

Polis in Shanghai: the joy of the irresistible web

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Shanghai Is Digital

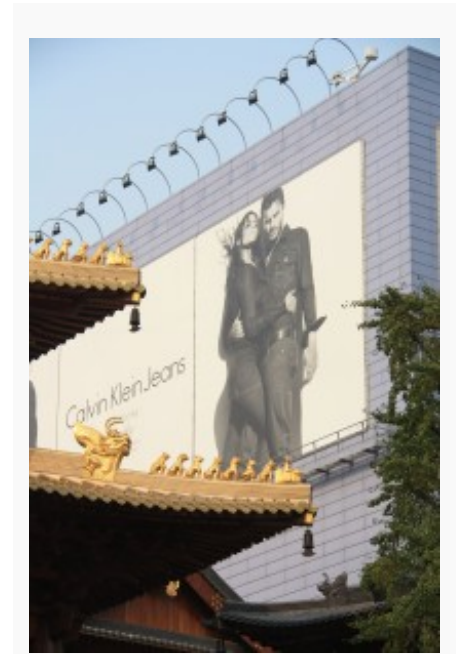
My awesome jetlag reminds me that digital has not eliminated distance. And the fact that I can't Twitter is a slap in the face of an Internet enthusiast, too. You get a little taste of what it is to be Chinese in the 21st Century when you try to Google a few choice items for a talk I gave tonight.

Funnily enough there wasn't anything political on my slides, I was only trying to get a link to the Cadbury gorilla advert on YouTube. Oddly, the Chinese censors allowed me to play the Cadbury Eyebrows video instead.

Shanghai is a steamy cauldron of economic activity. In the muggy mist combined with car fumes it is a mix of Bladerunner and Heathrow Terminal 5. In amongst the endless upthrusting

megatowers are some stunning patches of low-rise colonial community. In England the National Trust would have ring-fenced them, here they are still populated by shoe-shiners, laundries and people selling ducks and mushrooms in various stages of congealed deep fried pickledness. It feels like a social media landscape – diverse and rich.

Yet this vibrant place is still subject to the relentless attempt to assert State (and corporate) control. Visiting here is not like a trip to pre-Gorbachev Eastern Europe. People talk quite openly about their frustration at the authorities who are in danger of throttling all kinds of creativity in their search for 'harmony'. But they find it very difficult to act upon their digital instincts.



Brand Temple

But I hear so much on the ground here about advertising, marketing, social networking etc that is working that I am convinced that there will be too much online activity for this regime to control.

In a sense, though, the debate has already moved on from a Cold War style framing of Internet politics. More of that anon. Meanwhile, I am intrigued that my Twitter picture of Mao's museum got out, while Twitter itself is stymied.

Thanks to all the LSE alumni who came that lovely cafe to hear me ramble on about nu meeja. Some fascinating insights from some very thoughtful people.



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