account for a large population who is economically and politically active (Lewis 265). That being said, aside from the spatial advantages, the efficiency of this particular outdoor advertising is also attributed to the demographics who engage in the practice of commute; and in turn, those urban dwellers are expected to reciprocate with consumption (Wei and Pan 92) – or in some cases, political devotion.

Similarly, outdoor advertisements in both Shanghai and Hong Kong aim to entrench the consumerist and ideological values into the urban space. On the one hand, with leading-edge screening technologies, Shanghai is well-known for its public screen advertising culture. The first form is the moving text-based screen – either as the “walking words” screens with ticker tape

style text moving horizontally across them or as a loop of slides similar to a powerpoint presentation (Berry 124). It is prominently used in entranceways or other liminal spaces, catching one's attention with the predominant red color. Moreover, the type and size of the screens along with content displayed often varies according to particular usages and locations. For example, when placed in retail spaces like shops and banks, walking words screens attract pedestrians by detailing the latest offer and promotions; whereas in the entryway of a housing compound, the messages could be informing new governmental policies or simply slogans against drugs and prostitution, disseminating political values and propaganda. The second form is the moving image screen. Ranging from the huge LED screen covering sides of office towers to interactive bus shelters, such advertising technology has become commonplace (Berry 110). In particular, TV programming (regulated by a company called Mega Info Media) is widely applied, exhibiting a mix of brief entertainment features like commercials. The electronic-based semantic content embodies consumerism yet disguised as creative production, encouraging every urban individual to act upon the values promoted. At the same time, it introduces new visual stimuli in a hyper-visible way, constantly reiterating the commercial nature of a supposedly public space (Cronin 2747).

On the other hand, as for Hong Kong, improvements in digital print and high definition monitors have also drastically increased the quality, variety, and flexibility of outdoor advertising (Lopez-Pumarejo 1). Going through childhood memories, my first impression of Hong Kong (i. e. in early 2000) was the intensity and prevalence of outdoor advertisements (i. e. traditional

print-based). Innumerable signs, texts, and images were densely placed adjacent to one another, dazzling pedestrians with such unique scenery. Most iconic of all were those colorful commercial wrappings. They could be around double-decker buses and taxis, around construction site scaffoldings, and even on revamped historic buildings. Despite that the images glued onto traditional billboards were rather low quality or even just printed on the vinyl sheet, the placement and utilization of everyday objects were in fact cost-effective. In a densely populated city like this, colors on everyday objects can be particularly vibrant and eye-catching, constituting a fun yet modern city atmosphere. Nowadays, although traditional print-based media are gradually replaced by digital billboards or other high-end interactive technologies, the overwhelming consumerism essence of the urban realm remains consistent. Moreover, ads produced by multi-national corporations seem to invoke more subtle means to identify with diverse communities and groups (Lewis 263), given the multicultural nature of the city itself.

To some extent, outdoor commercials present more than just an alternative medium facilitating the commercialism. The technology of advertising production and survey research form a rapid interactivity between consumer and producer, creating unique forms of consumption-oriented collective identity for segmented populations. Consequentially, they may even stand ahead of other media popular culture such as film, television, and literature etc., shaping the collective cultural discourse of future generations in China (Lewis 267). In metropolitan cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong, outdoor advertising tends to appeal to local, national, and transnational communities (Lewis 263). However, it is more common to see traditional political symbols

being used in commercials in mainland China, serving as a means to resonate more with the nationwide audience. For example, Yu Zhao Lin (俞昭琳) pharmaceuticals advertisement in Shanghai uses the figure of an emperor standing in front of the Imperial Palace in Beijing, giving a “ thumbs up” as an approval for the products (Lewis 263). Royal mascots like golden dragons are applied to connote traditional notions of luxury, suggesting the supreme quality and thus luring in potential consumers. Meanwhile, commercials in Hong Kong seek to ask viewers to identify with the accelerated consumption habits, which are consistent with the stereotypical fast-paced urban lifestyle. In the Hong Kong subway, a commercial played on public TV screens showcases a fashionable man pulling luggage through an airport hall, who checks his time on his Rolex watch while awaiting the departure. The set up hints access to wealth and international mobility, which engages in urban professional class that floats among global cities (Lewis 264). Moreover, internationally known figures also are employed to personify a transnational lifestyle (Lewis 263) in addition to enhancing the brand’s credibility. In a way, those outdoor advertisings are representations of the city or even the nation. They are incorporated in the context of globalization, carrying messages promoting conspicuous consumption with subtle and complex rhetoric of transnationalism and localism (Lewis 267). Most importantly, they are capable of reflecting the interests of local governments and corporation in addition to shaping the consumerist culture, bringing in economic prosperity while compromising the democratic access belonged to urban citizens.

While outdoor advertisements promise the merit of the consumer culture, it also inevitably results in potential hazards to the civic environment such as creating visual pollution and chaos. Spatial order can be severely disrupted, as those outdoor commercials are aggressively invasive by occupying every corner of the city. Such “in-your-face” marketing technique may not even be effective as expected, as our encounters with such advertising clutter are thus becoming much more prosaic. From media-owning companies’ standpoint, spaces are expected to be mappable, quantifiable, and populated by saleable segments of consumers (Cronin 270). Yet, there are constant movements and changes in the city, given the transitive nature of the urban flow. That being said, glances at fragments of texts, blurs of color, and impressions of shapes during those brief transit moments will not necessarily be translated into the advertised information as it was conceived (Cronin 270). As a result, the dialogues that advertisers attempt to achieve with the public are thus resisted or ignored, as the public space is rather perceived as three-dimensional than simply a “call-and-response” interaction.

In addition, outdoor advertisements might also detract from other landscape values like heritage architecture that were once attractive to tourists or residents (Iveson 159). For example, the Jing’an Temple in Shanghai is one of the greatest historical sightseeing. Built in 247 AD and renovated in 2010, the sight is a physical manifestation of the Buddhism religion, advocating values of peace and tranquility just as the Chinese name suggests. Yet ironically, it is located in the center of all Shanghai transportation intersections due to the history of international settlement – literally the center of downtown and the noisiest commercial district. As a result, the

historical architecture is surrounded by – if not already immersed in – an abundance of commercial activities, which makes it an odd place to promote Buddhism whose core value is supposedly the riddance of desire and attachment. To some extent, visitors could no longer find what the temple originally offers or symbolizes given the geographical feature, given exposure to such overwhelming outdoor advertisements. As a result, the intention of the visit also evolves and adapts accordingly, which gradually becomes in favor of the commercial aspect. At the same time, the culture of Buddhism, in this case, is deeply incorporated into the profit-driven promotion, while the essence of the religion or historical values might have been severely disregarded.

From the perspective of urban planning, the thriving of the outdoor media landscape is largely attributed to the establishment of public-private partnerships between local authorities and advertising agencies – in the interest of the long-term maintenance and provision of urban infrastructure. Ranging from roads, water, electricity, and communications to daily garbage collection in public spaces, maintenance services are advertising funded (Iveson 155). In other words, in cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong, government authorities compromise the certain allowance of outdoor advertising in exchange for the sustainability of the city development, and such privatization of the urban space is implemented as a significant component of social progression. To some extent, those pseudo-public spaces are manifest of improved operational efficiency and modernized economy, as the partnership has provided incentives and support to achieve their missions respectively. Consequentially, outdoor advertisers assist –



although in China's case, often are restricted by – urban authorities, ensuring the proper placement of commercials.

Yet, aside from being responsible for the regulation and restriction for the use of urban public sphere, they also “[monetize] the public spaces by reading the amount of free space available to other advertisers and publics” (Iveson 162). Judging from an economic perspective, competitions among outdoor media are not necessarily fair play. Access is increasingly restricted to those who can afford to purchase space from commercial outdoor advertising companies (Iveson 163). That being said, the outdoor media landscape is getting increasingly monopolized, driven in part by the monetization strategies. Most importantly, in the case of China, 55% of the “private companies” including advertising agencies are actually under the full control of the Chinese Communist Party (Kodaka 2018), which raises the concerns over the actual dominator in the picture. As a matter of fact, the government has in turn utilized the advertising platform to create a special economic zone for foreign commerce, integrating the philosophy of capitalism into the communist ideologies as part of a pattern of coeval development under globalization. At the same time, those ideas are transformed into rich textual and visual spectacles, insidiously creeping into the preceptors' mind. In a way, it is fair to say that both parties in fact share similar interests that are profit-driven, along with indoctrination of political values in the urban public realm.

With the new media technologies evolving and circulating rapidly on the global scale, outdoor advertising in China emerges more than just a need for commercial expansion, but also a cost-effective medium for the exertion of

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political power. On the one hand, outdoor advertisements have effectively appealed to local, national, and even transnational communities in big cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong, establishing a collective discourse of consumerism-based culture. On the other hand, public displayed slogans fueled by nationalism can provoke a homogenous ideology. Young, educated, and financially well-off urban residents are the perfect target to perceive advertising messages disseminated in an urban medium. However, despite the ubiquitous presence, the intended effects of outdoor media landscape could be counter-productive, as the perception from the public is merely a passive viewing. Moreover, the visual chaos has also detracted original architectural essence of the dimensional manifest, making it increasingly challenging to preserve the democratic accessibility in nature. All in all, the outdoor advertisement is a spatial demonstration of China's prosperity in the context of globalization. Consequentially, the nation's perpetual growth will thus continue to compromise the public realm for the socioeconomic progression.

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