



A rhetorical study of in-flight real estate advertisements as a potential site of ethical transformation in Chinese cities

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ABSTRACT

Real estate markets in Chinese cities are in transition. Advertising for new developments in these markets often reflects changing city aspirations and branding rather than environmental and social experience. This paper investigates real estate marketing as a site of potential ethical transformation of values related to new urban development. It uses Kenneth Burke's rhetorical analysis as an approach to coding real estate representations from in-flight magazine advertisements as a means of capturing environmental and social viewpoints in China during 2008–2009. Both Chinese and foreign participants coded representations into four code modalities. These were based on anthropocentric – non-anthropocentric environmental orientations and nationalistic – universal social orientations. The results suggested that new developments in China are more likely to be understood as based on environmental resource use for continued national economic expansion rather than for a more sustainable world. Emerging patterns in coded representations have opened up the possibility of greater social choices that were however difficult to unambiguously decode from Chinese real estate advertising. From this it is concluded that it may take some time before real estate demand shifts in response to representations of Chinese eco-cities being promoted by Chinese policy makers in the 2000s.

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Introduction

Commercial real estate markets have only evolved in China since the State Council announced the 'Provisional Regulation on the Granting and Transferring of Land Rights over State-Owned Land in Cities and Towns' in 1991 (Ding, 2003). In the past, the work unit (*danwei*) was responsible for the provision of housing and other social services. This system of subsidized housing allocation practiced since the 1950s was abolished in 1998 (Jim & Chen, 2007). Housing reforms caused many work units to sell off their houses to employees (at subsidized prices) and a real estate market emerged. Many employees now have to find a house by themselves within a transitional real estate market among a very large pool of buyers (Cheng, Turkstra, Peng, Du, & Ho, 2006). Commercial housing investment was estimated to be over 80% of the total housing investment in Shanghai in 1998 (Zhang, 2000). More recently, local regulators have attempted various demand-side measures to control rising Chinese home prices but with little success (Urban Land Institute, 2011). Reforms in the finance system since the 1970s (Zhang, 2000) have greatly influenced how Chinese cities and towns have promoted demand for land development projects of hotels, villas, apartments and commercial floor space. Unfortu-

nately, compared to economic reforms, environmental reforms since the 1980s have had far less impact on how cities and towns have been built in China. First hand experience as a foreign advisor to ten Chinese city government offices led to a perception that a wide distance still exists between Sinocentric and Eurocentric viewpoints regarding urban development matters.

Marketing of commercial property in China differs somewhat from marketing of property in Australia, Europe or North America. For instance, Australian property developers in the *Weekend Australian* newspaper promote attributes such as the physical characteristics of a property; its wider positioning in relation to public transport, the central business district (CBD), local schools, shops and workplaces; and environmental features such as topography, green space, water views and psychological safety. The unique location of each parcel of property creates a multiplicity of property markets (McDonald, 1999). In contrast, Chinese developers have limited knowledge of local buyers' preferences and preferred housing attributes, although they have become increasingly aware of buyers' fondness for high quality living environments and well-designed green spaces with water bodies (Jim & Chen, 2007). Developers outside China since the 1960s have aimed to identify the salient drivers of housing choices, such as avoidance of overcrowding, natural hazards, ambient environmental conditions, stress in everyday life, access and orientation of urban form, security, privacy and residential satisfaction. Recently, attention has

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been drawn towards factors that make a location attractive to a person or family 'on the move', including low crime, high environmental quality, opportunities for good health and longevity, social tolerance, racial harmony, high usability of technology and accessible local amenities (McCann, 2004). Marketing of new zero-carbon cities and towns in the West is an emerging field of interest. In China, this field seems to be coalescing around the concept of eco-cities, heavily promoted by Chinese governments (Larson, 2009; Yip, 2008). This begs the question of whether real estate advertisements have any influence on the demand-side response to low carbon policies in China.

Real estate advertisements

Appealing representations of urban locations in many competing cities are generally intended to build a branded place identity and reflect common values between places and potential residents, commuters and visitors. In Australia, online property advertisements by agencies such as L.J. Hooker, Ray White and Harcourts often promote a desirable urban image in answering questions such as 'what will it look like' and 'where will the kids go to school'. Some promote a better family life, a sense of community and healthy living. While the general purpose of Chinese real estate marketing may be similar, advertisements often depict 'fantasy' images of views and relations that do not yet exist. This is because of the nature of the land development process in China. In the conversion of rural land to higher density urban land uses, local governments are expected to pay standard compensation to acquire land from farmers. This process allows the government to gain control of the land while it remains in rural use (Wu, 2000). Local governments must pay compensation before the land can be developed but funds are often not available from the city budget so other means must be found to develop the land. To overcome the lack of funds, local governments can transfer property rights to major development corporations who may not pay the land premium to the municipalities but may instead transfer the property rights to smaller development companies. These companies can acquire loans from domestic financial institutions or form joint ventures with foreign investors. They can then pay the land premium to the development corporations who in turn pay it back to the local governments. This process of redefining property rights, rather than selling property ownership, requires significant promotional efforts so that local governments can begin land development without adding to their fiscal burden. In China, real estate marketing is not just a simple matter of urban image promotion for economic gain by investors or homebuyers. It drives the hard reality of changing the physical landscape of cities and towns through a complex web of political negotiations (Wu, 2000). The question asked then in this study is whether rhetorical representations of urban locations, real or imagined, can reflect emerging ethical views of environmental responsibility (high biodiversity, clean air, clean water, safe food supply) and social harmony (strong kinship, low crime, medical support, international standing) in China. It attempts to describe viewers' rather than producers' positioning in relation to these rhetorical representations using a social semiotic approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005).

More recent attention is being given to visual and textual representations of urban development in the social change literature. Some studies of real estate promotion have taken a narrative approach with respect to the story of a particular city (Boone, 1998; Paddison, 1993; Wu, 2000, 2010). Some take an empirical approach using survey and interview data to assess impacts of changing perceptions of a city (He & Wu, 2007; Suarez Carrasquillo, 2011). Other studies have focused on the content of real estate advertisements as textual data in characterising social issues

emerging in ethnic minorities finding a house (Newburger, 1995), tolerance of social diversity in a city (Young, Diep, & Drabble, 2006), real estate agency behaviour in market dynamics (Pryce & Oates, 2008), rhetoric in buffering real estate market fluctuations (Robertson & Doig, 2010), socio-cultural differentiation through housing lifestyle choices (Kriese & Scholz, 2011a) and sustainability drivers on the supply-side and demand-side of residential property (Kriese & Scholz, 2011b). Of interest in this study is the possibility of real estate advertisements reflecting broad ethical worldviews in China, a country described by Lin Yutang (1936) as deeply conservative, at a time of dramatic social change, where Chinese residents and foreign visitors frequently find themselves on two sides of a deep East–West divide.

Real estate promotion is a means of engineering a desire for particular types of urban environments in Chinese property buyers, direct foreign investors, domestic and foreign visitors to Chinese cities. Meanwhile, there has been much public debate on *China Central Television* (CCTV) and the *China Daily* newspaper regarding a perceived sense of loss of Chinese cultural identity in the face of continued westernisation of Chinese consumer lifestyles. In marketing urban environments, marketers view the city as two parallel entities: the 'external city' that can be viewed superficially in relation to signature architecture and memorable landmarks and the 'internal city' of the mind that is associated with social inclusion, lifestyle and multicultural identity (Kavaratzis, 2004). Putting this another way, the 'best places' are formed by an intermixing of economic and extra-economic factors, where the latter are not monetised or entered into exchange including environmental and cultural meanings (McCann, 2004). The city therefore does not consist entirely of forms of socio-spatial organisation but a complex of symbols (Vanolo, 2008). Little research has as yet been found that tackles the symbolic nature of representing new urban places in China. Indeed analysis of visual discourse has received far less attention than interview and question/answer data in the social sciences. This study outlines a methodology that extends the use of Kenneth Burke's concept of symbolic action and rhetorical analysis into the realm of real estate advertisements as motivated representations of aspirational environmental and social viewpoints in China. It explores a new method that is sensitive enough to identify early ideological changes in place promotion that may be confirmed in later years in wider media sources.

Methodology

Visual rhetoric is the study of the use of visual symbols to influence and manage meanings (Foss, 2005). American dramatist Kenneth Burke was one of the few theorists to devise a grammar to study rhetorical action and human motives. Burke (1969) asked the question 'what is involved when we talk about what people are doing and why they are doing it?' (p. xv). His point of departure was that people employ basic strategies in endless variations, consciously and unconsciously, to convince and cajole others. These strategies have a 'you' and 'me' quality about them in that one person addresses someone else, for some advantage. Burke referred to these strategies collectively as 'rhetoric' (Burke, 1969). Burke's concept of symbolic or rhetorical action has been used to examine the persuasive power of speeches, art works (Foss, 1996), cartoons (Olson & Olson, 2004), corporate bureaucracy (Meisenbach, Remke, Buzzanell, & Liu, 2008), teaching performance (Juzwik, 2004), cybernetics (Pruchnic, 2006) and university advertisements (Kenney, 2005).

Rhetoric is used to mean the actions we choose for communicating with one another (Foss, 1996). We use rhetoric to persuade others to change in some way. We may invite others to understand our perspective and enter our world, to see it as we do. We may use

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