

In 04th February, Chris Berry has given a talk about the project at the Institute for Chinese Studies, University of Oxford. Read his report of the activity below.

There was a good turnout at Oxford, and a good Q&A. This is the first time I have presented our work to China specialists, and it helped me to think about how it fits into that intellectual lineage.

The talk was on Wujiaochang/Pentagon Plaza -- the retail site in Shanghai. We had a long discussion about the use of the screens for political material as well as advertising, and this is helping me to hone my argument that in China advertising and propaganda are a seamless continuum, and advertising rhetoric and aesthetics is helping the government to move to a much softer way of getting its message across. This could be one of the things that is a bit distinctive about China.

We also spoke about lineages -- both the blackboard idea I've spoken about before and going back to the pre-Communist high consumption mode in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai (many thanks to Mark Elvin for his comments). So, I have a kind of double local lineage to draw on there. It made me think about how the "context" that these screens are inserted into and used as part of is also historical.

There's a big debate in Chinese Studies about ideas of "quality" (*suzhi*) and "civilization" (*wenming*), with a very public discourse in China itself about making people more civilized and of higher quality. So we talked about that, too, and how these screens and the aspirational culture they are part of is all linked up to that.

I got one very good question that I hadn't thought about a whole lot before -- what kinds of ads and messages do you find on these screens that you don't find in other media? That would require quite a bit more thought than I've given to it yet. Maybe it would be a whole other research project for the future!