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# The potential for international and transnational public service advertising in public spaces in American and Chinese global cities: Conclusions from a 2010 survey of advertisements in subways in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC

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### ABSTRACT

Can we construct transnational or international public service advertising to counterbalance the proliferation of transnational commercial advertising? As an important first step in exploring the possibility of such an application of shared media public diplomacy among nations, this paper describes a complete survey of commercial and public service advertisements collected from the public spaces of subway systems in American and Chinese cities in 2010 – New York, Washington, DC, Shanghai and Beijing – to reveal the range of themes of commercial and public service ads in these spaces. The study reveals first that analogous commercial and public service ads are ubiquitous in the public spaces of both Chinese and American cities. Second, many of the themes that might appear in international or transnational public service ads are already being portrayed in ads created by local or national governments or NGOs, although these themes are portrayed in ads created by different sets of actors in China and in the US: government actors and a few international NGOs in Chinese cities, and governments, corporations and non-profit organizations in the case of American cities. Finally, the survey reveals that in all four cities there are many commercial advertisements that appeal to the identity of a transnational consumer, but that there are almost no public service ads that appeal to the identity of a transnational citizen: merely local or national ones who can solve such public problems as global warming, education, and health issues.

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## 1. Introduction: advertisements in public spaces in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC

Advertisements in urban public spaces are an influential and ubiquitous form of economic and political communication, and yet there are few theoretical works or empirical studies that examine their creation, their development and their influence. This is not surprising. Such advertisements are ephemeral, often appearing only for short periods of times – several months – and also often appearing just in a few localities. These advertisements in public spaces are as ubiquitous as their counterparts in the print and broadcast media, but because they are much more inexpensive to produce and to distribute they are capable of reflecting the conditions within local markets and local communities during specific periods of time. Scholars wanting to study the influence of advertisements in public spaces, therefore, often find it difficult to collect advertisements from different locations so that they can examine their influence more systematically. As globalization continues, and especially as global media corporations continue consolidating their ownership of advertising postings in

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the public spaces in the world's cities, the potential for both the integration of this medium with other media (print and broadcast forms) and the systematic study of its influence will increase.

How do commercial and public service advertisements in public spaces vary across localities? This study is part of a larger exploratory project established to capture images of such ephemera from many localities and then offer initial analysis of how they vary in content: the Transnational China Project's Archive of Digital Advertising Images.<sup>1</sup> Since 1998 dozens of scholars from this project have collected and archived more than 10,000 images of advertisements from subway stations in Asian cities: Beijing, Fukuoka, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Kaohsiung, Kuala Lumpur, Nanjing, Osaka, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Taipei, Tokyo. And since 2004 we have collected images of advertisements from subways in Washington, DC, and in 2010 the New York City subway and 16 other cities across Latin America, Europe and Asia.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the content of the advertisements from subway stations in Asian cities reveals that they contain appeals to urban residents to think of themselves simultaneously as members of local, national and transnational groups (Lewis, 2003, 2006). Local companies advertise local delicacies and local services, and local governments urge urban residents to make their cities clean, safe and civilized urban environments. National corporations advertise goods and services, and national governments ask citizens to participate in patriotic campaigns to donate blood, give money for disaster relief, and support the political system. Finally, multi-national corporations hawk their goods and services, asking city residents to consume as if they were the members of a transnational middle class, while international organizations ask people to behave like good "global citizens" in protecting the environment and endangered species and conserving energy. Subway riders are told to think of themselves simultaneously as holders of three levels of "citizenship", from local communities to nations and to transnational consumer classes.

This study extends this analysis to compare for the first time the advertisements in Asian and American cities: ads seen by tens of millions of commuters every day in the subway systems of Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC. I first briefly discuss some of the unique aspects of subway stations as public spaces. I next look to compare the basic content of advertisements in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC. Previous studies of advertisements in subways in Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore and Taipei found that most of the advertisements were commercial in nature and directed to induce individual consumption of goods and services. What kinds of goods and services are advertised in the subways of Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC? How do the commercial and public service advertisements in Beijing and Shanghai compare with those in New York and Washington, DC?

I next look to see if commercial and public service advertisements in the four cities make appeals – as seen in previous studies of Asian cities, including Shanghai – for subway commuters to think of themselves as members of local, national and transnational groups. Finally, I conclude with some suggestions for the implications of this study for the development of international and transnational public service advertising.

## 2. Background: subways as urban public spaces

Subway stations in most Asian cities are not just transportation hubs. They are commercialized public spaces comprising a vast array of interconnected forms of political, economic and social interaction. Many of the oldest subways in European, Russian and American cities were constructed in the early 20th Century by governments and state-owned corporations in order to provide low-cost, efficient transportation for rapidly urbanizing and industrializing populations. As such, these "public" subway stations themselves became political symbols through discussion of the associated public goods issues, especially taxation, efficiency and safety, which arose in their development. "... (T)he most important thing about the evolution of the subway as a symbol is that it starts by expressing faith in the city's future and, once built, quickly becomes a handy rhetorical tool for expressing discontent with its present" (Brooks, 1997).

They can be viewed popularly as symbols of distinctly local problems and achievements. Sometimes they are viewed as dangerous, crime-ridden spaces; the underground corridors of urban decay. On the other hand, when subways run smoothly and efficiently, they can become popular measures of successful local development. The quality of their operation is an easily identifiable, and individually observable, daily barometer of comfort for hundreds of millions of commuters worldwide.

<sup>1</sup> Researchers from the Transnational China Project have thus far collected more than 10,000 images of advertisements from the subways of Asian cities: Beijing (1998–2011), Fukuoka (2001–2003, 2010), Guangzhou (2010), Hong Kong (2001–2011), Kaohsiung (1999–2000), Kuala Lumpur (2009–2010), Nanjing (2009–2011), Osaka (2003, 2010), Seoul (2000, 2010), Shanghai (1998–2011), Singapore (1999–2011), Taipei (1999–2011), and Tokyo (2000–2005, 2010). For broader comparative study, subway advertisements from Washington DC (2004–2011) and New York City (2010) in North America have also been collected. In 2010 we also collected images of advertisements from subways in Ankara, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Dublin, Frankfurt, Helsinki, London, Lyon, Madrid, Mexico City, Munich, Paris, Prague, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, and Sao Paulo, and in 2011 are also surveying Boston, Santiago, Shenzhen, and Tianjin. Coding of many of the Chinese-language advertisements is ongoing. A digital archive of these images for researchers and students is being prepared by the Baker Institute for Public Policy's Transnational China Project and the Cao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University Fondren Library Center for Digital Scholarship's Rice Ephemera Archive: [<http://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/39097>].

<sup>2</sup> These surveys were sponsored by the Transnational China Project of the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University and supported by the Henry Luce Foundation of New York. The author also thanks the following scholars and students for their help in collecting and codifying the images of these surveys: Eve Bower, Michael Cappelli, Dieqin Chen, Geneva Henry, Bryan Ho, David Ho, Tze-yu Hsu, Ying Jin, Yen-Ming Mark Lai, Peter Lampport, Jason Lee, Chung Kang Lee, Shuyi Li, Tai Wei Lim, Michelle Lin, Brian Mathes, Cassie Miao, Takamichi Mito, Joe Man Kit Ng, Christopher Pound, Angela DeHart Rabuck, Zoe Shen, Christopher Sneller, Dale Swartz, Shisha Van Horn, Alec Walker, Mark Ting Wang, Yuanzhuo Wang, Sheng-Peng Wu, Simon Meng Wu, Arthur Jiantao Yan, Wen Xing, and Jieming Zhu.

This political rhetoric establishing subways as symbols of urban development can be reinforced by the advertising campaigns of the transportation authorities and subway corporations themselves. Chinese cities often portray subways as necessary symbols of urban development. The argument here is that a city is not a “true” city unless it has a subway system. The Washington, DC Metro was also able to use this aspect of local pride to mobilize popular support for its funding by taxpayers (Schrage, 2006). Subways can thus be presented as unique symbols of modernity and economic development, the public valuation of which is their performance in comparison with subways in other “world-class cities”.

But subways are also symbols of distinctly national political issues. Consider their extensive construction and use as civil defense shelters in times of war, particularly the Cold War, and especially the Washington, DC subway system with its stations buried deep underground. Or consider how subways are viewed as important infrastructural features necessary for hosting international sporting events, including the Olympics, the World Cup or, in Shanghai’s case, the 2010 World Expo. And if they tie into national government owned and operated railway systems their operation can become symbols of heated, partisan national political debate, as in Britain in recent years.

And subways as physical spaces are sometimes highly visible political arenas. An individual with a sign, a billboard or a megaphone can easily send a political message to a host of commuters and tourists streaming by. Striking workers, especially subway employees, can quickly mobilize popular support if stranded commuters believe that their cause is just or that they need to be accommodated in order to end disruptions in transportation. Shanghai Metro authorities reportedly stopped a small group of eccentric people from wearing costumes of popular culture figures while riding the subway – the Japanese robot Gundam, Superman, and the mummy – because they were concerned the costume wearing was actually an indirect form of popular political protest (Yao, 2009).

Subway stations can even serve as museums or performance halls when they display the messages of other media, including music, graffiti, and installation art. The Taipei Metro system has displayed pieces from the Imperial Palace Museum in subway stations, and has placed statues – and banned commercial advertisements – in the station beneath the Chiang Kai Shek Memorial hall. Beijing’s oldest subway lines have a few stations – Chaoyangmen and Jianguomen – where patriotic artistic murals portraying great moments in Chinese history cover the walls and thus do not allow for the placement of commercial advertisements.

Subways and urban railways are also high-profile targets for violent political protest and terrorism. Consider the attempts to change government foreign policy following subway and railway bombings in Moscow, London and Spain in recent years. Or consider the national debates on domestic policies on religious freedom and national security following the sarin gas attacks by Aum Shinrikyo in Tokyo in 1996.

Such attacks can at least temporarily capture the attention of national and international populations, but they also may profoundly shape the views of urbanites who see themselves as the targets of these attacks. Although research in this area is exploratory, subways may figure prominently in the way city dwellers orient themselves psychologically in order to navigate through the complex living environments that are global cities (Garling, 1995; Groat, 1995; Shuffield, 2002). More specifically, commuters may think of subways as spaces that are uniquely public and private. Violent attacks within them reveal that they are capable of creating powerful individual psychological reactions among large segments of the affected populations.

Subway stations in the global cities of Asia, however, may play an additional role in the development of public spaces. As with their earlier counterparts in Europe and the Americas, Tokyo and Beijing subways began as publicly financed projects of national and local governments. The first two subway lines in Beijing were constructed as underground civil defense shelters. Tokyo’s oldest subway lines were established by semi-private companies. As such they have also figured prominently as political symbols of local and national development. Coming much later, Taipei’s MRT was also a key battleground in an ongoing ideological debate between political parties and leaders, central and local authorities (Lee, 2005).

But railway stations and subways in many Asian global cities, including Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore and Taipei are also centers for retail trade and individual consumption. Following the lead of the powerful land development and railway company groups in Japan, subway corporations are promoting a new model of the subway station as a transportation hub below ground and commercial and residential living space above ground. Consider the residential and office skyscrapers, and the attached labyrinthine underground shopping arcades, built in suburban Tokyo: Ikebukuro, Shinjuku and Shibuya. Even where urban railways were initially financed by the state and operated by government agencies – as in Taipei or Beijing – privatization in the 1990s has turned their newest stations into small-scale shopping malls. With rapid urbanization, and plans by more than 20 PRC cities to develop their own, subways will become a commercialized public space shared by hundreds of millions of urban Chinese.

Finally, subway stations are also potentially influential new locations for social interaction. These places may be particularly important for those parts of the urban population which have lost traditional public spaces – small parks, gardens and recreational sites – to urban development. Where do children and the retired population spend their leisure time as these global cities are reworked into dynamic, accelerated work environments? The shopping areas of the new subway stations may become a unique location for social interaction for those who are not yet part of, or who are no longer members of, the working population. Subway stations are not just used by commuters.

Shoppers also call such stations home. Much like Tokyo’s Sub-Nerd underground shopping mall at Shijuku station, Shanghai’s Renmin Guanchang also has an extensive commercial arcade interwoven with the tunnels of the subway system. In Taipei, observant advertisers noticed that young women formed distinct consumption-oriented social groups in its MRT mall. They then developed advertisements using witty, cynical and hip political puns in order to create a location and

**Table 1**

Advertisements in Beijing, New York City, Shanghai and Washington, DC in 2010 by type of advertisement.

Commercial and public service advertisements in four city subway systems	北京 2010 Beijing (%)	上海 2010 Shanghai (%)	Washington, DC 2010 (%)	New York City 2010 (%)
Commercial ads directed at individual/family	73	82	68	84
Commercial ads directed at corporate/government	1	5	19	1
Public service ads	26	14	13	14

**Table 2**

Advertisements in subways directed at individuals/families Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC in 2010.

Consumed by individual or family	北京 Beijing 2010	上海 Shanghai 2010	DC 2010	NYC 2010
(Percent of all ads that year)	73	82	68	84
Fashion/cosmetics (%)	16	19	3	13
Food/drink (%)	7	11	4	9
Entertainment (%)	15	23	23	25
Household goods (%)	0	7	0	0
Communication/media (%)	22	11	9	9
Housing (%)	1	1	1	1
Transportation (%)	2	1	4	10
Medicine/health care (%)	3	2	1	2
Education (%)	2	1	4	7
Financial/banking (%)	4	6	2	7
Employment (%)	1	1	1	1

group-specific form of interactive, consumption-mediated political discourse. Girls who could interpret the language and imagery of these advertisements responded by returning again and again to these shopping malls. Advertisers succeeded because they were able to use the architecture of these new public spaces to develop a medium that could convey these appeals to such an imaginary “*新型人类*” (“*xinxing renlei*” or “new breeds of human”) (Liao, 2003). We must wonder if underground shopping malls attached to subway and railway lines in other cities – such as Tokyo or Shanghai – may develop such unique and very local forms of interaction between advertisers and consumers. If so, will there be any long-term influence on the shopping, marketing and socialization practices of the people in these places? Social scientists may have to develop new theories and methods to explain such behavior.

### 3. Methods: advertisements in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC

Basic coding of the content of the advertisements from the Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC subway stations in 2010 reveals a remarkable amount of similarity across space in the types of commercial and public service appeals. Advertisements were analyzed by the author and coded according to three general categories of appeals: (1) consumption by individuals and families; (2) consumption by companies and governments; and (3) public service behavior and social norms.<sup>3</sup>

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC are similar in having most of the advertisements consistently directed toward consumption by individuals and families: from 73 percent in Beijing, to 84 percent in New York, 82 percent in Shanghai and 68 percent in Washington, DC. Overall, it can be said that the political capitals of Beijing and Washington, DC have smaller ranges of commercial ads directed at individuals than the advertisements in New York and Shanghai. Beijing has the highest percentage of public service ads – 26 percent – and New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC all have about thirteen to fourteen percent of ads making appeals to people to change their behavior for a public good. Washington, DC is singular here in that it has a large percentage of ads – some 19 percent – that are directed at corporate or government consumption. Beijing, New York and Shanghai have few such ads.

The categorization I have used breaks down the individual consumption advertisements into 11 fairly distinct categories: fashion/cosmetics; food/drink (including restaurants), entertainment (including movies, plays, theatre, music, museums, tourism, airlines), household goods (furniture, suitcases, ceramics, kitchenware), communications/media (including news, print, literature, radio, television, internet, cellphones, computers, DVDs), housing (rent or purchase), transportation (cars, bicycles, motorcycles, public transport, including ads for subways themselves), medicine/health care (including hospitals,

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the surveys do not tally the total number of times each advertisement appears in the subway in the survey period: it tallies the total number of unique messages obtained from the advertisements. So a greater number represents a greater diversity of messages. The surveys of Beijing and Shanghai subways began much earlier than in New York and Washington DC, and have consistently surveyed the advertisements on the core 1, 2 and 3 subway lines. The surveys of advertisements in the postings of the subways in Washington DC – where there are often only 8 or 10 postings per station, in comparison with the 40 or 50 in a typical Shanghai station – were from the red, blue, yellow and green lines. Similar diversity of stations across the range of lines was obtained for Beijing and New York as well. Future surveys in Beijing and Shanghai will attempt to gather advertisements from the new suburban lines, including where they intersect with light rail and high-speed trains for inter-city travel, although thus far these stations have had far fewer advertisements than those in the urban core. There are no current plans for further development of the DC Metro.

**Table 3**

Advertisements in subways directed at companies/governments in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC 2010.

Consumed by company or government	北京 Beijing 2010	上海 Shanghai 2010	DC 2010	NYC 2010
(Percent of All ads that year)	1	5	19	1
Light goods/labor (%)	0	1	0	0
Capital goods (%)	0	1	8	0
Consulting/advertising (%)	1	3	11	1
Financial/insurance (%)	0	1	0	0

clinics, health insurance, pharmaceuticals), education (universities, language schools, training centers), financial/banking (including banking, credit cards, loans, accounting, life insurance), and employment (job agencies, headhunting).

Beijing's top three categories, comprising half of all ad messages, are communications/media (22 percent of all ads), fashion/cosmetics (16 percent) and entertainment (15 percent). Beijing's lowest three categories are household goods (0 percent), housing (1 percent) and employment (1 percent). Shanghai's top three categories, also comprising more than half of all ads, are entertainment (23 percent), fashion/cosmetics (19 percent), and communications/media and food and drink (each 11 percent). Shanghai's lowest three categories are housing, education, transportation and employment (each 1 percent).

New York's top three categories, comprising nearly half of all ads, are entertainment (25 percent), fashion/cosmetics (13 percent) and transportation (10 percent). Its lowest three categories are household goods (0 percent), and housing and employment (each 1 percent). Washington, DC's top three categories, comprising only a third of all advertisements, are entertainment (23 percent), communications/media (9 percent) and food/drink, transportation and education (each 4 percent). Its lowest three categories are household goods (0 percent) and housing, medicine/health care and employment (each 1 percent).

The evidence here supports advertising studies suggesting that advertisements reflect different stages of consumption in national economies. Beijingers and Shanghainese are apparently still mainly interested in purchasing media, clothing and food. New York City's and Washington, DC's residents desire to consume more higher priced items, including vacations, cars, and even houses. Overall, we can see that the advertisements in the subways are accurate reflections of the changing economies and general patterns of consumption in the two societies. We can also see this in the changing patterns of consumption by companies and governments. As seen in Table 3, in 2010 Shanghai had a significant amount (5 percent) of advertisements seeking consumption by companies: mainly office equipment and advertising services. As other research by this author has shown, in 1998 this type of advertisement was eight percent of all ads, as then it included ads for industrial machinery, and even relocation within the Caohejing High-Technology Development Zone. By 2010, however, even Shanghai was closer to the one percent of ads directed at corporate or government consumption that was also seen in New York and Beijing.

In Washington, DC, however, a consistently significant amount since 2004 (from 10 to 20 percent) of commercial advertisements target companies and governments, and in 2010 this was 19 percent. This is most likely so because many of the people riding the Metro each weekday are federal government bureaucrats. Many of the advertisements in Washington, DC are directed toward government purchases of information technology systems, and occasionally toward tourism by government agency employees (i.e. holding organizational study "retreats" in tourist spots).

The categories include: light goods/labor (mainly office supplies, temporary office staff), capital goods (mainly real estate, buildings and in the case of Washington, DC: weapons systems), consulting/advertising (mainly advertising for companies, but also accounting services and, in Washington, DC, security clearance agencies and intelligence/analytic research companies), and financial/insurance (mainly corporate loans and business insurance).

Most vividly, each year in the Washington, DC surveys contain advertisements for such "capital goods" as weapons systems: the littoral cruiser, the C-17 cargo airplane, the presidential helicopter, the advanced air force fighter, etc. Fig. 1 is an example of such an advertisement, from 2010, from a consortium of military technology corporations – Northrop Grumman, BAE Systems, Pratt & Whitney and GE-Rolls Royce – selling the F-35 fighter to nine countries. There were also ads in 2010 for the littoral cruiser and a new Air Force tanker.

It is likely the placement of such advertisements is designed to serve a two-fold purpose. First, they help remind the millions of American citizens visiting the nation's capital as tourists that they should also support the purchase of these systems. Ideally, when they visit the offices of their Congressional representatives – as some tourists do – or when they return home they should promote these purchases with their elected officials. Future research will focus on interviews with the companies placing the ads, and the advertising service companies that work with the Metro subway authority to put them in the subway stations in DC.

Second, such advertisements help remind Federal bureaucrats, including the very large civilian workforce at the Department of Defense that rides the subway to work every day, that in their everyday work they need to support the government purchase of these expensive systems that only governments can buy. Fig. 2 shows one of a series of advertisements filling the subway station for the Pentagon in the summer of 2009: the Palantir information technology system, also "consulting" good according to this study's coding categories.



**Fig. 1.** Advertisement for F-35 lightning in DC Metro in Summer 2010.



**Fig. 2.** Advertisement for Palantir information technology system in Pentagon Station of DC Metro in Summer 2009.

Not all of the advertisements directed at governments and corporations in the DC Metro, however, are targeting federal government agencies themselves. No doubt reflecting the fact that so many Department of Defense employees ride the Metro every day, electronic equipment manufacturers appeal to the individual DOD employee. Fig. 3 shows an ad for notebook computers that suit the field deployment needs of American soldiers.



**Fig. 3.** Ad for notebook computers in Washington, DC Metro in Summer 2010, taken at Pentagon subway station.

**Table 4**

Public goods advertisements in subways in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC in 2010.

Public goods: behavior and thinking	北京 Beijing 2010	上海 Shanghai 2010	DC 2010	NYC 2010
(Percent of all ads that year)	26	14	13	14
Health/sanitation (%)	3	1	4	1
Philanthropy/donation/volunteer (%)	3	1	1	2
Spiritual/religion (%)	3	1	0	0
Politics/justice/patriotism (%)	5	3	2	3
Civil behavior/norms/family (%)	2	4	2	2
Security/safety (%)	4	3	2	5
Environment/energy/nature (%)	6	2	3	2
International/cosmopolitan (%)	0	1	0	0

These forms of commercial advertisements in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC are visual evidence of the general trend toward privatization in this era of globalization. The decline in advertisements directed toward companies in Shanghai coincides with the general reduction in purchases by the traditional socialist “danwei” administrative or production work unit and other work units. The outsourcing of information systems, consulting and even weapons – and thus the advertisements for these products on the DC Metro – is a reflection of the American version of global privatization.

Finally, as seen in Table 4, the survey reveals a large amount of public service advertisements in the four cities in 2010: New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC each around 13–14 percent, and Beijing at a very large 26 percent. I divided the public behavior and public service ads in to eight categories: health/sanitation (mainly disease prevention, keeping public spaces sanitary, but also blood donation), philanthropy/donation/volunteer (mainly asking people to donate money or time for a public good), spiritual/religion (asking people to behave morally because of religious beliefs, but also including celebration of public holidays having a religious basis, including Chinese New Year’s and Christmas); politics/justice/patriotism (asking people to do something for the locality or the nation, or celebrating anniversaries of political events, including national days), civil behavior/norms/family (asking people to be civilized in public, and to respect other family members); security/safety (asking people to be careful to avoid accidents, harmful goods, or crime and terrorism); environment/energy/nature (mainly asking to conserve natural resources, support renewable energy and sustainable urban environments, and protect endangered species), and international/cosmopolitan (asking people to have good relations with people of other nations).

For Beijing, the top three public service ad categories were: environment/energy nature (6 percent) politics/justice/patriotism (5 percent), and security/safety (4 percent). The lowest three public service categories were: international/cosmopolitan (0 percent), civil behavior/norms/family (2 percent) and health/sanitation, philanthropy/donation/volunteer and spiritual/religion (each 3 percent). Many of the spiritual/religion ads in Beijing in 2010 were of Chinese New Year, which had recently passed before the survey. For Shanghai, the top three categories were: civil behavior/norms/family (4 percent), politics/justice/patriotism and security/safety (each at 3 percent). The lowest three categories were all of the remaining categories, each with 1–2 percent. In short, Shanghai had few public service ads, but most of them dealt with civilized public behavior and patriotic issues. In New York City, the top three categories were: security/safety (5 percent), politics/justice/patriotism (3 percent) and philanthropy/donation/volunteer, civil behavior/norms/family and environment/energy/nature (each 2 percent). The New York City subway system has many ads advising people to be careful of old equipment and construction, and to avoid crime and terrorism. Washington, DC’s top three categories were health/sanitation (4 percent), environment/energy/nature (3 percent) and politics/justice/patriotism, civil behavior/norms/family and security/safety (each 2 percent). The large percentage of public service ads in health and sanitation and in environment and energy most likely reflect the presence of concerted advertising campaigns by non-government organizations and corporations trying to influence federal government policy on health care and energy.

Fig. 4 tells Shanghai subway riders that people build cities, and that cities in turn benefit humanity (“renlei chuangzao chengshi, chengshi zaofu renlei”). The advertisement also contains the symbol for the Shanghai Expo 2010 and the Expo’s mascot, Haibao.

Fig. 5 is an example of a more direct appeal to commuters to change their behavior for the public good. Reflecting government and popular concern about the future of family relations after several decades of the “one-child policy”, it asks adult children to be sure to not neglect their elderly parents (“rang jiaomu ye nenggan shoudao nide guanzhu”). The advertisement was designed by a public service advertising agency in Beijing and is part of a series of award-winning public service ads from various localities in China. Text at the bottom of the ad informs the viewer that it is sponsored by the Shanghai State Administration of Industry and Commerce, the Shanghai Advertising Bureau, and the Subway Authorities and Corporations of Shanghai.

Fig. 6 is an example of a public good more and more commonly seen in the advertisements in China’s public spaces: energy conservation, sustainability and environmental protection. It advises people that conserving electricity is like putting money in the (piggy) bank.

Washington, DC public service ads in the subways promote a wider range of public services than their counterparts in Shanghai, and they are also sponsored by a wider range of actors, including governments, non-governmental organization (NGO), and corporations. As seen in Fig. 7, in 2004 a non-governmental organization called Legacy tells smokers that they



Fig. 4. Public service advertisement in Shanghai subway in Spring 2010 promoting civilized behavior.



Fig. 5. Public service advertisement in Shanghai subway in 2010 promoting respectful behavior toward the elderly.

should connect to the internet and go to bobquits.com in order to see how somebody named Bob (a very common name) learns how to quit smoking.

Similarly, as seen in Fig. 8, the USO, a quasi-governmental organization, seeks volunteers to help them entertain American soldiers who are traveling to and from their locations of military service.



Fig. 6. Public service advertisement in Shanghai in 2010 promoting conservation of electricity.

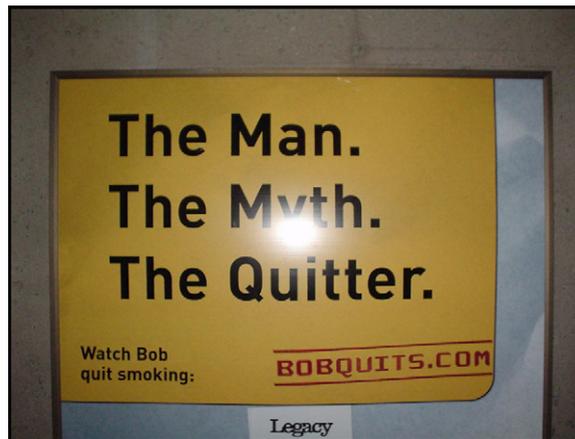


Fig. 7. Public service advertisement in Washington, DC in Summer 2004 directing smokers to consulting help to give up smoking.



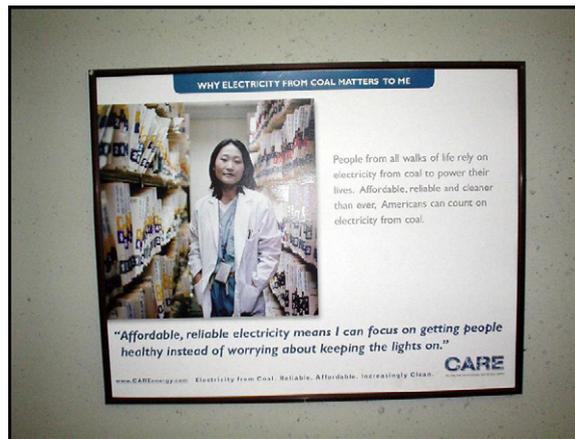
Fig. 8. Public service advertisement in Washington, DC in Summer 2004 asking people to volunteer to help entertain soldiers as part of the United Serviceman's Organization (USO).

Fig. 9 reveals another example of NGOs taking the lead in dealing with public goods problems. A New York NGO called Million Trees NYC seeks donations to make New York public spaces more green.

Fig. 10 reveals yet another form of public service ad common in Washington, DC, and in American public spaces, print and broadcast media: the public service ad supporting specific sectors of the American economy. Here, the American coal industry uses individuals (possibly paid actors) to advise consumers that they need to support the use of coal as a fuel for electricity.



Fig. 9. Public service advertisement in New York City in 2010 asking people to donate to plant more trees in the city.



**Fig. 10.** Public service advertisement in Washington, DC in Summer 2004 asking viewers to support the coal industry as a cheap and reliable source of fuel for electricity.



**Fig. 11.** Public service advertisement in Washington, DC in Summer 2009 asking people to support agricultural and chemical industries.

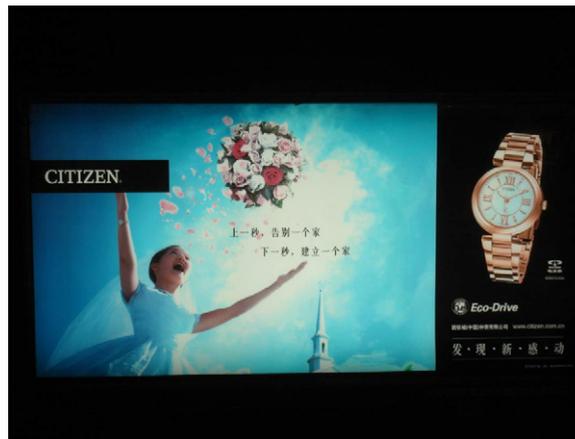
Presumably, they hope that people who see these ads will tell their elected representatives to support legislation to support the coal industry. Perhaps reflecting the renewed emphasis on cleaner sources of fuel, such coal industry advertisements did not appear in Washington, DC subways in 2005 or 2009.

Other companies continue to use these spaces to promote their industries as a means toward their vision of a greater public good. In Fig. 11 the chemical company Monsanto warns of a global population boom and the potential for starvation, and advises that companies such as Monsanto can help solve this problem through the use of their products (mainly pesticides and pest-resistant genetically engineered crops). Apparently they hope that viewers will contact their elected officials to support laws to support the agricultural and chemical industries, and block legislation that bans the popularization of genetically engineered crops.

Overall, the surveys of commercial and public service ads in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC reveal that there are some similarities and yet major differences in the content of the advertisements. Commercial ads in the four cities demonstrate trends toward consumption of more expensive goods, and toward the increasing privatization of government services. The four cities mainly differ in the range of public service advertisements, and the creators and purposes of these ads. Beijing and Shanghai's public service ads are mainly about changing public behavior toward norms that are more beneficial for society, and they are mainly created by the municipal government. New York and Washington, DC's public service ads seek to change a wider range of public behavior, and they are sponsored by governments, NGOs and private companies.

#### 4. Results and discussion: localism, nationalism and transnationalism in subway ads

Previous research demonstrated that advertisements in Beijing and Shanghai and other Asian cities simultaneously ask viewers to belong to local, national and transnational forms of collective identity (Lewis, 2003), but do advertisements in Beijing, Shanghai, New York City and Washington, DC make similar appeals? A cursory examination reveals that they do. Commercial advertisements ask commuters to go to entertainment enjoyed by other Washingtonians (e.g. baseball and



**Fig. 12.** Commercial advertisement from Shanghai Subway Fall 2009 for Citizen watches.



**Fig. 13.** Commercial ad from Beijing subway in 2010 for an English language school.

basketball sports events) and use other local media (e.g. local television and newspapers). Other commercial ads make appeals to nationalist identification: going to the Smithsonian national museum, the National Archive and other tourist sites in the capital. As seen in Fig. 12, Shanghai's subways include commercial ads which make appeals for consumers to think of themselves as a transnational middle class: jet-setting and participating in events and travels that middle class from other countries. Here, an Asian woman sporting a Citizen watch participates in a wedding in, judging by the Western style architecture in the background, what seems to be a foreign country.

Or consider Fig. 13, an ad for a professional English school from Beijing in 2010. It invokes the image of Chinese and foreigners bound together to learn English, and thus helps commuters visualize the concept of a distinctly transnational workplace.

By comparison, as seen in Fig. 14, only a few commercial advertisements in Washington, DC's subways ask commuters to think of themselves as members of a transnational middle class. This advertisement is one of a few asking them to adopt a more transnational lifestyle, one requiring education to compete and work in a global workplace.

More common in New York City and Washington, DC are ads for media and banking services that appeal to the needs and interests of jet-setting consumers and "global citizen". In Fig. 15 see an example of an international banking ad that explicitly compares wealthy Americans to wealthy Russians. In Fig. 16 see an example of an ad for a satellite television service that appeals to Indians living in America. New York City has many advertisements that portray local residents as very diverse in terms of citizenship, ethnicity, religion, etc.



Fig. 14. Advertisement for Johns Hopkins University MBA in Washington, DC subway in 2010.



Fig. 15. New York City subway 2010 commercial ad for HSBC Banking Corporation.



Fig. 16. New York City subway 2010 commercial advertisement for Hindi satellite television service.

In public service ads Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC ask people to change their behavior because they are local, national and transnational citizens. Perhaps reflecting a uniquely city-oriented development theme for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, many public service ads in that city appeal to municipal civic pride. Consider the New York City subway public service ad campaign in summer 2010 that asked commuters to submit photographs they felt portrayed the uniqueness of life in New York City. These can only have helped contribute to local civic identity. For an example, see Fig. 17, a picture of New York City commuters that looks very much like a uniquely New York pairing of people:

All four cities have public service ads asking people to protect the environment and conserve energy because they are global citizens. Most of these are local or national government produced, but increasingly there are more and more NGOs placing such ads in the world's subway spaces. Chinese cities only have a few such ads produced by international NGOs: more specifically through 2010 only the World Wildlife Fund. There are in American cities, however, more and more advertisements for international NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund and Oceana.org, as seen in Fig. 18.



**Fig. 17.** New York City 2010 subway public service advertisement of photographs by commuters.



**Fig. 18.** Advertisement in Washington, DC subway in Summer 2010 for Oceana.org and Environmental Protection.

## 5. Conclusion: summary and future research

The surveys of commercial and public service ads in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC reveal that there are some similarities and yet major differences in the content of the advertisements. Commercial ads in both cities demonstrate trends toward consumption of more expensive goods, and toward the increasing privatization of government services. Advertisements in the subway systems of the four cities mainly differ in the range of public service advertisements, and the creators and purposes of these ads. Beijing and Shanghai's public service ads are mainly about changing public behavior toward norms that are more beneficial for society, and they are mainly created by the municipal government. New York City and Washington, DC's public service ads seek to change a wider range of public behavior, and they are sponsored by governments, NGOs and private companies.

Advertisements in Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC make appeals to commuters to think of themselves as members of local, national and transnational groups, although in China the appeals to belong to transnational groups are mainly in the commercial advertisements, and in New York and Washington, DC such appeals mainly appear in public service ads.

Although the research presented here has revealed some of the important characteristics of these particular forms of ephemera, much research remains to be done before we can understand the extent and the form of their significance in social theory. Marketing research demonstrates that people do in fact pay attention to such advertisements, but do they actually significantly change their consumption habits or change their behavior in response to them? How do commuters feel about the subway stations as public spaces? Do they prefer to see more or less commercial and public service advertisements in them?

Next we must wonder, can these long-term surveys of advertisements allow us to test some of the theories about the role of advertising in effecting social change? For example, some political theorists have hypothesized that the role of women in society and the nature of the militarization of societies occurs through advertising (Enloe, 2000). If this is true, we should observe such changes in long-term studies like these, but how can we determine what changes in advertisements might

reflect a general trend toward the militarization of women and society? Future interdisciplinary work will need to be done in areas like this.

But what do these surveys of advertisements in the public spaces of Beijing, New York, Shanghai and Washington, DC tell us about the potential for truly international or transnational public service advertising?

First, the surveys reveal that public service ads are an important part of communication in public spaces in American and Chinese cities. Between 13 and 26 percent of all messages in advertisements in subways in 2010 in these four cities were public service advertisements. Moreover, as previous research on Beijing and Shanghai, and on Washington, DC has shown, these levels, especially between 10 and 20 percent, have been seen throughout the last decade. Public service ads are themselves not ephemeral: they are a constant feature.

Second, the themes that might appear in international or transnational public service ads are already being portrayed in ads created by local or national governments or NGOs. As this survey of the four cities reveals, every city asks commuters to chip in to solve classic public goods problems experienced by residents of any global city: sanitation, conservation, education, anti-terrorism, health and environmental protection. In Chinese cities these ads are produced mainly by local governments and the national government. There are, however, recently a few ads produced by international NGOs (e.g. World Wildlife Fund). In American cities, ads are produced by a greater variety of actors, including local and national governments, corporations, and local and international NGOs.

Third, the commercial advertisements in all four of these global cities definitely appeal to the idea of a transnational citizen: a transnational consumer citizen. There are advertisements by airlines promoting a jet-setting lifestyle, advertisements by luxury goods that portray middle class consumers who live and play in many countries, and advertisements by schools and banks that cater to the needs of families whose members include young people and businessmen who live and work overseas.

In conclusion, this research suggests that there is already considerable potential for distinctly international or transnational public service advertising. Future research – policy research – should examine the political and economic potential for effecting the cooperation between various local and national governments, and supporting corporations and NGOs to actually produce such advertisements.

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