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# Screening Tiananmen

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By Chris Berry

Recently, I've been spending a lot more time in Shanghai than in Beijing. This is because of a research project comparing moving image screens—mostly Lighting-Emitting Diode (LED) screens—as part of everyday culture in public places in Cairo, Shanghai and London. (If you're interested, you can read more about that [here](#).) But in the meantime, I had heard about the Jumbotron screen installed in the middle of Tiananmen Square. So, when I made it back to Beijing for the first time since just before the 2008 Olympics to do a bit of teaching at the Chinese Film summer school organized by Yomi Braester and hosted at the Beijing Film Academy, I couldn't resist going down to Tiananmen again. Here are some notes I made after my return.

## 20 July 2011

I arrived at about 4.30 p.m. at Tiananmen East subway station, in search of the Jumbotron screen I have heard now sits in Tiananmen Square. Although Beijing is not one of the cities in our research project and a Jumbotron screen is hardly an everyday screen, I couldn't stop myself. On the way, I noticed that the Beijing subway system's screen installations are very similar to those in Shanghai. There are pairs of screenings facing both ways and perpendicular to the tracks on each platform. These are supposed to show news and entertainment programming plus advertising at the same time, as their draw the passenger's eye because they also have information about the next train. However, this being Beijing rather than Shanghai, where things are more smoothly organized with an eye towards commercial advantage, I noticed that most of the time there was no information about the next train, and so no one was watching. On the trains, there are screens by the door, much as in Shanghai, and also much as in Shanghai, sometimes they are working and sometimes not. Sometimes, they just have information about the next station, and no advertising. On line 5 today on my way back during the peak of the rush hour, they were screening live coverage of traffic conditions above ground, just to let you know that the involuntary intimacy experience of the subway was worth it to avoid the stasis of the traffic jams above. The main difference I could observe on the subways was that on lines 1 and 2, there is a special kind of advertising that Lydia Liu tipped me off about a couple of years ago and I have never seen anywhere else. When the train gets to a particular speed (it seems), advertisements appear to be projected onto the wall of the tunnel, at waist height if you are standing. I have no idea how this is achieved technologically. However, most of the ads appeared to be for local products of no particular prestige, so it does not seem to be considered a highly desirable form of advertising.

At Tiananmen Square, I found that the most visible thing on a murky day like today is the screen. Or, to be more precise, it is the pair of screens. About half way between Tiananmen Gate at the north end facing the square with Mao's portrait, and Mao's Mausoleum in the middle of the square, is the Monument to the People's Heroes. Now, on either side, and facing back up towards the Tiananmen Gate, there are a pair of giant screens (see figure 1). I guess these are meant to be framing the Monument. But unless you are standing directly in front of the Monument, they obscure it. And their brightness certainly draws more attention. This seems to capture the relationship between the old and the new in China today. In theory, marketization is there to complement and support socialism, but sometimes it also seems designed to distract from the survival of the political system it is simultaneously propping up. Is this Debord's "society of the spectacle" with Chinese characteristics?



Figure 1: The Jumbotron screens shine from afar.

I gather the material displayed on the screens changes. Today, it was all about the upcoming 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Every ten minutes or so, the screens went through a series of slogans (white characters on a red background). In between, there were different celebratory montages. When I arrived, it was a montage congratulating the motherland and celebrating in dance. There were images of all the different nationalities (or at least the more recognisable ones) dancing and stirring orchestral music (see figure 2). I took a lot of photos. A logo indicated this had been contributed by China Central Television (CCTV, who presumably paid for it?). The next montage was all about Jiangsu, and looked like a combination tourist advertisement and a "come live/set up your business" ad. I wandered off after that. On the way back, I saw the end of a Beijing TV (BTV)-branded piece all about saluting the flag, and the beginning of a piece displaying the loveliness of Shenzhen. I wonder what the financial arrangements are concerning this material? On the surface, this appears to be a conventional commercial sponsorship situation. The screen is in a special place, viewed by many thousands of Chinese as they visit the square. Although it is not a one-off televised event like the Super Bowl, presumably this is a valuable screen to have your name exposed on. Do media organizations like CCTV and BTV eagerly compete for and pay good money for their ten minutes? Or have they been called upon to contribute these pieces? Or are they paid by the Party to produce them? And what about the local montages? Do they come from municipalities or provincial governments, or the local television stations? It wasn't quite clear to me. However, all these organisations are state-owned, and the state is controlled by the Party, just as almost all the important figures in these organizations are Party members. So, although the appearance might be of numerous friends and family eager

to wish the Party a happy ninetieth birthday, the whole thing has a “happy birthday to me” feel about it.



Figure 2: All the nationalities celebrate, and the screen is a new photo opportunity for visitors to the square.

While I was looking at the screens, twice I had the interesting and unexpected experience of young women wandering by, asking “Hi! Where are you from? Do you speak English?” as they passed behind me. Who would have expected that with all the cops crawling all over Tiananmen, the place would be a hooker’s pick-up spot? Apart from that, all of Zhang Yuan and Duan Jinchuan’s observations of the tourists, cops, soldiers, and Beijing public jostling for use of the square in their 1996 observational documentary, *The Square*, are re-confirmed. I was impressed by the sheer range of police transport, which even included Segways. Right behind the big screens seemed to be a favorite parking place for various police vehicles (see figure 3). The instinct to tuck things away is significant itself. Of course, for a long time Tiananmen has been physically organized to signify openness and accessibility, lying at the centre of various public transport routes and with no visible barriers to access. And yet, in practice, you can only cross the street to get to the square at certain designated points, and taxis cannot stop and drop off or pick up passengers right at the square. If you enter via one of the tunnels leading from the subway station, you have to put your bags through a scanner. Once you’re on the square, the other ubiquitous form of screen technology is the surveillance camera, linked back to screens in a nearby control room, no doubt (see figure 4).



Figure 3: Behind the screen.



Figure 4: Notice the surveillance cameras on the lamppost to the right.

At the same time as I noticed the cops on Segway scooters, I also noticed that I wasn't the only person fascinated by the screens. Other visitors were also clustered around them and sometimes taking pictures of each other in front of the screens (see figure 5). So, they are a new tourist attraction that people want to be photographed in front of when they finally make that visit to Tiananmen. (One young man asked to be photographed next to me. I could probably make a bit of money on the side by being a professional foreigner for people from the sticks to be photographed next to!)



Figure 5: Outside the Mao Mausoleum.

Standing in front of the screens, I also noticed something that I would probably have passed by completely were it not for the research we have already done in Shanghai. In the far distance, I noticed green Chinese character LED slide show screens. There are two of them, either side of the entrance to the Mausoleum, and they echo the larger Jumbotron screens—a pair, either side of a central edifice, facing north. On the slide show is simple practical information about visiting, including one slide in English (see figure 6). Then, turning round, I noticed another LED, but this time a yellow-charactered “walking word” (走字) screen above the small cop hut on the West side of the square. The message was asking people to be vigilant and accept security measures, and thanking them (see figure 6).



Figure 6: The police booth on the west side of the square.

Everyone notices the Jumbotron screens in Tiananmen and lots of people have commented about them. But in fact, they are not the only LED screens in Tiananmen. In addition to the spectacular and eye-catching screens, two other forms are also there: the relatively smaller and less spectacular slide show-style and "walking words" screens. Here, the "moving image" consists almost entirely of Chinese characters. If Tiananmen is a sort of heterotopic space that condenses all of China, this is true for China's screen culture, too. Across the country, huge screens catch your eye. But even more common are the smaller slide-show and walking word screens, seen far less frequently outside East Asia. And, finally, of course, there is the other element of screen culture in public spaces: surveillance cameras. What does this tell us about public space in China today? It is structures as the space of the spectacle and consumption, but not of communication among the people who gather there, nor is spontaneity encouraged. Instead, the public are led by the messages on the smaller screens to understand their preferred role, and to regulate themselves. And if they don't regulate themselves, the surveillance cameras should spot any deviant behaviour before it gets out of hand. In today's neo-liberal society, how different is this from public spaces in so-called "Western" countries? Perhaps this scene seems similar at first, but in principle at least, the political structure that lies behind it is very different. The looking-at-while-being-looked-at structure will remind many people of Orwell. However, not only is the mood much less sombre, but also my encounter with the hookers may indicate even the most elaborate structures of control are far from infallible.

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