

Exploring Shanghai through Metro

Xin Jiang

Department of Humanities, Ningbo Dahongying University, Ningbo 315010, China

Abstract: In the era of globalization, metro system has now turned into a multi-functional public place. To date, it not only serves its traditional function as transportation means, but in addition transforms into a media-rich commercialized place filled with ads in various media forms. It is especially true when it is applied to modern urban cities like Shanghai. Shanghai, as one of the fastest developing cities in China, constantly demonstrates features of international, Chinese and Shanghainese city through various forms of visual environment in the city infrastructures. This study aims at exploring Shanghai through its metro system. In other word, it tends to examine the identity of Shanghai through careful analysis of its visual environment within the metro stations so as to see whether it can reflect the generalized three features as international, Chinese and Shanghainese.

Key words: Shanghai metro, the city Shanghai, identity of Shanghai, visual culture, advertising, international, Chinese, Shanghainese.

1. Introduction

Years have witnessed the rapid development of Shanghai metro system. Nowadays, Shanghai metro has become one of the fastest-developing metro systems in the world. There are already 13 public metro lines (from Line 1 to Line 13) and an elevated light rail throughout Shanghai at present: these lines link Shanghai's every core urban districts with the surrounding suburban areas such as Jiading, Songjiang, etc. As Augé [1] points out that, metro is like a miniature of a society. It can reflect the city where it roots in term of its visual environment and its daily users.

This paper devotes to exam the visual environment in Shanghai metro stations so as to give light to the wider perception of what it means to live in Shanghai in the globalized era. In other words, it tends to answer the hypothesis if visual environment in Shanghai metro stations can manifest the city's general identity as an international, Chinese and Shanghainese city and how the new media-rich visual environment in the metro contributes to the reformation of the city's identity in

the new era.

2. Literature review

Since the adoption of reform and opening-up policy, the great economic and social development in China has drawn increasing attention. Shanghai stands on the focal points for urban studies of cities and globalization. Many scholars have applied the paradigm of global cities to study Shanghai [2-4]. These studies examine the international flavor within the city under circumstances of globalization. Notwithstanding an overall background of globalization, Shanghai, like other individual world cities, still demonstrates certain national and local flavor in its visual environment as suggested by Lewis [5]. Those nation and local elements render Shanghai into a more unique city incorporating international, Chinese, and Shanghainese characteristics.

Most people consider metro as an engineering production rather than a work of architecture [6]. To them, metro is just like a highway, bridge or railway, merely serving the purposes of transportation facilities. What's more, Augé argues that metro incorporates solitudes [1]. It is simply because people normally will not invest their feelings into metro stations, even if they are the daily users of them. Therefore, metro stations

Corresponding author: Xin Jiang, master of international communications studies, lecturer; research fields: international communications, and visual image. E-mail: 150534435@qq.com.

turn into, what Augé would call, “non-places”, which are only concrete and symbolic constructions deprived of relational, historical and emotional connection with individuals [7]. Contrary to Augé’s non-place theory, there are other scholars who argue that metro is not merely a work of engineering, and that it is architecture of a city, which bears closely relationship to the city and its culture [5, 6, 8]. To them, metro or subways have always been public spaces full of economic, cultural and political interactions.

What’s more, it is also possible to argue that there are cultural undertones in public spaces like metro stations and these are represented and manifested in a number of ways as well. Culture, on the one hand, according to Kroeber and Kluckhohn [9], refers to a cultivated pattern of way of life shared by a group of people and in return characterizes them. In this way, metro culture could be understood as a whole way of lifestyle expressed by the daily metro users. On the other hand, culture could also be discovered through careful textual and visual analysis or examination [10]. As a result, culture undertones in metro could also be expressed in the visual environment of the metro stations as well.

3. Methodology and Data

3.1 Methodology

The research methods conducted in this project are mainly a combination of qualitative method and quantitative method—the mixed research method.

Quantitative method refers to series of more than a hundred visual images in the metro station taken along the metro lines, ranging from ads, fresco to notices in the underpass, on the platform and inside the carriages. The metro line routine started from Shanghai South Railway Station, through Line 1 to People’s Square, and then through Line 8 and Line 9 to Madang Station—one of the Expo Line (Line 13) Station—and then back through Line 9, Line 2 and Line 3 to South Railway Station. This routine includes 6 metro lines and 18 metro stations, with a wide coverage of

transportation hubs, downtown city center, daily working places and residence (Fig. 1). In a word, the corpus of photos represents a sample of image environment that passengers might expect to see on their journeys interacting with the city either as a home, or as a hub.

Qualitative method incorporates insight analysis, comparison and contrast of the in-hand visual materials, as well as other data. Other data come from promoting activities hosted in the information center within the station, published information about the metro from city authorities, brochures, and the official metro website (shmetro.com). Due to the limitation of time and resources, the collection of the data may not cover all the metro lines and stations in Shanghai, thus the representation of the research may still be problematic.

3.2 Data

Visual data in this research are of great importance. Doing fieldwork in the discipline of visual environment, one of the most effective and common methods would be photographic recording. Collier and Collier, in their classic visual anthropology, suggest that the critical eye of camera, as opposed to researchers’ eyes, can capture precisely the visual images [11]. The main data used in this research come from the writer’s personal records of observation—including written notes and photos. The corpus of ads can be separated into three catalogues: the tunnel ads (Figs. 2a, 2c, 3-5, 7b and 8), the platform ads (Figs. 1b and 9), ads in the carriages (Fig. 7a), and ads on mobile TV (Fig. 10).

Apart from various forms of ads, another genre of posters also can be frequently perceived by the metro users—signs and notices (Fig. 8). These texts are normally issued by the metro authorities to remind passengers for safety purposes, efficient guidance or expected courtesy. All of them are in certain distinctive forms and placements.

The last visual data in the metro station chosen to address here are the frescos on the platform walls



Fig. 1 The routine and metro stations covered during the research.

(Fig. 6). Frescos in metro stations are of various forms and themes. Different from ads and signs or notices, they are entitled a much wider display arena—on the tunnel walls, pillars, or sometimes ceilings. Most of the frescos are closely theme-related to the metro station itself, for instance, we can see wall paintings of circus plays in the Shanghai Circus Station, stairs-shaped books in Shanghai Bookstore Station, and so on. What's more, some other frescos in the station also tell historical and local culture heritage of Shanghai, such as Jin'an Temple Station, Qibao Station, etc.

4. Metro's Evocation

Visual environment can evoke social and cultural meanings in terms of the images, themes and linguistic elements they present [12]. Visual information conveyed in the Shanghai metro station also evokes a spectrum of various identity of Shanghai. At one end of the spectrum, it evokes the international worlds of fashion, science and technologies. At the other end of the spectrum lie the Chinese domains of traditional culture, art and contemporary character. In between

spread the extensive and profound Haipai elements—the natural combination of Chinese and Western culture.

4.1 Evoking the International

It is easy to uncover that visual images in metro stations, especially ads, evoke international flavor in various ways. First and foremost, those ads indicate the rapid development of the urban Shanghai. A great number of advertisements in the metro station are, to a large scale, of international brands. The numerous international brands situated in the metro stations can, to some extent, manifest Shanghai as a commercial agglomeration site, attracting top transnational corporations to invest and branch. Besides, it also shows Shanghai's international consumption capacity and its ability to provide advanced professional

services to the whole world. Besides, visual contents in the ads also backup the international flavor. Models in most of the ads disseminate internationality (Fig. 2a and 2b). They are normally white, young females with well-built figures, looking at the viewers with a seductive gaze. Such images can constantly be viewed on the prosperous streets with big international shopping malls within which most world-famous fashion, cosmetic brands root. The latest fashion news is transferred in no time to the fashion ads in the metro stations by various top fashion brands. And it is quite inviting to notice that little kids now also get much more involved in the ads of children products, but with a much more variety. In the corpus of the data, children in ads are of different racial background, hair style and dressing, happily together promoting certain products (Fig. 2c).



Fig. 2 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author: (a) fashion magazine ads in the tunnel ads boxes; (b) fashion products ads on the platforms; (c) promotion of Expo in the metro tunnels.



Fig. 3 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author.

Last but not least, the linguistic context of the visual environment in metro stations also conveys certain international information. Almost every visual image collected during the research shows the uses of English, either in the brand of the products or in the actual advertising context. Despite the fact that English is not the official language in Shanghai and the comprehension of the English language may not reach certain variety, the use of English language still reinforces the element of internationality in that it reveals the wide coverage of such a linguistic pattern. Furthermore, English is not the only foreign language that can be perceived in metro ads. In Xujiacui Station, an ad of a famous wine in Shanghai advertises “Welcome to Shanghai” in more than 8 languages, including French, German, Korean, Japanese, Arabic, etc (Fig. 3). Apart from ads, notices and signs in the metro station also contains the use of English language.

4.2 Evoking the Chinese

As one of the biggest cities in China, Shanghai undoubtedly remains certain ties to Chinese characters in terms of political, economic and cultural relations [4]. Various Chinese elements can be also perceived from the visual environment in Shanghai metro stations, though the main domains of Chinese elements occupy larger percentage in cultural context than the political or economic aspects.

The most evident Chinese element in the data

collected would be the promoting of Chinese festival culture (Fig. 4). Traditional Chinese festivals are of great importance to Chinese people. Among them, Chinese Lunar New Year is the most grandeur and widely celebrated one. In the festival, elements of celebrating are highly promoted, such as the color red and orange, candies, fireworks, Tangzhuang (a traditional Chinese jacket style originated at the end of Qing Dynasty, established in 1636 and ruling China from 1644 to 1912), etc.

Apart from the traditional festival element, ads in the metro station also reveal certain touches of Chinese art. In South Railway Station, there was an exhibition of paintings and calligraphy by a famous Chinese artist (Fig. 5). Most of the pictures exhibited in the ads light box are water and ink painting—one of the well-known painting skills in China. And the themes of the paintings largely focus on the splendid views of Chinese natural sights such as birds, flowers, mountains, etc. What’s more, calligraphy is renowned as one of the treasured art in China. There are more than hundreds style of writing, and every style tries to demonstrate the grandeur power within the Chinese character in one way or another.

In the metro stations, what reveals a touch of Chinese traditional art not only includes commercial ads, but also incorporates some of the visual objects presented by local metro authorities. Those subjects are mainly composed of propagandas in the standard light



Fig. 4 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author.



Fig. 5 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author.

boxes and frescos on the station walls (Table 5). The themes of those propagandas can be varied in terms of various Chinese traditional arts, such as ancient scrolls, instruments, etc. Frescos in the stations are normally copies of famous Chinese paintings or the latest paintings produced by art students in famous art colleges. None of them indicates the slightest of commercial or political meanings. According to the official website of Shanghai metro, early in 2003, transportation authorities announced that they intend to transfer Shanghai metro station into “a cultural corridor dotted with celebrity quotations and beautiful frescos”.¹ With more than 7 years of planning and renovating, frescos in Shanghai metro station have

covered a substantial amount of stations and made great contributions to the “Brand Building project”, which aims to construct Shanghai Metro as a world renowned transportation brand.²

Besides the traditional festival elements and the art works, visual environment in Shanghai metro station also reveals the other side of the typical Chinese—street spam. Street spam, known as *niu pi xuanguanggao* in Chinese, is quite a common phenomenon in most cities in China. Those illegal, indecent ads or signs have gone rampant in Shanghai for a long period of time and flourished with the development of adverting industry. People can easily find such spam in various forms written or posted on the lamp posts, on the walls, in the public toilets, and

¹Xinhua News. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2003-03/01/content_751953.htm.

²Official website of Shanghai Metro. <http://www.shmetro.com>.



Fig. 6 Frescos in the metro stations, photographed by the author.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 7 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author: (a) hand bars on the trains; (b) promotion of Expo in the tunnels.

any public places you can imagine. As part public transportation system, metro is inevitable not exempt from such plague. Despite the fact that metro authorities have taken great effort to remove all those spam as much as possible, little written graffiti ads can still be discovered in the corner of the light boxes or posters. What's more, several business name cards were also placed inside the hand bars in the train and will remain there until they come into views of the train inspectors (Fig. 7).

4.3 Evoking the Shanghainese

In China, there is a stereotype about Shanghainese that most of them intend to be wealthy, modern, fashion and anti-foreign [13]. Here foreign includes people all over the world that are non-Shanghainese, be it non-Chinese or Chinese. What's more, Shanghainese are believed to be prideful and arrogant. They are

prideful because their hometown has gone through great development over the past decades. They are arrogant because they are convinced that they are unique and unparalleled.

When you reached Shanghai South Railway Station, walking alone the tunnel to take the metro lines, you could not fail to notice a series of wall ads promoting the renowned Shanghainese brands (Fig. 8). It is an exhibition held by Shanghai government and the metro authority to provide a platform for people living in or visiting Shanghai to get the knowledge of famous Shanghai brands. All of the brands have gone through several decades' years of development. And most of them have witnessed the rapid development of Shanghai and have made great economic contributions to it. Those Shanghainese brands are remembered and honored by local people to such a large extent that most of Shanghainese, especially those aged ones, would

have no hesitation in choosing those branded products other than the national or international made ones. It is because those brands, with familiar icons and advertising messages, can evoke memories of the nostalgia of aged Shanghainese in that they grow up together with them. In return, their reminiscence also reinforces those brands of their Shanghai identity and uniqueness.

Every city has its representatives in terms of its world renowned architecture, brands, famous local stars, etc. One of the most representative images of Shanghai would be its skyscrapers. Unlike other modern cities, the architecture style in Shanghai bears its own unique Shanghainese flavor due to historical and cultural background. As one of the biggest port cities in China, Shanghai has been greatly influenced in term of its architecture style since foreign aggression. Along the bank of Huangpu River, a collection of distinctive style foreign concession are well preserved most notably the French concession. After the reform and opening-up develop, a large number of architecturally distinctive skyscrapers have spread

through the whole city, especially in Lvjiazui, Pudong District: Oriental Pearl Tower, Jin Mao Tower, Shanghai World Financial Center, etc (Fig. 8). Apart from the modern buildings, the irreplaceable Shanghai cultural residence Shikumen also can be regarded as a unique representative for Shanghai. Shikumen, meaning stone storage doors, is an old Shanghainese style of residence protected by high walls dotted along the straight alleys named Longtang (Fig. 3, the brand's icon). All these representative architectural images can be traced within the visual environment in metro station, for example, ads in a local wine company named after Shikumen, frescos depicting dazzling night view along the Bund, or the government promotion of the prosperous city image.

Besides architectural images, images of famous local stars can also invite associations to the city. Those living and breath representatives are one of the best outlets for companies or government to promote their Shanghai complex. Consequently, those posters of those images can be spotted in the metro stations here and there, for instance, the image of Liuxiang, one of



Fig. 8 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author: (a) exhibition of Shanghai brands ads in the stations; (b) promotion of the city Shanghai; (c) exhibition of Shanghai brands ads in the stations.

the famous Shanghai athletes, who broke the world record in 110 meter Hurdle, was placed several times in one station. So was the image of a Shanghaiese talk show host, Zhou Libo, who runs his programs only in Shanghai dialect.

4.4 Rethinking the Evocation

As argued in the previous section, visual environment in Shanghai metro station evokes a spectrum of identities of Shanghai. However, it is worthwhile to give those evocations second thought in that reconsideration and reflection may bring out more insightful information than simple observation.

Starting with the international elements, internationality is problematic in term of linguistic context, which is slightly mentioned in the previous section. English is adopted not in an applicable way. The English translated signs or notices, sometimes, or most times, are of wrong spelling and misinterpretation, which bring those signs and notices into the question of their practical usage. What's more, as exemplified in the above section, English sometimes is only limited in the main title, the actual contents of the passage are still in Chinese without any English equivalence (Fig. 9). As a result, for those foreigners with basic knowledge of English, doubts can be still raised in that they may not understand the newly invented Chinglish.

Apart from international aspect, meditation also

needs drawing onto the evocation of Chinese flavor. It is true that visual environment in the metro stations, to certain extent, reflects Chinese traditional art and culture. However, those traditional art and culture including various festivals, or calligraphy, is just a quite small part of Chinese elements, whereas the main part of which—the everyday modern life—is utterly missing. And Chinese counterpart is more than merely combination of festivals and high arts. And these Chinese elements lay most emphasis on those Chinese high arts without a slightest reference to people's everyday culture life.

As for the Shanghaiese elements, attentions should be drawn to the mascot of Shanghai metro station Changchang (Fig. 9b). Changchang means smooth traffic in China. Launched in February 2010, this little mascot is the outcome of months' efforts from many cordial people throughout the country, representing best wishes and outlook to the Shanghai metro from all Chinese. Changchang is the mascot of Shanghai metro, whereas he is also highly Chinese and less Shanghaiese as it presents.

In all, evocations in Shanghai metro are to some extent controversial in one way or another. They reflect Shanghai's identity as an international, Chinese and Shanghaiese city. But these identities are still problematic respectively in that the authenticity of international, Chinese and Shanghaiese are questioned.



Fig. 9 Ads in the metro stations, photographed by the author: (a) metro information boards; (b) mascot Changchang and metro rules.

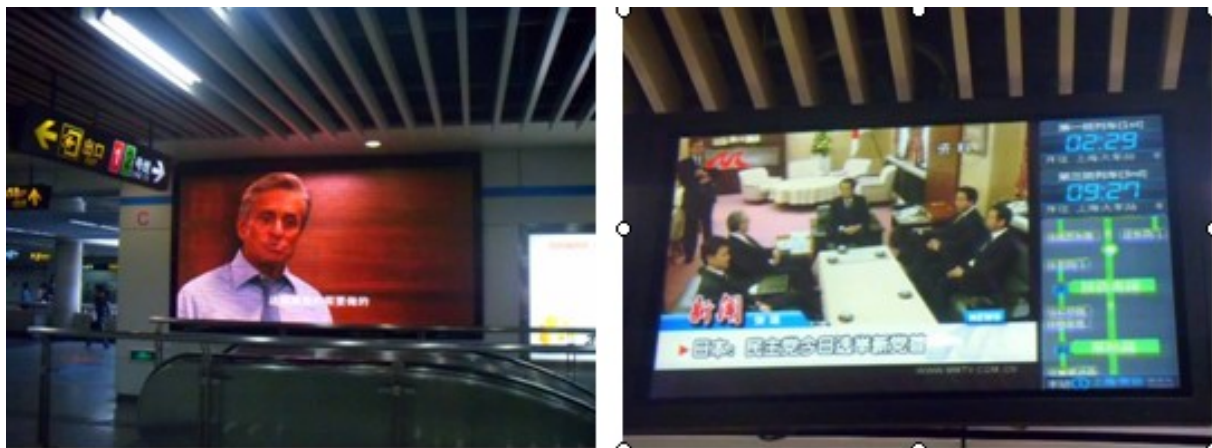


Fig. 10 Mobile TV boards in the metro stations, photographed by the author.

5. Conclusion

To date, Shanghai metro, as a media-rich public place, deserves certain attention from the urban studies as it has become a multi-functional place rather than architecture just for transportation system. Sophisticated visual environments within the metro stations not only evoke Shanghai's general identity as an international, Chinese and Shanghainese city, but in addition demonstrate unique mixed features in reshaping the local identity with its subtle but powerful influences.

In the globalization era, Shanghai's identity as an international, Chinese and Shanghainese city are reflected by its metro stations through the media-rich environment. In return, such media-rich environment also imperceptibly exerts influence on the formation of the local identity. While visual environment in the metro stations is of various forms and objective in a sense, the anthropological approach may be involve more complex and sophisticated research and analysis. As a result, it would be interesting to see whether such metro evocations can be reinforced through anthropological approach, which could be considered as a future research possibility.

References

- [1] Augé, M. 2002 *In the Metro*, translated by Conley, T. Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press.
- [2] Wu, F. 2003. 'The Global and Local Dimensions of Place-Making: Remaking Shanghai as a World City.' *Urban Studies* 37 (8): 1359-77.
- [3] Ye, L. 2004. "Is Shanghai a 'Global City'?" Presented at City Features—International Conference on Globalism and Urban Change, July 8-10, Chicago: University of Louisville.
- [4] Yusuf, S., and Wu, W. 2002. "Pathways to a World City: Shanghai Rising in an Era of Globalisation." *Urban Studies* 39 (7): 1213-40.
- [5] Lewis, S. W. 2003. "The Media of New Public Spaces in Global Cities: Subway Advertising in Beijing, Hongkong, Shanghai and Taipei." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 17 (3): 261-72.
- [6] Schrag, Z. M. 2006. *Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro*. Baltimore, MD, USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [7] Augé, M. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, translated by Howe, J. London: Verso.
- [8] Lynch, K. 1960. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [9] Kroeber, A. L., and Kluckhohn, C. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. New York: Vintage Books.
- [10] Meehan, E. R 2001. "Culture: Text or Artifact or Action?." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25 (3): 208-17.
- [11] Collier, J., Jr., and Collier, M. 1986. *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- [12] Stanczak, G. C. 2007. *Visual Research Methods: Images, Methodologies, and Generating Social Knowledge*, edited by Stanczak, G. C. US: Sage Publications.
- [13] McDaniel, L. 2001. "'Jumping the Dragon Gate': Torytellers and the Creation of the Shanghai Identity." *Modern China* 27: 484-507.