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The maternal in the city: outdoor advertising representations in Shanghai and London

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Abstract

The article examines representations of mothers in Shanghai and London outdoor advertising. We treat their display of motherhood as a regulatory space where ideas about the maternal and fantasies of the “good life” under neoliberal rationality are formulated and normalized. Situating Shanghai and London outdoor adverts within their respective media cultures, we identify two common themes: (a) mothers as self-responsible individuals managing the family; (b) public display of maternity and intimate family life. We discuss similarities and differences in depictions of motherhood and the purportedly normative ideas about the “good life” they suggest. We argue that outdoor advertising acts as a visual disciplinary space regulating fantasies of the “good life” which millions of city-dwellers consume, but rarely realize.

Keywords: Neoliberal rationality, advertising, mothers, good life, comparison, visuality

The Maternal in the City:

Outdoor Advertising Representations in Shanghai and London

Contemporary western media culture has been described as a site of “remarkable maternal visibility” (Addison, Goodwin-Kelly & Roth, 2009, p.5). Discourses about motherhood and representations of mothers proliferate in film (Addison et al, 2009; Walters & Harrison, 2014), television (Hundley & Hayden, 2016) reality TV (Hamad, 2014), advertising (Gregg, 2008), celebrity (De Benedictis & Orgad, forthcoming; Littler, 2013), news (Akass, 2012; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015), guidebooks (Littler, 2013; McRobbie, 2013), social media (Longhurst, 2009; Palmer-Mehta & Shuler, 2016) literary fiction (De Benedictis & Orgad, forthcoming; Thoma, 2014) and women’s magazines. The publicness of the maternal marks a significant shift from invisibility to visibility. For example, pregnant bodies, previously confined to clinics, are now ubiquitously displayed (Tyler, 2011), “aberrant mothers” previously excluded from the screen are leads in popular television shows (Walters & Harrison, 2014, p. 38). Many argue that this explosion of public display of the maternal is intimately connected to the expansion and consolidation of neoliberal culture, and that proliferating mediated constructions of motherhood embody and legitimize neoliberal notions of choice, agency, self-responsibility and self-governance (Littler, 2013; McRobbie, 2013; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015; Steiner & Bronstein, 2016; Tyler, 2011).

Building on these accounts, we focus on the public display of motherhood in city outdoor advertising. No genre has been more oriented toward projecting desire and fantasy than advertising. Research shows the central role of advertising in constructing and normalizing ideas and practices of “good mothering” and “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) as closely linked to consumer culture (Clarke, 2004; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Lynch, 2005; Mansvelt, Breheny & Stephens, 2015). From the smiling calendar girls in 1930s’ advertisements in Shanghai (Laing, 2004), to the happy housewives praising home products

in 1950s' American and British popular magazines (Friedan, 1963; Nicholson, 2015), historically maternal figures have been associated with happiness linked to consumption.

We extend the mostly Euro- and American- focus to examine the display of motherhood in outdoor adverts in London and Shanghai. By comparing these representations we aim to highlight similarities and differences in depiction of motherhood and the normative ideas adverts articulate about the “good life”, in two cultural contexts with strong yet significantly different neoliberal culture.

We treat these cities' public spaces as spaces of “visual media governmentality” (McRobbie, 2013, p.122), where ideas about femininity and motherhood and “good life” fantasies are formulated, negotiated and regulated. How do these motherhood representations construct imaginaries of the “good life”? What is rendered abject or invisible? What do the differences and similarities between and within representations in these cities reveal in the context of discussion of maternity and neoliberal rationality?

To address these questions, the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews key arguments in the literature on neoliberal culture and representations of motherhood. We discuss contributions and lacunae, and offer a comparative perspective on the visual display of maternity in outdoor advertising to address some of these gaps. We describe the study design and the methods, followed by comparative analysis of Shanghai's and London's outdoor advertisements that include depictions of mothers. The analysis is organized around two interrelated themes: (a) mothers as self-responsible individuals managing the family, and (b) public display of maternity and intimate family life. Both themes appear in these cities' visual spaces and render certain ideas about motherhood, family and the “good life” visible, desirable and normal. However, we consider also how within these common themes, specific ideas and claims take different form and meaning in advertisements in these urban spaces. We conclude by arguing that outdoor advertising

participates in the symbolic disciplining and regulation of fantasies of the “good life” which millions consume but arguably few can realize.

Neoliberal Rationality and Representations of Motherhood

Neoliberalism: UK and China. Drawing on Gill and Scharff (2011), we use the term “neoliberalism” to refer to a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and state withdrawal from many areas of social provision. Neoliberalism proposes that people’s well-being can best be enhanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial skills within an institutional framework based on strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p.5). More specifically, we focus on the concept of neoliberal rationality which casts people “exhaustively as market actors” (Brown, 2015, p.31), who constantly must enhance their present and future value through entrepreneurialism, self-management and self-governance.

The rise of neoliberalism in the UK originated in Margaret Thatcher’s premiership: her fierce attack on trade unions and the welfare state, and her famous proclamation that “there is no such thing as society... and people must look after themselves first” (1987). London by no means is representative of the UK but as a global creative industries hub and center of consumer culture, it has been critical in the expansion and consolidation of neoliberal culture and rationality in the UK.

In China, neoliberalism remains largely the *exception* (Ong, 2006). Compared to the UK and the US, the Chinese state is far more interventionist in dealing with global capital, and redressing social inequality resulting from capitalist developments. Inherited patriarchal statism and socialism linger and often are evoked by both the *Chinese Communist Party* and the disenfranchised population to articulate the need to curb the power of capital (Nonini, 2008). Simultaneously, the Party-state is increasingly seeking aggressive privatization in

many areas including previously key socialist welfare sites such as housing, health care and social security. In the more developed Chinese regions, neoliberal rationality is gradually taking hold, promoting a free market, privatization and self-responsibilization as drivers of progress and modernization. For the younger residents of China's metropolises – key targets of the adverts we examine – consumerism and the idea of cultivating rational, self-interested individuals are accelerating (Yu, 2014).

Shanghai stands out as China's neoliberal exception: In the 1930s it was China's gateway to modernity (Bergère, 2009; Lee, 1999). More recently, we have witnessed transnational companies' efforts to "re-engineer the Chinese soul" (Ong, 2009, p.192) to make employees conform to global corporate norms. Shanghai has been at the frontier of China's encounter with global capitalism, exemplified by its launch of China's first Free Trade Zone in 2013 (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2013) and proliferation of elite gated communities (Pow, 2009). Drawing on accounts of transformations in China through a neoliberalism lens (e.g. Angnost, 2004; Rofel, 2007; Wang, 2004; Yan, 2003), and studies of the power of visual images in reflecting, participating and propelling such transformations (e.g. Berry, 2015; Marchetti, 2009), we use the notion of neoliberalism - particularly neoliberal rationality - to examine ideas and values articulated in outdoor advertising in Shanghai, and compare them to those depicted in London adverts.

Representations of motherhood and neoliberal rationality: UK and China. In British public culture, motherhood "has never been so visible, so talked about, so public" (Tyler, 2011, p.22). Unlike "traditional" ideologies, which posited mothering as confined to the domestic sphere and separate from economic labor, more recent images show mothers who are carers, economic laborers and consumers, and associated with individualization, sexualization, empowerment and consumerism (Hundley & Hayden, 2016; Littler, 2013; McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Tyler, 2011; Walters & Harrison, 2014). Writing about the west, and

especially the UK, McRobbie (2009, p. 9) situates the rise of these images within “the new sexual contract”: a hegemonic process starting in the 1990s which demanded women simultaneously be laborers/consumers and mothers/carers. It promises women greater freedom to consume and earn wages while removing welfare state support. In this new ideological regime, the “good mother” is configured as the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism: an entrepreneurial, calculating actor who regulates every aspect of her conduct and is exhorted to make sense of her life in terms of freedom, autonomy, choice and self-responsibility. In the US context, Douglas and Michaels (2004) show how the rise of an oppressive ideology of “new momism”, and the pernicious ideal of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996), are tied to and promote consumer products and consumer culture.

The figure of the white middle-class mother “body forthes” (Littler, 2013, p. 228) these ideas. It capitalizes on her historical Victorian construction, and the later 1950s' and 1960s' exemplary wife and mother, associated with comfort, happiness, success and normality (Friedan 1963; McRobbie 2009, 2013; Nicholson, 2015). The exemplary modern mother is the responsible, resilient, white middle-class woman who “directs her professional skills to ensuring the unassailable middle-class status of her children” (McRobbie, 2013, p.130). She manages the family as a small business and represents “quality parenting” (Steiner & Bronstein, 2016). She is demanded by numerous guides, manuals, self-help devices and advertisements constantly to assess, improve and manage herself and her family, and aspire to the good life (McRobbie, 2015). Against images of the middle-class responsible and aspirational mother, there is intensified demonization and denigration of the poor, disenfranchised, single mother. Notably, in British media culture, in contrast to the middle-class mother who seemingly lives the “good life”, the poor working-class mother is cast as a pathological Other, as the welfare-dependent irresponsible mother who fails to contribute to

the economy and is incapable of governing herself and her children in the “right” ways (Allen & Taylor, 2012; Jensen, 2012; Littler, 2013).

Work on western, and particularly British media culture, underscores the ideological work of representations of motherhood in promoting, legitimizing and naturalizing neoliberal rationality: valorizing self-responsibility, individualization, self-governance and resilience, thus legitimizing withdrawal of state support. Closely related to accounts of postfeminist media culture as a sensibility intimately connected to neoliberal rationality (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), this scholarship highlights how constructions of mothers and mothering in terms of individualism, choice, and self-responsibility, de-politicize their experience and condition, transforming structural issues into personal matters requiring private solutions.

In China, during the socialist era, the dominant ideologies of gender equality and the “good life” were oriented towards eradication of class and socio-economic differences. Women’s primary responsibilities were serving the collective (Evans, 2008). However, in post-socialist China, the political passion invested in class struggle gave way to the emergence of a new feminine ideal in public culture: a “desiring subject”, with individual material, sexual, and affective longings (Rofel, 2007, p. 2). In her study of gendered subjectivities of mothers who grew up during the Mao era and daughters who came of age in post-Mao China, Evans (2008, p.13) notes that for the daughters’ generation, women’s emancipation equates with “the individual capacity to capitalize on the individual benefits of participating in the private market”. Amidst dismantling of the socialist welfare system, increased privatization and the rise of consumerism, urban middle-class mothers are called upon by state and market to act responsibly as consumers and the family's primary caregivers.

Neoliberalism did not cause the double burden Chinese women shoulder in the public and private spheres; in the socialist era women were exhorted to “hold up half the sky”, with no equivalent call for men to share domestic work. Yet neoliberalism has

intensified women's unequal labor significantly. The disintegration of services such as health clinics near living compounds, free workplace-based childcare, and subsidized canteens, has exacerbated women's domestic labor. Marketization has produced new forms of workplace gender inequality (Goodman, 2014), resulting in growing numbers of young middle-class women leaving paid employment to become full-time mothers (Chen, 2011) - reversing the socialist state ethos.

In turn, earlier constructions of motherhood have been modified: the socialist image of *yingxiong muqin*, the heroic mother who raises her children to become model workers, has given way to *meima*, a maternal figure embodying normative feminine beauty and purchasing power. The middle-class mother in particular is configured by both state and market as responsible for caring for the single child – the family's “only hope” (Fong, 2004), a role she is demanded to perform primarily through consumption (Li, 2016).

Thus, studies of UK and Chinese cultural contexts highlight how representations of motherhood are bound to neoliberal ideas of consumerism, individualization, self-responsibility and self-management. In this context, we now turn to examining outdoor advertising representations of mothers in Shanghai and London. We draw on Lewis's (2003) analysis of outdoor advertising as a powerful medium for shaping consumption-oriented identities. While similar images to those we analyze might appear in print, television or online advertising, outdoor ads are distinguished by their ubiquity, large size and public consumption by the millions who navigate the public space of the city. Outdoor adverts are embedded in and contribute to what Massey (1994) describes as modern cities' privileging of vision over other senses, and construction of an authoritative, masculine position. Inspired by Massey and scholarship on the modern city as a space of masculine gaze (the male city dweller of the *flâneur* being the archetype of modernity) (Pollock, 1988), we position outdoor adverts depicting mothers as embedded within the city's masculine gaze. We treat these

advertises as regulatory space where ideas about the maternal and fantasies of the “good life” are formulated and normalized. They constitute part of what McRobbie (2013) calls “visual media governmentality”, where “the benchmarks and boundaries of female success are established”, and where norms of failure and “mismanaged lives” are articulated and legitimized (p.122). What are the millions who view these outdoor advertisements called upon to imagine? What “good life” fantasies do advertising representations of motherhood in Shanghai and London present, and what do the differences and similarities between and within the representations in those cities reveal?

The Study

The Site: Outdoor Advertising in Shanghai and London

As financial capitals, consumerist centers, favored destinations for internal and external migrants, Shanghai and London are key nodes connecting their respective countries with national and global economic, political and cultural networks. People are drawn to these metropolises by their material opportunities but crucially also symbolic power; their promise of betterment, and the fantasies they nourish of the good life.

We chose Shanghai and London based on their converging divergence. Both cities are situated in different historical, national, political, social and cultural contexts; gender norms, neoliberal influence and life aspirations differ substantially between and within them. At the same time, they are financial centers, creative industries hubs, the most cosmopolitan cities in their countries, and key sites of neoliberal culture. Both cities are inseparable from the images constructed by media representations (Georgiou, 2013) and constitute national and global symbolic sites of “good-life” fantasies. As Shome (2011) notes, these fantasies are tied closely to ideas about “good mothers”, and imaginations of healthy and civilized nations.

We spent a day each in London and Shanghai, taking notes and photos of visual representation of mothers in outdoor ads in the cities' streets, underground transport,

shopping malls and public squares. Our sample provides neither representative nor exhaustive evidence but snapshots of advertisements encountered in a single day. In each city, we collected over 30 ads displaying mothers. If the average person in Britain is exposed to 71 outdoor adverts each day (Route Research, 2016) and the average Shanghai resident is exposed to three times as many ads a day (Doctoroff, 2012), then the number of ads we encountered clearly demonstrates remarkable public visibility of the maternal in these cities.¹ Some of the ads were encountered more than once. Therefore, we created a sample of 15 unique advertisements from Shanghai and 14 from London. Informed by the literature on neoliberal culture and the maternal, we conducted thematic analysis of these 29 advertisements guided by the question: what ideas and fantasies of the “good life” are deemed visible, desirable and normal in outdoor advertising representations of mothers and motherhood? We identified two central themes: (a) mothers as self-responsible individuals managing the family, and (b) public display of maternity and intimate family life. Based on these themes, we conducted visual and textual analysis to examine similarities and differences across and within each thematic cluster, and explore the ideas and figures rendered invisible or undesirable. Some ads display both themes, others refer to only one.

Our analysis is informed by social semiotics of visual communication (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001) which focuses on how “representational meaning” is conveyed by the participants depicted (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p.141), and by “semiotic resources” such as point of view, gesture, depiction of groups vs. individuals, and placement of the image. Social semiotic analysis pays particular attention to how meanings are created through the interaction of these semiotic resources with other meanings. Thus, to explain the meanings created by the ads we analyzed, we draw on studies of maternal constructions (e.g. McRobbie, 2013; Shome, 2011) and consider their inter-textuality (Hall, 1997), e.g. how the meanings of Shanghai ads rely partly on their relations to the idealized socialist maternal

figure in earlier propaganda posters, or how constructions of the maternal subject in the London ads depend for its meaning on being read against depictions of poor and working class mothers in British media. The text in each ad was analyzed for its relation to the image, e.g. whether it identifies the people it depicts (e.g. L1, “Ms. Chata”), represents a social type (e.g. L4, middle-class “momprenneur”; S3, urban heterosexual middle-class mother), and whether it reinforces (S12, emphasizing trust), or contradicts the meaning of the image (based on van Leeuwen, 2001).

To avoid measuring non-western societies using a western yardstick (Meng & Rantanen, 2015), we deliberately moved back and forth between Shanghai and London examples of outdoor advertising. We were interested in similarities and differences identified by genuine comparison, rather than provision of a Eurocentric “first in Europe, then elsewhere” type analysis (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.7).

Analysis

In both Shanghai and London, adverts featuring mothers were mostly for commercial goods, e.g. communications technologies, groceries, money transfer, holiday packages, baby food, and life insurance. The Shanghai ads were exclusively commercial but among the London ads, two were for non-commercial goods (L2 and L3, Table 1).

[Insert Table 1]

Mothers as Self-responsible Individuals Managing the Family

In both cities' ads, the maternal figure frequently was depicted as a self-responsible subject managing family life: in nine of the London ads (L1, L2, L4, L5, L8, L9, L12, L13, L14) and seven (out of 15) Shanghai ads (S1, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13). In all but three of the London ads (L5, L9, L14), the mother was displayed on her own or with her child(ren). Fathers or other carers or adult family members were missing, the mother depicted as solely responsible for childcare and/or managing family life. In the sample of Shanghai ads, just

over half showed the mother with her nuclear or extended family and five showed the mother on her own or with her child.² The former reflects the norm in urban China of grandparents living with young families, often to help with childcare, while the mother is still expected to take primary responsibility for the whole family's daily maintenance.

The London ad for the supermarket chain *Tesco* (L4) is illustrative. The mother is positioned as solely responsible for ensuring that the family's material needs are satisfied. A white woman, redolent of the middle-class "mompreneur" who works flexibly from home, is depicted dressed in a jumper, sitting at her desk, scrutinizing her tablet. The text on the left reads "Shop your way: Everything you need for you and your family in store, online and on your mobile". She wears make-up and looks relaxed and content; rather than another unpaid chore, this is an activity she seems to do willingly, happily and easily, and is a responsibility which is hers alone: management of happy family life through responsible consumption. In another London ad (L1), "Ms. Chata", the professional working mother - signified by her business attire - is shown sitting at the kitchen table with her school uniform-clad teenage children. The mother is at the center of the image, on her left her daughter eats supper, and on her right her son whispers in her ear something which makes her smile. She is there for teatime – the "sacred" national evening meal, engaging with her children in intimate relations and making sure they are fed. An oven is center-stage, integral to the composition, but not in use - recalling bygone days when good motherhood equated with home cooking. The modern mother is a "fully realized" citizen (Anagnost as cited in Shome, 2011, p.389), for she is an economic laborer who simultaneously manages her family responsibly. Ms. Chata displays what Berlant describes as "affective forms of middle class exchange" (2011, p.180) embodying the fantasy of "normal" mother-child intimate relations. This "normative promise of intimacy" (Berlant, 2011, p.189) is reinforced by the advert's frame, indicating it is a "selfie" image, posted by "The Chata family" on social media at 6:32 pm. It figures in

McCain's advertising campaign which invites "ordinary UK families" to post images and clips of family teatime. This, the ad suggests, is how the good life of an "ordinary family" looks, a meaning anchored by the slogan "good things happen" - a reversal of the adage "shit happens".

The mother's responsibility for managing happy family life through consumption is manifest in seven of the Shanghai ads, showing the middle-class mother as in sole charge of the family's safety and wellbeing. While the London ads show motherhood and economic labor combined, as the condition for "maternal citizenship" and the "good life"; the Shanghai ads cast self-responsible mother exclusively in the domestic sphere. This is a striking reversal of the idealized socialist maternal figure in earlier propaganda posters celebrating women as workers "holding up half the sky". As a socialist role-model worker, the mother both excelled in the workforce and raised happy and healthy children. However, post-Mao, the conception of the feminine ideal has been replaced by a new "desiring subject", with individual material, sexual and affective longings (Rofel, 2007).

This new maternal subject is depicted vividly in an ad for *Nestle* baby formula (S12). Positioned in the center of the picture, a light-skinned, slim woman is seen holding a child, against the background of a meadow, symbolizing the uncontaminated origins of the milk. The young mother's lilac top, elegant hairdo and delicate make-up signify normative middle-class heterosexual beauty. She is gazing down at her child, seemingly oblivious to harm, implying her faith in the product. The child looks contentedly out at the viewer, his head resting on his mother's left breast. The text reads "one barcode on each tin, safe and reassured". The mother trusts the product, the baby trusts the mother. The ad appears to capitalize on the panic caused by the 2008 baby formula scandal in China, offering a solution to the food safety problem in terms of individual consumer-based choice (demanded of the middle-class mother). Ironically, most victims of the contaminated milk were children in

rural areas and lower-class families; middle-class mothers living in the metropolis had abandoned domestic brands long before the scandal broke (Hanser & Li, 2015).

While the emphasis on mother's self-responsibility for ensuring her child's safety and well-being is similar to that in the London ads, and can be related to the influence of neoliberal rationality in China, it also is continuous with construction (e.g. in socialist posters) of the socialist good mother exercising responsibility for family planning. The Shanghai ads evoke this historical emphasis on mother's responsibility but recast it in individualized, affective and consumerist terms. Her prime responsibility now is managing the family's happiness and wellbeing through responsible consumption and affective forms of "normal" middle-class intimacy.

The interpellation of middle-class mothers as calculating, rational and responsible consumers is most pronounced in ads promoting online resellers *Yang Matou* (S8) and *Miya Baby* (S9). The growing spending power of Chinese middle-class, the price disparity between foreign brands sold in China and overseas, and increased brand awareness of urban consumers since the mid-2000s have resulted in a plethora of online platforms specialized in reselling branded foreign goods - from Chanel handbags to nappies. The *Yang Matou* ad (S8) features a casually dressed, barefooted mother sitting contentedly on the floor of a middle-class appointed sitting room (with three-seater sofa, light fixtures and framed wall decorations) with her baby. Each piece of furniture and home appliance pictured bears a price tag indicating country of origin. The text boasts "foreign products directly shipped from overseas, 100% genuine". The brand name reinforces this message: *Matou* means dock, and *Yang* - literally overseas or foreign, in the Shanghai dialect especially connotes modern and cosmopolitan: the label *yang* is a very positive assessment, and implies admiration. Similarly, in the *Miya Baby* ad (S9), a smiling young mother holds a happy baby in one arm, and samples of baby products in the other. The text emphasizes, "everything shipped directly

from countries of origin". Thus, the historical imaginary of Shanghai as China's gateway to modernity (Bergère, 2009) after being forced to open up to foreign trade following China's defeat in the First Opium War, is revived and reconfigured in the figure of the middle-class mother who purchases quality foreign brands to ensure her family's safety and happiness. The middle-class Shanghainese woman presents a new image of ideal motherhood: the former ideal in socialist posters of women as workers is replaced by the fantasy of middle-class mothers with her children at home, enabled by consumerism.

As discussed earlier, in both UK and China, central to the construction of the middle-class mother as the ideal self-responsible feminine subject who confidently manages her family and the "good life", is her positioning against an image of the pathological Other, the abject mother who leads an "inadequate", "mismanaged" life (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Tyler 2011). In the UK context, McRobbie (2013) argues that the figure of the strong working-class mother has largely disappeared from British popular imagination; poor and working class mothers, especially single mothers, are demonized and denigrated. Indeed, the majority of the London ads (11/14) featured white, middle-class mothers, whose self-responsibilization is valorized partly by the absence of "underclass" slovenly and benefit-dependent single mothers (McRobbie, 2013). Only three ads depicted working class and/or poor maternal subjects. In an ad for the international money transfer company *Western Union* (L12), a woman of color is seen outdoors with her daughter, seemingly playing hide-and-seek. The girl, aged around five, in a pink sleeveless dress, is at the forefront of the photo, gazing directly at the camera with a wide open smile. The mother, a scarf tied around her head, also smiles but looks at her daughter, presumably, as she finds her hiding place. The implication is that the mother is an immigrant who uses Western Union's services to send money to her relatives abroad. Contra to the xenophobic sentiments in many current representations of immigrants, the ad seems to present a migrant role model: the good mother

who shares an intimate moment with her daughter, knowing that money matters have been taken care of. However, like her middle-class counterparts, the migrant's good mothering is conditioned on her being an economic laborer; she clearly earns money that she can send abroad legally. It is conditioned also on her appearing to engage in normative middle-class forms of maternal intimacy – spending “quality time” with her child in outdoor play. The conditions and resources upon which this good mothering and well-managed “good life” are predicated are completely obscured.

The other two London ads depicting working class mothers present a grimmer picture. L3 is part of a campaign to tackle violence against, and abuse of London transport staff. Childish handwriting on a blank poster reads: “My mum works on the tube. Last night someone shouted at her again. I thought she was crying But she said it was just something in her eye.” The ad evokes empathy for a vulnerable mother who seeks to hide her “inadequate life” from her child. She has no voice; her child pleads on her behalf. While this ad represents a rare empathetic response to the difficulty faced by some mothers, it exploits the maternal to appeal to passengers' emotions rather than to stress law enforcement to protect transport workers like her. L2 is the only ad depicting a poor single mother with agency and voice. Publicizing the services of the London Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), the ad displays a full-size image of a black woman with an Afro coiffure, wearing a ragged brown jumper, staring at the camera. The text above reads: “I don't like the way he treat my daughter. She thinks the gifts make up for it”. The mother is shown to act responsibly by protecting her daughter; the state – embodied by LSCB, provides support. However, although this ad resists demonization of single mothers and evokes compassion and support for women in her position, it emphasizes the psychological internalization of individual responsabilization. The onus of reporting to the authorities is the mother's and hers alone: she has to self-manage.

While working-class mothers appear in three of the London ads, the Shanghai ads are marked by the absence of reference to or depiction of either working-class mothers or women in the workplace. In contemporary Shanghai, the “good life” achieved through motherhood is configured exclusively within a middle-class domestic sphere, and based fundamentally on consumption. The absence of working-class mothers and prominence of middle-class housewives converge to reinforce the idealized good mother as the middle-class mother responsible for raising the next generation of high *suzhi* (quality).

Public Display of Maternity and Intimate Family Life

A second theme prominent in both the London and Shanghai ads, is encouragement and valorization of public display of maternity and family life. Ads frequently display intimate moments of mothering to promote a product as enabling or associated with a close-knit, loving family, and the “good life”. In the Shanghai ads, intimacy is depicted almost exclusively in the setting of the nuclear and/or extended family (e.g. S1, S4, S5, S6, S10). Three (S4, S5, S6) displaying extended family, appropriate the genre of *quan jia fu*, the photo taken traditionally by Chinese families around the time of the Spring Festival to mark the reunion of different generations and revalidation of the family bond. They display the forms of attachment rendered legitimate in Chinese imagination. As Berlant argues, intimacy is a highly regulated and political site through which familial national belongings are staged, and notions of publicness are legitimated (as cited in Shome, 2011, p.390). Only certain forms of affective connections are recognized by the nation as legitimate intimate attachments (Shome, 2011). In these three ads for financial products—insurance, consumer loans, personal finance - the family members wear similar styled and colored clothes as if a coordinated unit. Thus, traditional forms of familial intimacy are assigned new meanings: self-calculating, rational, management of family life. Only families practicing this neoliberal logic are deemed “successful” and legitimate for display.

Unlike the Shanghai ads, among the 14 London ads, the nuclear family figures in only three (L5, L9, L14). Rather, there is more frequent focus on mother and child attachment to depict intimacy. For example, two ads (L7, L8) - for fertility treatment and motor coaches - depict mother and child in remarkably similar poses and contexts: snuggled, asleep in the same bed.

The display of intimate mothering and family life is most pronounced in incitements to viewers in six of the total 29 ads, to engage in “sharenting” – sharing family snapshots via technology and social media platforms. This practice is constructed as fundamental to building and sustaining good family life. The mother is the main, sometimes exclusive addressee of demands to share: good mothering and family life, once part of the private sphere, are now to be displayed publicly using various technologies (Longhurst, 2009). For example, in a London ad for the photo-sharing app *Touchnote* (L13), we see a photo-card showing a blond, white mother in sunglasses and a swimsuit carrying her blond toddler daughter on her back, with both sticking out their tongues in childish poses. The text invites the (female) reader to “make the day” for someone she loves by sending one of her favorite photos via this app. Rather than a narcissistic act, the implication is that this form of maternal sharing connotes caring: the maternal caring is extended to caring for her “loved ones”.

In the Shanghai sample, two ads in particular illustrate the exhortation to mothers to display family life publicly. The first (S2) is part of a Valentine’s Day campaign inviting young couples to contribute romantic love photos. A young man and woman wearing pajamas sit side-by-side in a domestic setting. The woman’s pink top is rolled up revealing her pregnant belly. Echoing Tyler’s (2011) account of the intensified surveillance of pregnancy as a site of pleasurable identification in western media cultures, here too pregnancy is idealized and tied in with consumption. The young woman playfully punches the man’s face, knocking off his glasses. The caption below reads “*laopo* (colloquial Chinese

for wife), let me take care of you for the rest of our lives”. The text invites consumers to share their photos and “ideals of love”, and get “a chance to be on display at the most popular metro advertising spots”. The other ad (S3) is part of a campaign called “smile relay” which solicits photos of children’s smiling faces in order to “pass on the positive energy”. A cheerful young mother wearing a smart suit is depicted alongside a collage of child photos; the caption reads “happiness needs your attention”. Words such as love, smile, positive energy and happiness allow these campaigns to capitalize on and reinforce the myth of sharing which masks the underlying commercial interest (John, 2012). Thus, visual governmentality operates on two levels. First, only urban heterosexual middle-class motherhood is deemed appropriate for sharing and display. This good mothering is validated by the children’s smiles and spouses’ loving words. Second, the activity of sharing intimate moments via social media epitomizes the expansion of market logic, with personal information previously deemed private becoming a commodity in market-exchange relations.

The sharing discourse regulates the social imaginary of “good life” by compelling individuals – primarily mothers – to decide what is worthwhile and appropriate for sharing. Images of middle-class family life are presented as the norm worth emulating while individuals living in a highly mediated contemporary urban environment are exhorted to measure their own lives against what is “shared” through media, before deciding which of their private moments are the “right” ones to make publicly visible. The most extreme manifestation of the incitement to mothers to share their intimate familial lives publicly is the *Vodafone* 4G advertisement (L11). The ad shows a young mother in a hospital bed, holding a newborn baby. She raises the baby’s arm to wave at the camera and smiles tearfully. In the foreground a man’s hand - presumably the husband’s - holds a smartphone whose screen shows the excited faces of the grandparents. This highly emotional moment of family reunion is enabled by digital technology. The text, which occupies more space than the picture, urges

the viewer: “Never miss a moment, indoors or out. Our unbeatable 4G coverage in London uses a unique combination of high and low frequencies to reach deeper indoors. Giving you the coverage you need to share the first cuddle. Power to sharers. Vodafone. Power to you”. In contrast to the soft color tones of the image, the white lettering against a bright red background makes a very loud statement about the demand to share and the power of sharing. The surveillance is omnipresent (“reach deeper indoors”), totally eliding the boundary between private and public – a blurring that is further reinforced by the sexual allusion to “reaching deeper”. Sharing becomes an obligation (“never miss a moment”, “the need to share the first cuddle”) for the mother to please others (as in the Touchstone ad), even immediately after the physically and emotionally exhausting experience of labor. Sharing validates her as a responsible and competent mother whose children are tokens of the “good life” suitable for display. The father, absent in most of the other ads, appears here in the role of facilitator for surveilling the intimate; colluding with technology to make the mother meet her sharing obligation.

In both the Shanghai and London ads, the “good life” is signified through middle-class forms of intimacy whose expression depends on consumption. This good life is to be shared publicly (primarily by the mother); its public display validates its being the “good life”. The “mismanaged” lives of the millions whose conditions “can barely support even the memory of the fantasy” (Berlant, 2011, p.167) are totally excluded from this public display.

Conclusion

This article explored how urban outdoor advertising acts as a regulatory space which formulates and articulates ideas and fantasies about the “good life”, through representations of mothers and motherhood. Focusing on representations of the maternal in adverts in two consumer culture centers - Shanghai and London - we examined in detail the symbolic production of idealized mothers and motherhood and what it hides. Our analysis

demonstrates how neoliberal rationality can be a useful concept for comparing two similar mediated objects – representations of motherhood in outdoor adverts, situated in very different cultural, political and historical contexts. In both cities' ads, the maternal constitutes a symbolic site for articulating and legitimizing neoliberal rationality: the mother is cast as the quintessential neoliberal subject – the self-responsible, calculating individual who manages the family through consumption, self-responsibility and self-governance. She is exhorted to display her family's intimate life: surveilling and governing herself and her family are the new requirements for good mothering and “good life”.

At the same time, neoliberal rationality is manifested differently in these cities' advertising representations. In Shanghai ads, fantasies about the good mother and the “good life” are closely tied to traditional Confucian and socialist ideas of family life but reconfigured in neoliberal terms: from the bonded extended family embodied by the happy and content *quan jia fu* photo and the responsible mother (historically in relation to family planning) who is managed by the state, to the self-responsible mother who manages the family as a self-sufficient unit. At the same time, in other respects the “good life” fantasy is predicated on a radical departure from socialist representations: the good mother is removed from the public sphere of work in which she participated equally in the past, and relegated to the domestic sphere. While once she realized herself as a “full citizen” as a worker *and* mother, her new maternal citizenship is exercised exclusively through consumption in the domestic sphere: buying medicine, food and products for her child, furnishing the home with foreign brands, buying the right home and life insurance. In London ads, the “good life” is marked by the white middle-class mother who supposedly enjoys gender equality, as simultaneous economic laborer, consumer and mother (fulfilling the “new sexual contract”). In contrast to her historical counterparts in 1950s' adverts, the “good life” she represents is one of freedom, choice, intimacy and control: the contented mother who shops responsibly

for her family on the internet, or happy Ms. Chata who rather than slaving over the stove, returns from work to feed her children and enjoy quality time with them. Yet responsibility for managing the family is hers, and hers alone, as is her obligation to share intimate family life, crucially, in order to satisfy others rather than herself. Her male partner is notably absent: the only source of support is derived from the goods she consumes - the technology which enables her to share her intimate moments with her children, or the ready-made meals which seemingly enable the good-life fantasy of “work-life balance”.

The visions of the “good life” in both cities' ads effectively denigrate and render other “inadequate lives” invisible. In the London representations we glimpse “abject” mothers whose mothering is disciplined by the middle-class mother fantasy. In the Shanghai ads the “inadequate life” is invisible and implicit. It refers to the lives of the millions who might see the ads and desire the fantasies they evoke but who are unable to consume and realize them, and are excluded from their “good life” vision. The “inadequate life” is also life in the past - life in the socialist era. The commercialization of public space has transformed spaces once dominated by socialist ideology into “public celebrations of individual desires, life aspirations, and personal connections” (Yu, 2014, p.58). The image of the good Chinese middle-class mother and the vision of “good life” it represents, effectively erase and delegitimize the historical vision of good life and good mothering under socialism (e.g. as constructed in propaganda posters). Hence, outdoor ads act as a regulatory symbolic space, which participates in the broader process of “visual media governmentality” (McRobbie, 2013), and reinforces the disciplinary role of the city's visuality as reproducing authoritative and masculine order (Massey, 1994). They project narrow fantasies of motherhood and “good life” which the majority of city dwellers who consume them help to sustain but can rarely realize.

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Endnotes

¹ We were able to obtain data on exposure to outdoor ads in Britain, not London, and exposure to ads in general (rather than outdoor ads specifically) in Shanghai.

² The remaining ads show a pregnant woman (S2) and a mother alongside shots of children (S3).

Table 1: Sample of ads

	Shanghai (S)	London (L)
1	<i>China Telecom</i> : 4G mobile service	<i>McCain's</i> : ready-made meals
2	<i>STDecaux</i> : photo sharing platform	<i>London's Local Safeguarding Children Board</i>
3	<i>STDecaux</i> : photo sharing platform	<i>London Transport</i> : campaign against and abuse of transport staff
4	<i>Huaxia Bank</i> : financial products	<i>Tesco</i> : supermarket online shopping
5	<i>Shanghai Rural Commercial Bank</i> : consumption loan	<i>Atlantis the Palm</i> : travel booking
6	<i>AllTrust Insurance</i> : insurance products	<i>Natwest</i> : life insurance
7	<i>Pacific Insurance</i> : insurance products	<i>IVI</i> : fertility treatments
8	<i>Miyabaobei.com</i> : baby products online reseller	<i>Megabus gold</i> : coach buses
9	<i>YangMatou.com</i> : foreign brands online reseller	<i>Brittany Ferries</i> : travel booking
10	<i>Laiyifen</i> : snacks	<i>Vitabiotics</i> : pregnancy care supplements
11	<i>OMO</i> : detergent	<i>Vodafone</i> : 4G mobile service
12	<i>Nestle</i> : baby formula	<i>Western Union</i> : money transfer services

13	<i>Dingguier patches</i> : children's medicine	<i>Touchnote</i> : photo-sharing app
14	<i>Old Navy</i> : children's clothing	<i>TSE</i> : local banking
15	<i>Lycra</i> : tight-fitting garment	