Big Changes, Big Characters: Public Development Discourse in Yunnan, China

John Couper

Gulf University for Science and Technology,
Masjid Al Aqsa Street, Mubarak Al-Abdullah - Kuwait.
Email: couperjohn@hotmail.com, Phone +965 95504711

Cui Litang

Guangzhou Huaxia Technical College
Guangzhou, Conghua District, Guangdong - P.R. China.
Email: clitang@aol.com, Phone +86 20 7087699363

Abstract In China, 'Big Character' posters have represented public discourse for centuries, now updated as billboards, posters, and banners. This study analyzes public discourse on development and politics to understand representations of tradition, globalization and modernization in Yunnan Province, China. Signage by authorities, corporations, and community groups ranges from paper calligraphy to Internet dissent. The authors used Social Semiotics to investigate explicit and implicit codes, both verbal and visual on three levels. Government signage aligns citizens with governmental values, actions, and politics. Commercial signage strengthens community acceptance of development. Community signage gently criticizes local government and requests help. Results indicated that community members enjoyed unusual, if circumscribed, freedom to comment and criticize. The authors theorize various functions of public discourses on development in a region that is experiencing dramatic change and resistance. The study also suggests a framework for analyzing public discourse.

Keywords: China, Public Discourse, Ideology, Billboards, Social Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The explosive development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is both well-orchestrated and widely-recognized. Government control over the media and information, encourage outsiders to imagine China's information as monolithic.

However, the nation's tradition of public discussion of issues goes back for many centuries; it was used extensively during the Cultural Revolution and continues, adapted through modern technology (Mann, 1984). 'Big Character' posters, for decades an important way to interchange information and ideas, have been adapted and updated although their role is diminished. These large, usually polemical paper posters represented one of very few open avenues for dialog on such social issues as urban development, health, the environment, and corruption. This tradition influences modern variations.

This research attempts to understand public discourse on modernization and change as seen in signage in a rapidly–modernizing region of China. The signage varied widely in its professionalism and goals, differences that are revealing in themselves. This study explores how development has recently been represented and contested in public discourse, within interacting economic, political, cultural, and social factors. Its 'recent history' perspective locates signage in a long trajectory of public discourse. The result is a snapshot of public discourse in the recent past, both for theoretical interest and as part of a history of discourse in this rapidly-changing nation. The singular opportunity for Chinese citizens to publicly respond to authorities via banners, billboards, posters etc. is significant and, apparently, being reduced by official regulations.

This interdisciplinary study focused on development discourse in two urban areas in Yunnan Province, in the tropical southwest of China. Kunming, its most populous city, experienced dramatic reconstruction and creation with a disruptive city-wide metro system, now largely complete. Jinghong has been considered a quiet regional town on the

Mekong River with homes that were, until recently, dominated by traditional Dai wooden structures. The central government now is relocating most residents to huge new apartment buildings along the river.

The research questions of this study are 'Which contesting meanings of modernization were apparent in public discourse in Yunnan, China?' and 'What were the societal, cultural, political, and historical implications of this discourse?'.

Public discourse allows the State and its citizens to rally and marshal the general morale and efforts. In chapter 24 of the Confucian Analects (trans. James Legge, 1861) this is metaphorically referred to as the wooden bell clapper: 'The kingdom has long been without the principles of truth and right; Heaven is going to use your master as a bell with its wooden tongue'. The bell was rung to notify and rally the masses before making important public announcements. This ancient text points up the emergence and importance of public sphere and political communication in the early Kingdom.

Big Character posters originated in Imperial China for official announcements and education, but their use increased in the 20th century with the spread of literacy (Cushing & Tomkins, 2007) and with the political purposes of Chinese cultural revolution (1966-1976), the April 5th movement (1976), the Xidan Democratic Wall (1979), and the Tian'an Men incident (1989). Such posters represent a public-sphere genre in its own right-at 'self-criticism' forums, class-struggle meetings or political study sessions, whether at the level of residential streets, or by production teams/team groups. They played a unique role based on communal proximity, though sometimes people travelled to read Big Character posters.

These posters have been influential more because of their unusual and explicit content than for their practical or aesthetic form. Some named their authors, while others were anonymous. As alternative declarations that competed with, or added to, official statements, propaganda and calls to action, they praised, criticized or tried to subvert and

redefine; for example, one famous Big Character poster author represented democracy as the 'Fifth Modernisation.'

Big Character signage and its newer off springs are the most open, accessible form of public communication available for ordinary Chinese citizens and communities. As such, these signs are a unique window into a society whose rapid change inevitably creates exhortations, frustrations, and disputes. It is equally accessible to scholars to identify changing parameters of discourse surrounding development. In that sense, this communication—both what is public and what is absent-offers a small but intriguing view into recent contemporary Chinese society.

Historically, Big Character posters offered a rare outlet for political and ideological dissidents (Leys, 1987). Before the modern era, paper in China was too precious to use for public discourse. However, mass production of paper allowed political statements to be prominently displayed in public areas.

The form and its recent variations have served as announcements, notifications, commentary, presentations, promotions or propaganda. They might be billboards (street-side newspaper-reading windows, print or electronic), or hung banners (on walls, spanning a street, in print or in neon lights). They are mostly designed to serve: 1. social/political agenda's (in addition to the political propaganda and policy making); 2. the social/economic agenda's (residential development, mega buildings vs. cityscapes etc.); and 3. public utility (e.g., weather reports).

Public posters largely reflected the state-run media ecosystem in mainland China, mostly strictly controlled but sometimes open to social commentators eager to push the official envelope. Recent decades witnessed the renewed flourishing of Big Character posters, before it tolled its dirge and decreased as a unique form of free expressions. Technology now allows the same functions to be served by emerging, enormously popular social media–with decreasing obstacles and the menace of big discourse plastered onto brick and mortar, like those analyzed below. However, local discourse has generally been tolerated by officials; the

national accessibility of online discourse has led to enormous, well-known institutional efforts to control anything on the Internet.

In few other areas has public communication evolved so drastically, both in forms and function, reflecting the social and economic changes that have taken place. To the extent that McLuhan (1964) was correct in his claims of technology determinism, despite a looming question will remain how much more-will need to be in place, before they make influence on public discourse, shaping public opinions and shared community values. While national public policy, practices and developments are verbally and visually trumpeted in all other public media, it seems worthwhile to note the conclusion of a printed, pre-Internet, interactive form of public dialog.

Within China's enormous media-scape, public political signage has been a distinctive and meaningful aspect of public discourse. Chairman Mao essentially used the "Big Character" form to criticize an enemy who had been an ally. In the late 1960s and afterwards, the Cultural Revolution sparked an explosion of such posters, which promoted official ideas for public consumption and attitude change. Deng Xiaoping's Reformation was a hybrid of communism and capitalism that continued this tradition: adapting traditional public culture with advertising-style techniques for announcements and mobilization.

This form has been used increasingly by the government, using modern technology, to professionally produce billboards and posters for public education purposes, albeit framed by traditional codes. For example, many official signs now exhort the population to be more civilized, protect the environment, and to develop the community's living standards.

Alongside official signage, communities across China have some freedom to express their needs, frustrations, and priorities that coexist with professionally-produced official signage. Locally-initiated discourse is tolerated as a way for communities to speak to their neighbours and to the government, within narrow limits. Some dissent is

permitted, though any community posters that criticize the central government are immediately removed and the people associated with them are likely to be arrested. This community signage, although not extremely common, appears across China, though apparently decreasingly.

In Chinese society, mass media are fully constrained and controlled by government policies: letters to the editor, editorials and similar channels of dissent are not permitted. For this reason, any open communication is both socially and theoretically significant. The continuation of what might be called 'New Big Character' messages is a unique way for communities to directly speak to their corner of the world, such as neighbours and the local government offices. Presumably, one reason the government allows this exceptional form of expression is that it permits strictly controlled feedback from citizens, such as protests of local government malfeasance that might alert officials to problems. To some extent, locals see it as a rare opportunity for dialogue: communities can disagree with policies and local government actions, and government posters are sometimes mounted on or beside local community banners.

The Social Semiotics method (Jensen, 1995) provides a useful approach to collecting and analysing data, explicating both the rich meanings of texts themselves and their relation to the social context. To guide the analysis, the authors focused on identifying and analysing codes as 'explicit/implicit' and 'visual/verbal'.

The authors collected data in China's Yunnan Province as an excellent representation of rapid globalization in a relatively traditional and rural area. The first author took photographs of all available billboards, banner, and poster related to development in Kunming city and Jinghong town. Photographs of 84 public signs (billboards, posters, and banners) were collected during a trip to Kunming and Jinghong by the first author and Naila Couper in 2013. Every such sign of potential significance was photographed for later analysis. The analytical method used was social semiotics, which the authors adapted to identify four dimensions: explicit visual, explicit verbal, implicit visual, and implicit

verbal. Cultural, social, ideological, economic, ecological and other meanings were analysed. Beyond denotative and connotative meanings, this process noted patterns of meanings across sets of texts-such as official and community-and by topic. In addition to implicit meanings, broader associations that local passer-by are likely to make were noted and analysed; an example is the suggestion of unrealistic ease in a representation of an empty park bench in an unpopulated park. The final step of the analysis was to consider and integrate patterns of interactions and associations within the social/political context of China, including those that could have been included but were not.

DISCUSSION
Visions of Development

The People's Republic of China (PRC) puts great emphasis on development. However, it is unrealistic to assume that all Chinese citizens unquestioningly accept and desire high-rise buildings and shopping malls; citizens agree that many people, especially elders, reject such change. This dissatisfaction is exacerbated in areas in which old buildings-and therefore communities–are being torn down to make way for new development. The destruction of neighbour-hoods for the Beijing Olympics is a recent case. While many people welcome the opportunity to buy more products in modern shopping areas, they are generally considered to be less happy when familiar neighbour-hoods and homes are torn down, and when they are told where to move by the government, often into newer but less desirable homes with a higher price. Frustration with change is inevitable in any society, but China offers citizens very few avenues to express dissatisfaction.

After 1980, the political and social system of China under Deng Xiaoping quickly shifted from socialism to a form of political organization called 'Chinese socialism.' (Kraus, 1977). This means that, while society is extremely centralized, consumerism, industrial production for export, westernization of institutions and projects, etc. have become dispersed and predominant (Massey, 2000). Yunnan

province, in the warm southwest of China, is a large and relatively unindustrialized province; it has the nation's greatest diversity of natural ecologies and cultural groups. It has been both protected by the government, and yet the target of massive, forced population translocation and construction.

The Chinese government and people have complex understandings of globalization and modernization (Kang, 1996). The government wants to benefit from Western technologies and institutions, while filtering out factors such as public dissent and calls to decentralize power. Chinese people, on the other hand have a less ideological focus, although a large number accept the government ideology and priorities (Boutonet, 2011). At the same time, both the government and population of China are understandably proud of an ancient and productive culture as well as such social traditions as a strong family and community life.

The PRC government works not only to centralize the physical living spaces of its population, but also to shape the symbolic spaces of ideology, as in the huge program to control Internet content. China, with its impressive literary tradition, displays a rich mix of meanings, such as in government proclamations that combine socialist slogans with calls to capitalist activities. This inherent friction and tension of change are especially predictable in areas where urbanization and globalization are most dramatic.

Murphy (2004) concluded that state institutions in China apply a concept of 'population quality' (in Mandarin, 'suzhi') to support and enact policies. These include speeding demographic transitions, restructuring education, professionalizing labour markets, promoting agricultural competence, instilling economic liberalism, and promoting messages of patriotism. Although Murphy's focus was education, it evinced parallels with public-discourse efforts, such as those of the current study. She suggested that 'suzhi' discourse is designed to a) project policy coherence, b) suggest state concern for the benefit of citizens, c) argue that the population itself is responsible for ensuring improvements and thus exculpate the state for problems,

and d) call for citizen self-control to fit societal norms and expectations.

Chinese Signage and Public Discourse

The use of signage for public dialogue is a very Chinese piece in its development puzzle. As part of the process of transforming Chinese society and culture, the government locates millions of public signage that try to convince its people of the value of centralized pressures for change, such as modernization and ecological protection. Technological and social norms are often framed in terms of traditional pride, such as civilization and family. These calls for unity and action reflect, to some extent, class differences that are re-emerging in the China of broadening disparities between the wealthy and the working class. They also reflect pressures for and against government-controlled urbanization, the centre-piece of Chinese modernisation.

The Chinese tradition of 'Big Character' signs was embraced and developed during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. It became both a form of discursive democracy-allowing individuals to present their opinions to the community-as well as a form of mobilization and indoctrination by the government. Special areas for large signs spread across the country and became part of the Chinese approach to community building and community control. This tradition has been updated in modern times through large posters, billboards, and banners that are tolerated much more than other forms of public expression (Nabudere, 1997).

Public Discourse

Every society and time has its own approach to community dialogue about important issues (Williams, 1996; Gandy, 2006). This Public Discourse is one way that societies regulate, share and elaborate meanings in the community. Chinese society is unusual in having sharp, widespread limits on such discourse, while allowing the dramatic and democratic option of opinion billboards. This signage can include attitudes toward dissent and public discussion of

rapid and dramatic changes that are transforming Chinese society, landscape, and ideology (Thornton, 2002).

Access to publicly–placed billboards is an international phenomenon (Johnson, 2008), although in the West such communication is dominated by commercial messages. Soderman & Dolles (2015), for example, found that in emerging markets public media, including billboards and posters, displays distinctive methods to influence behaviors that help reach commercial strategic goals.

Worth and Kuhling (2004) argued that culture needs to be considered partly as resistance to globalizing and consumerist changes, focusing on how local rejection of hegemonic influences suggests the need to consider wider issues of diversity and local autonomy. The authors posited a binary dynamic in which power structures encourage when possible, but impose when necessary, acceptance of globalising economic emphases that have fundamental implications for sub-groups and for cultures.

Jun et al (2016) studied the sources of distinctiveness in responses to billboard advertising in New York City—how latent constructs influenced advertising effects. They found that message congruence (or resonance) was associated with emotional responses, while symbolic values on the billboards was related more to media values.

'Zones of In-distinction', according to Gandy (2006), are bio-political urban contestations. Examples include discourses on public health and concepts of 'urban order'. He concludes that the dynamics of modern urban space combine various sources of power. Our understanding of power should consider rhizomes of power that, to some extent, help reconcile contradictions. Some of these "zones of in-distinction" are separate from conventional "shifting strategies for determining modes of inclusion and exclusion. These power geometries are linked by a web of different mechanisms and belief systems" (p. 511).

Savell et al (2015) focused on public media to identify patterns in traditional and non-traditional tobacco marketing and found contrasts tailored to income and urban/rural characteristics. Globalisation, a process that merges the

international and the local, has been defined as 'the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or– in more general vein– the universal and the particular' (Robertson 1994, pp. 38 - 39). This process is clear in development communication in the PRC, such as using western advertising practices with Chinese culture. Mohanty (1991) surveyed historical and then-current aspects of 'freedom discourse' in official responses that apply globalising effects to message-based rejections of modernization discourse.

Lucie-Smith (2002) reported on the widespread use in Iran of posters and billboards, as well as other commercial artefacts, that proposed or responded to official policy (such as birth control) and those (such as music) related to culture and art, among much larger number of billboards supporting the government. He found an imbalanced but lively dialog in which non-official groups and counter-official cultural trends, such as western music, could be inferred from a wide variety of public discourse materials and statements by citizens.

Myanmar's military junta often calls for harmony, according to Holliday (2007). He found that its constant, narrow and self-serving conception of unity, however, have led to a 'degenerate' militaristic argument that emphasizes centralized power but distributed responsibility for defending the nation. These, wrote Holliday, echo Chinese philosophy and comparisons to Chinese appeals for harmony that are mixed with claims of accepting diversity. Such discourse is often evident in urban billboards and signs that are scattered but especially common in prominent locations, with messages such as 'Towards a new nation with the united strength of the people'. The author saw official characterizations of harmony as very narrow and, although slogans mention the popular foundation of harmony, theirs is a top-down and "imposed unity" (p. 391). Holliday offered three reasons that a 'governance of harmony' is difficult, certainly as pursued in Myanmar, and argues that 'it would be better to push harmony discourse to one side and engage

in open and transparent codification of rights, powers, responsibilities, and duties' (p. 392).

The government of the People's Republic of China, Dynon (2008) reported, uses ubiquitous public pronouncements of the importance of civilization, and appeals to tradition-based moralities, to shape economic growth and change. Official pronouncements attempt to create and disseminate a new, synthetic understanding of civilization, whose values can refer to and draw on both material and spiritual civilization, without substantially abandoning post–Revolution ideological principles.

Finding Results

Results are presented in two sections, each categorized as either verbal or visual, or explicit and implicit. Section A provides representative texts from the four sets of data mentioned above. The numbers at the end of each text identify each piece of signage, based on the metadata attached to each frame by the camera. Section B. explains patterns identified by the 'authors' interpretation within and across the data.

'Explicit verbal' texts

'Support the real estate right law of the People's Republic of China! Kun Fang (Kunming Textile) Rights Protector' (7253)

'Long live the Communist Party of China! We want to survive! We will never be moved! We will keep every inch of the land of Kunfang textile factory workers' (7256)

'Build a Civilized Jionghong City/Be a Happy Jinghong Person' (7164)

'Be an umbrella against some officials to protect Junfa' (regional real estate company) (7254)

'The government should be trustworthy, be concerned about public opinion, care about the welfare of the public, seriously keep the difficulties of Kunfang workers to heart.' (7263)

'Kunming Metro thanks the whole number of Kunming citizens for understanding and supporting Kunming Metro construction. Textual lines along the bottom provides informative details about the company, such as the administration, construction time, and the full name of the Metro company'. (1040)

Representative 'Explicit visual' analyses

The gold-coloured letters on a long red banner are very simple but have similar colour scheme and look like billboards produced by the government. The colours are standard and conventional Chinese colour scheme. The lettering is simple but professionally printed. (7253)

One sign is two parallel banners stretched across a fairly narrow street. They are gold on red, the usual form from this same group (7256)

Two hands in a white-sleeved, buttoned shirt are holding a heart, whose shape they mimic; blood is dripping from the fingers at the bottom of the heart. The hands have a glow around them, caused by white halo effect; one drop of blood at the bottom of the heart leads directly to the verbal text "one drop of blood, one piece of heart". (7272)

The foreground is a blue Lake with hundreds of white birds, apparently ducks, spaced evenly across the water. The low, mid-distance cityscape includes park trees on the left and right, with half-hidden buildings at the centre. One multi-story building rises above the trees and other lower buildings. No people are visible. (1040)

A very graphic government poster with drop-down hands in the middle of a large green field on left and right; an apple is implied in the design at the top of the earth, that has two shapely leaves on the top right side; the globe shows the Western Hemisphere, not Asia; a light green glow surrounds the planet.

'Implicit verbal' analyses

One banner, produced by a community group, suggests that a good law is on the books, but politely points out that the law is poorly implemented and enforced. The implication is that the community should not depend on current

enforcement but to make sure that it is genuinely followed in accordance with current laws. By including the name of the group, the banner might invite the community to support them. (7253).

Banner 7256, on a main neighborhood street of Kunming ('Long live the Communist Party of China! We want to survive! We will never be moved!/ We will keep every inch of the land of Kunfang textile factory workers') is relatively aggressive and challenging. Although it begins by celebrating the Party, it quickly calls for resistance to efforts to make workers move away from their present housing-a common practice that is universally considered to contradict the law. (7256)

One text produced by the Metro construction company, acknowledges citizen inconvenience because of major construction site across the city, and asks for their understanding. This relationship shows unusual respect for citizens, linking a request for toleration with the goals and future of the project. Not mentioning beauty or civilization, the text focuses on social interactions rather than modernization, etc. (1040)

The central implications of one long banner (erected by a community group) are trust, concern, care, and empathy. The government should create trust, show human values toward the general public and specifically toward the workers who put up the sign and who live in the neighbour-hood. By stating what the government should do, the banner implies that it does not now do this sufficiently. (7263)

A community protest banner was placed, with possible irony, to cover the top half of a government-sponsored billboard, suggesting a deliberate or accidental contrasting message that people are not concerned with happiness, but with survival in their current homes. (7262a)

Text 7254 suggests that citizens are opposed to the protection of the JunfA private company by local officials. The 'umbrella' is a common metaphor for the need to protect people from undesirable problems-criticizing particular officials who it claims prevent implementation of zoning laws.

The text (on the Metro construction) invokes social priorities with words such as 'travelled together' and 'harmonious society'; invoke movement with the words such as 'travel' and 'road'; and passion and determination with words such as 'wholeheartedly'. (7269)

'Implicit visual' analyses

The use of a conventional, bright colour scheme suggests that this for action could be mistaken for a government sign-a common attempt at increasing credibility. (7255)

By echoing government billboards style, and Chinese conventions, and by being professionally mounted on the wall, the community-based banner suggests authority and official status. (7253)

The bright colours of the lettering suggest purity and, with a slight glow slightly on the left side, balances the composition and draws the eyes to the lettering while balancing it with the globe. (7271)

In this pro-Metro billboard, the natural foreground suggests peace and a healthy environment, exemplified by the large number of birds. Clouds and buildings are reflected in the water, linking natural and constructed environments and offering them to the viewer. The inviting, open space suggests comfort and the safe naturalness of a city lake surrounded by trees, reinforced by the absence of human beings and the small size of buildings. (1040)

Patterns

Most professional, government-produced billboards and posters, several patterns of explicit images are very clear. Many of these include flying birds, very few include human beings, transportation and buildings are very futuristic, hands are often included, many have grass, trees, and flowers in relatively controlled forms, a number have an environmental focus, many are red, but green and yellow are also prominent colours in many billboards. Most Kunming signage showed modernistic, even futuristic buildings; many in Jing Hong were more natural, traditional, and cultural.

Explicit Visual

Across most of the professional government–produced billboards and posters, several patterns of explicit images are clear. Many of these include flying birds, very few include human beings, transportation and buildings are very futuristic, hands are often included. Many are red, but green and yellow are also prominent. Most signage in Kunming showed modernistic buildings, but many in Jing Hong are more natural, traditional, and cultural, such as a popular natural geographical formation, and a riverside scene showing two women wearing traditional Dai clothes and holding paper umbrellas.

Compared to the highly designed government signage, community signage was only textual-professionally printed but otherwise plain. Clearly, communities relied on words and their significance.

Implicit visual

In official banners, a large number of implications can be identified in much of the imagery. Blends of modern/industrial with natural content is common, as in placing buildings on the other side of lawns and trees. Prosperity is strongly suggested across most of the images-the prosperity of a natural civilized society, not individual consumerism (e.g. cars). Several billboards suggest lightness and air with fluffy clouds, happily flying birds, and butterflies. A few suggest energy through action and starburst designs. The frequent use of hands suggests social contact and collaborative construction, strongly implying social care.

Many signs clearly contrasted words and images-words about construction with images of comfortable but controlled nature. People and shops were absent, though these dominate the surrounding urban landscape. Harmony is often implied by groups of trees and birds. Several billboards suggest diversity, e.g. with buildings of many shapes and styles, though uniformity is a more common theme. Also common were codes for economic strength and personal

aspirations: a boy lifts his eyes and hands to the sky and his lighter-than-air future.

In several cases, there is a clear contrast between words and images-the words suggest construction while the images suggest comfortable but controlled nature. A sense of sheltering fences was implied by rows of buildings and trees, but these were somewhat open and not so much forbidding as protective. Especially striking was the absence of people and shops, both of which dominate the urban landscape that people know best and that surrounded these official billboards.

The most basic distinction among the texts were pro-government and community-produced, though there were clear variations even among the relatively few of each studied by the authors. Within the pro-government group, some were pro-construction (growth) others are pro-environment (protection) and the third group were pro-policy. These signs were professionally produced, colourful and often included photographs and, in two cases, the insignia of the Chinese Communist Party. Among the individual signs, there was only one purpose: protecting the basic, quotidian rights of community members. These signs were hand-painted, black lettering on long white banners strung in areas of the city whose communities feel threatened by modernisation.

Explicit Verbal

Government wording tended to be more conversational and direct than the relatively legalistic community signage. Most of the phrasing and language mixed traditional and modern language, though most texts displayed a relatively neutral, standard form of correct modern Chinese.

Some sentences were long and complex, though most were shorter and follow the Chinese version of western-style advertising conciseness. A common structure was three-part parallel phrasing, repeating exhortatory action verbs.

In government signage, the government was not specified. These only referred to official processes when, for example, referring to international competitions for 'best

city'. Laws were ignored entirely in these texts; only cultural and social motivations were mentioned.

Implicit Verbal

Among the pro-government construction signs, meanings include the government's ability to lead people to create a plan that builds civilized city and society. The term 'Civilized' implies the norm of clean, orderly and moral lives. The government encouraged citizens to engage in this actively, and in a coordinated way, following the government leadership. The promise was that people who accept official direction can live a harmonious life together. Some signs suggested hard work, explicitly and implicitly, with phrases such as 'a colourful city built by two hands', linking hard work with courage.

Hands were also common symbols. These suggest social contact and construction, as well as any implication of social care, strongly included in some of the signs. They were used to convey social meanings with phrases such as such as 'hand in hand, heart to heart'. By linking feelings and activity, this apparently encourages both emotional and practical involvement. Another poster proposed a 'civilized city built by all the people' and 'built for homeland, shared by you and me'. In this context, the Chinese phrase 'you and me' does not refers to two individuals but is conventional shorthand for 'everyone'.

Semiosis of air, light clouds and the often-represented flying birds imply freedom and health, especially in an environment dominated by concrete and air pollution. The open space in many signs seemed to promise freedom of personal movement and a relaxed family environment, indicating strong associations between official norms and unpopulated grassy fields or forests.

Pro-government environment signs often suggested a life of ease, using such phrases as "to beautify the environment just needs two steps forward" and 'To protect the environment is to protect yourself'-in other words, equating the environment and citizens' interests. However, individual action is not implied; rather, following government

leadership will bring individual benefits but a 'unit' as the smallest form of identification-a discrete group such as a party branch or organization. Several signs referred to 'consciousness' as discipline and order and, in an expression of communalism, suggests that a city itself-e.g., Jinghong-is capable of consciousness.

Government policy signage often equates socialism with cultural development, specifically Chinese socialism. For example, another theme (once very common but now rare) calls for deepening reform of the cultural system; this suggests a challenge to American cultural dominance, in the effort to make China a cultural super-power through its 'soft power'. A localized poster increases the internal and external opening of Yunnan toward China as well as toward other nations. Yunnan is also represented as a bridge to other, more south-westerly regions of China and beyond.

Personal health is invoked in one sign, calling for citizens to 'prevent six common contagious diseases' and promote health, with the suggestion that the government cares for citizens. Benevolence and care was invoked in many signs, mostly with a paternalistic implication.

Some signage in Kunming was produced by the private construction company producing the new Metro system that is leading to the demolition of many homes and even the city's main government offices and the disruption (at the time of data collection) of much of the city centre. These offer some revealing contrasts to official signage. Not surprisingly, these signs pointed out the benefits of the new system, mostly with images of gleaming trains in nearly-empty stations; perhaps more surprisingly, there was no related protest signage, nor any indications that dissent had been posted then removed. It is only possible to guess the reasons for this contrast, such as desire for the new service or recognition that protests would fall on deaf ears. In any case, it is suggestive that all permitted protest signage was designed to communicate with the central government but only protested local authority and corruption.

This confirms that citizens understand their ability to resist and criticize their government interactions to at least

some degree, which is not the case with any other form of public media. Another meaningful interaction was implied by the Metro company's concern for PR, which apologized for the serious disruption of the city by construction; such sentiments were not noted in any official signage.

A local worker's group posted individual/private group signs. These were relatively emotional, protesting conditions in an older neighbourhood of Kunming. While focusing on complaints against local corruption, they did not question national law. The signs called on the government to protect their rights to their own homes and criticized some local officials as colluding with private, commercial organizations to profit by denying basic rights. They represented these officials as protecting illegal actions by officials in league with private interests, with 'umbrella' implying payments to and protection of officials. One sign referred to the 'real right law of PRC' as being violated because residents cannot stay in their homes. 'Long live the Communist Party of China—we want to survive', equating the government with survival and defiance of the law as threat.

Another category of these signs claimed that the government 'should be trustworthy' and care about public opinion and "take the life of the public seriously", suggesting (without direct criticism) that the government can only create a harmonious society-often represented by the government as one of its key goals. The signs imply that contracts had been violated for several years, and dramatically suggest that community members might have to leave their homes, become beggars, and perhaps die on the street.

CONCLUSION

The signage analysed for this study are a form of media, used with substantial flexibility in the Chinese context, that displays government policies and semiosis as well as commercial and public responses to them. Modern Big Character signs allow the government to bring their goals, meanings and policies onto public streets where they will be seen. Such signage, despite its relative scarcity

compared to conventional mass media, is societal significant because local respondents concurred that few citizens read or trust Party newspapers or websites but will read signage while waiting for a bus or walking home or to shops.

Official signs used slogans and associations to mobilize and motivate a population-representing the government as the central source of not only work and law, but also of meanings that reach back to China's distant past as well as into a glorious future. Civilization is considered more than heritage, as potential for comfort and glory. Government signs suggest that its leadership can help citizens improve their own futures, but only if they unwaveringly contribute their efforts and faith.

Official signs have a strong paternalistic flavour--treating citizens as children who need guidance; this dominance is accepted even by local groups who protest their treatment at the hands of corrupt officials. Local residents believe that limited criticism is tolerated by the government because the streets and walls offer a special, relatively controllable, focus of dialog.

The authors hope that this study helps initiate systematic theorization and investigation into public discourse, a relatively neglected but meaningful and accessible form of interactive communication. Just as printing technology enabled the full-colour, high-resolution printing seen in official signage in this study, LED and other new display technologies could be increasingly used for a range of public discourses.

Each region has its own cultural and historical context that could lead to productive research. For example, political turmoil and cultural contestation in regions such as Xinjiang in western China ensures very a different public discourse that can and should be analysed to deepen understanding of comparable friction areas and how this friction is played out in public. The range of signage analysed for this research suggests what we might call the varieties of public discourse experience, which is especially notable in China.

This study has several limitations. By analysing only, a relatively small number of billboards, posters and other

signage, the study could only begin to address the numerous issues of such communication. The fact that these were displayed in a small area during a short time of data collection adds two further limitations. Future research could focus in greater depth on one category of discourse, unlike this study, which considered several types.

The authors feel that public discourse is a relatively neglected but meaningful form of communication, revealing (and often trying to hide or assume) a great deal about the dynamics of a societal change and interaction. In this effort, social-semiotics with its links between deep meanings and social context, seems to have potential, as might other analytical approaches.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Boutonet, T. (2011). 'Harmonious' Consumer Society Exposed: Visual Cacophony and Schizophrenia on Beijing's Street Billboards. *Journal of Chinese Studies* 6 (1): 118 - 134.

Cushing, L. & Tompkins, A. (2007). *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Dynon, N. (2008). 'Four Civilizations' and the Evolution of Post-Mao Chinese Socialist Ideology. *China Journal* 60 (1): 83-109.

Gandy, M. (2006). Zones of indistinction: Bio-political contestations in the urban arena. *Cultural Geographies* 13 (1): 497-516.

Holliday, I. (2007). National unity struggles in Myanmar: A degenerate case of governance for harmony in Asia. *Asian Survey* 47 (3): 374-392.

Jensen, K. B. (1995). *Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*. New York: SAGE.

Johnson, J. 2008. Billboard jungle. *British Journalism Review* 19 (7): 87-101.

Jun, J.W., Bae, Y. H. Ju, I.; and Chung, J. (2016). The Effect Model of Billboard Advertising Media. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8 (2): 15-31.

Kang, L. (1996). Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China. *Boundary 2* 23 (3): 193-218.

Kraus, R. C. (1977). Class Conflict and the Vocabulary of Social Analysis in China. *China Quarterly* 69 (1): 54-74.

Legge, J. (1861) *Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean.* The Chinese Classics I. London: Trübner. Revised 2nd edition 1893, reprinted 2006. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Leys, S. (1987). *The Burning Forest: Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics*. London: Henry Holt & Company.

Lucie-Smith, E. (2002). Living with Kangaroos. *Index on Censorship* 31 (1): 206-213.

Mann, S. 1984. Urbanization and Historical Change in China. *Modern China* 10 (1): 79-113.

Massey, C. 2000. Civic Discourse amid Cultural Transformation. *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 12 (1): 193-215.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Mohanty, M. (1991). Swaraj and Jiefang: Freedom Discourse in India and China. *Social Scientist* 19 (10/11): 27-34.

Murphy, R. (2004). Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: 'Population Quality' discourse, demographic transition and primary education. *China Quarterly* 177 (1-2).

Nabudere, D. W. (1997). Beyond modernization and development, or why the poor reject development. *Geogr. Ann*. 79 (4): 203-215.

Robertson, R. (1994). Globalisation or Glocalisation? *Journal of International Communication* 1: 33–52.

Savell, E.; Gilmore, A.; Sims, M. et al. (2015). The environmental profile of a community's health: A cross-sectional study on tobacco marketing in 16

countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 93 (12): 851-861.

Söderman, S. & Dolles, H. (2015). Unlocking advertising, activation and sponsorship in an emerging market: The case of Beijing Olympics. *Sport, Business and Management.* 5 (5): 472-492.

Thornton, P. M. (2002). Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy. *The China Quarterly* 171 (1): 661-681.

Williams, D. M. (1996). The Barbed Walls of China: A Contemporary Grassland Drama. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (3): 665-691.

Worth, O. & Kuhling, C. (2004). Counter-hegemony, anti-globalisation and culture in international political economy. *Capital & Class* 28 (1): 31-42.