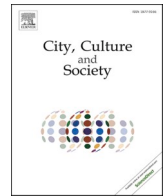


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Window of the world: Transparency, digital placemaking, and Shenzhen Urbanism

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ABSTRACT

Shenzhen, the first Special Economic Zone established in 1979 in southern China, has transformed from a global electronics manufacturing hub and counterfeiting capital into a UNESCO City of Design within the span of four decades. This article examines three digital-imaging practices that emanate from the city to explore the city's multiple connections to globalization from above and globalization from below. The first is the 2004 narrative film *The World*, directed by Jia Zhang-ke (often known as a Sixth-Generation Chinese *auteur*) and based in part on lead actress Zhao Tao's experience working in Shenzhen's *Window of the World* theme park. The second is Shenzhen-based company Transsion's design of smart phones for the African market, which have roots in the city's Shanzhai (i.e. "knockoff") mobile phone sector. The third is large-scale light shows around the city in 2018–2019 that turn the facades of high-rises into electronic screens, featuring LED-light imageries generated by algorithms. Utilizing digital media to illuminate Shenzhen as a networked place in the world, these relational place-making practices simultaneously engage with and reveal the contradictions of transparency as a normative ideal upheld by global tech giants and Euro-American governments. Together, they provide a distinctive window to discern China's cultural and political dilemmas in the 21st century.

Shenzhen, the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) established in 1979 in southern China, has transformed from a fishing village, a global electronics manufacturing hub, and a counterfeiting capital into a UNESCO City of Design within the span of four decades.¹ Home to *Window of the World*, one of China's first replica theme parks featuring world-renowned landmarks, Shenzhen is increasingly becoming a showcase for ultra-modern skyscrapers. Formerly the birthplace of Shanzhai (i.e. "knockoff") cell phones, which enjoy tremendous popularity among China's migrant working class, Shenzhen is now known for such hi-tech startups like Tencent (腾讯) and Transsion (传音), the former celebrated for its WeChat app - the most used social media platform in the Chinese-speaking world - and the latter boasting mobile phone brands that have achieved tremendous market success in the Global South.

Located in the Asia-Pacific while serving as a key node in the global network of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Shenzhen presents a distinctive site for probing the politics of "relational place-making" (Pierce et al., 2011). As Pierce et al. suggest, relational place-making as a methodological framework encourages us to

recognize the interconnectedness of different places and the networked process of politics. This perspective orients us to approaching Shenzhen as a media-architectural nexus that straddles globalization from "above," emphasizing the role of institutional actors from the Global North (i.e. Euro-American governments and corporations), and globalization from "below," which highlights the agency and resistance of people from the Global South (Falk, 2000; Karim, 2003).

This essay examines three digital-imaging practices that emanate from Shenzhen to explore the city's networked politics and its place in the world. The first is six-generation *auteur* Jia Zhang-ke's 2004 narrative film *The World*, based in part on lead actress Zhao Tao's experience working in the *Window of the World* theme park. The second is Transsion's design of low-price phones for the African market, which have roots in the Shanzhai mobile phone sector. The third is large-scale light shows around the city in 2018–2019 that turn the facades of high-rises into electronic screens, using LED lights to project patterns and imageries generated by algorithms. Distinct in their operations, these examples are best conceptualized as *digital placemaking* projects that utilize digital media to illuminate Shenzhen as a city with

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¹ This, of course, is a dominant narrative, if not myth, that is challenged by recent publications such as Juan Du's *The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China's Instant City*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

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dense connections to global communication. Together, they offer some provocations for rethinking the political possibilities of *placing* Shenzhen - and indeed China - within the uneven relations between the Global North and the Global South, particularly from the standpoint of digital media production.

Taking the “window” metaphor as a starting point, I center my analysis on the concept of transparency. For my purpose, I follow a basic understanding of transparency as the condition of making the information of one entity visible, available, or knowable to another. As cultural theorist Clare Birchall argues, transparency emerged as a dominant ideology with the advent of Western modernity. “Enlightenment philosophers,” for instance, “privileged transparency (of the state, self, other, and world) as an ideal, and in the process, they ascribed negative value to secrets and secrecy” (Birchall, 2021, p. 15). In contemporary times, Emmanuel Alloa and Dieter Thomä observe “a growing consensus that transparency is one of democracy’s best tools and that every citizen has a right to transparency” (Alloa & Thomä, 2018, p. 2). And yet, as Birchall notes in the context of “datafied” America, “the ubiquity of secrecy in the state and corporate sectors, whether in the form of security agencies, covert operations, classified information, black box technologies, opaque algorithmic discrimination, trade secrets, and so forth, means that secrecy is a staple rather than exceptional” (Birchall, 2021, p. 6). The ideology of transparency, then, is fraught with inherent contradictions. While global tech giants and governments alike often demand maximum transparency from consumers and citizens as they collect personal data for targeted advertising or national security, they seldom subject their own data operation or decision-making processes to public scrutiny. Between state or corporate entities and the people they proclaim to serve, then, exists what I would call an *asymmetry* of transparency.

The rise of Critical Transparency Studies has come to challenge this “ultimate consensual value of our time” from multi-disciplinary perspectives (Alloa & Thomä, 2018, p. 2). Yet limited attention has been paid to how the normative ideal of transparency may be contested in non-Western or Global South locales. In this light, the Shenzhen-based digital imaging cases examined here simultaneously engage with and reveal the contradictions of transparency as it is construed and practiced predominantly in the Global North. Enacting multiple layers of transparency from a variety of angles, they provide a distinctive window through which to investigate the placeness of Shenzhen in relation to the world. As such, they offer useful opportunities to discern China’s cultural and political dilemmas in the 21st century.

1. Window of the world

The *Window of the World* (世界之窗) theme park is located in the Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) along the Shenzhen Bay. Opening doors in 1994 with over 130 miniature world landmarks, it is one of the earliest attractions in the city. The park is often toured together with its adjacent *Splendid China* (锦绣中华) and *Folk Village* (中华民俗村), which feature miniature sites and ethnic performances within the nation. Over time, the park has continuously put on new performances and added Disney-style rides to attract new and returning tourists. In 2002, its newly built high-tech “Global Stage” (环球舞台) served as a local platform for the annual, nationally broadcast Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television (CCTV). The show reportedly led to a record-breaking number of park visitors the next day. In subsequent years, as many as one third of the tourists have stated in surveys: “It was the Gala that brought us here” (“Huicui Shijie Chuang Yiliu [A World of Excellence],” 2002).

Ren Kelei, the Chief Executive Officer of the OCT Group, repeatedly proclaimed that “Shenzhen’s *Window of the World* is not just the window of OCT, the window of the Shenzhen SEZ, the window of Guangdong. It is indeed the window of China” (“Huicui Shijie Chuang Yiliu [A World of Excellence],” 2002). This may not be an overstatement, considering that the OCT was “imagined as a manifesto of the ‘Asian metropolis’”

reserved for “returned overseas Chinese,” often those likely to bring in capital from Southeast Asia. Indeed, as historian Taomo Zhou argues, the official desire to use “the border town” of Bao’an - the county from which Shenzhen was carved out - “as a window” to “showcase the PRC’s achievements to ‘the Hong Kong compatriots’ and international visitors” can be traced back to the socialist era (Zhou, 2021, p. 12). Built by a collaborative team from Singapore and Hong Kong (Cracium, 2001, p. 133), the inclusion of theme parks like *Window of the World* was motivated by interests in the tourist industry and real estate speculation, because views of the parks from the apartment buildings erected in the surrounding area would presumably add value to the construction. The parks, according to Miha Cracium, “scatter signs of the city even before the ‘city’ was present” (Cracium, 2001, pp. 133–135). In this way, the built environment of the OCT, part of the state project to “[open] up a narrow path between reality and representation” (Cracium, 2001, p. 89) became an architectural sign deployed to showcase the city/nation’s high-speed development.

It was therefore no surprise that award-winning filmmaker Jia Zhangke would choose *Window of the World* as a main location for shooting his 2004 film, *The World* (*Shijie*). In interviews, Jia often speaks of his first trip to the park - the place where his long-time collaborator and muse Zhao Tao once worked as a dancer - as a source of inspiration for the film. Some of the most memorable scenes in *The World* include tourists posing for pictures in front of replicas of the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, among other international and historical landmarks, the result of which is often no different from posing in front of the real sites. As Jia recalls, *Window of the World* struck him as a reflection of “the impact of high-speed economic development on the human psyche,” as people’s distance to the world has become “so close” and “so far at the same time” (Cheung, 2005).

One way in which the film represents this simultaneous lengthening and shortening of distance - between China and the world and between people - is through animated sequences of mobile-phone texting among the main characters. In an otherwise live-action film, these sequences work to distinguish a space of mobile communication among migrant workers that allows them to establish a sense of intimacy amidst an alienating work place. Yet this intimacy is as uncertain as it is fleeting, such that the female protagonist Tao, for example, finds out about her boyfriend’s affair with another woman, which was also initiated through texting. Similarly, the boyfriend of another character in the film constantly chastises his girlfriend for not responding to his texts, prompting a friend of hers to comment that he ought to obtain a GPS-tracking-enabled phone so that he can locate her at all times.

In scenes like these, the mobile phone’s potential for creating a space for inter-personal communication, which relies on immediacy, is entangled with its capacity for what André Jansson calls “interveillance” (Jansson, 2015). Much like the dominant social media platforms analyzed in Jansson’s account, texting through mobile phones offers “simulated forms of recognition” in response to the “recognition deficit” within an individualizing, capitalistic society (Jansson, 2015, p. 87). Having been displaced from the rural communities that form the traditional ground for their identity formation, the workers at the theme park seek to re-establish a sense of autonomy through peer-group recognition. Yet the simulated recognition provided by the personalized device of the mobile phone ultimately fails to offer a genuine kind of individual autonomy and instead reinforces “the legitimation of the dominant system itself” (Jansson, 2015, p. 88). This corresponds to what Cara Wallis has termed “immobile mobility” in her study of young Chinese female migrant workers’ engagement with mobile phones, which offers “a means of surpassing, but not erasing, limiting material conditions to gain inclusion in expanded and enriched social networks” (Wallis, 2011, p. 62).

In this cinematic treatise of Shenzhen - a form of digital placemaking predicated on the use of animation to represent mobile connectivity - lies the first layer of the politics of transparency. That is, Shenzhen as the “window” intended to open China to the world is created at the expense

of the possibility of human connection, particularly on the part of migrant workers who have made China “the World’s Factory.” Elsewhere, I’ve argued that Jia is particularly concerned with the enslavement of the migrant workers by “Shenzhen speed,” the defining slogan for the city since its founding (Yang, 2017). This is a world of “sped-up urbanization” that denies them the opportunity to accumulate “experience” (*Erfahrung*) over time but leaves them with a constant sense of floating “uncertainty.” As performers in the park and participants in its simulated environment, the workers may “travel” to different places in the world. Yet much like the built environment that flattens into a backdrop for tourist photographs - that is, as spaces *made for media* - the workers can’t seem to cultivate a sense of place despite their attempts to form bonds with one another via the communicative medium of the mobile phone. It is precisely this sense of *displacement* that is enacted in the animated sequences of texting; they reveal the ambiguous capacity of the mobile phone to simultaneously create a space of co-presence while amplifying the distance between the workers. As “window of the world” and a microcosm of Shenzhen, the park is ultimately a non-place, in Marc Auge’s sense of the term (Auge, 2009). Through it, the world may appear to be accessible, but only as a façade on the other side of the window, the transparency of which seemingly erases the distance. Far from an ideal to be embraced, this transparent connectivity between China, its people, and the world, as interfaced through animated mobile phone communication, is displayed as fraught with tensions and contradictions.

2. Transsion

The mobile phone also highlights Shenzhen’s role as a window of China to the world on another level. Elsewhere, I have traced the material conditions that gave rise to Shanzhai, the “brand name” for counterfeits that took off in Shenzhen’s informal mobile phone industry (Yang, 2016). These conditions reflect Shenzhen’s key role as a manufacturing hub for global electronics, which drew thousands of migrant workers from inland China to the city. As part of what Jack Qiu calls “the working-class network society” (Qiu, 2009), they are at once the producers and consumers for Shanzhai phones. The making of the brand simultaneously challenges the globalizing intellectual property rights (IPR) regime and relies on the technological transfers of global tech firms. Since the early 2000s, Shenzhen has rebranded itself from a knockoff capital into a site of “indigenous innovation” (S. M. Lindtner, 2020, p. 40) as part of the national strategy captured by the slogan, “From Made in China to Created in China.” Emblematic of this transformation are companies like Transsion, a Shenzhen startup founded in 2006 that now produces some of the most popular mobile phones in Africa, including the feature phone brand itel (priced under \$20) and the smart phone brand Tecno (priced under \$100) (Lu, 2021, p. 29).

Transsion’s success in the Global South can be seen as a form of relational placemaking through digital media in that it relies on what Lu Miao calls “a place-based” approach to phone design (Lu, 2021, p. 26). In Lu’s study of itel, an affordable option popular in Ghana especially among “farmers, manual workers, and street vendors,” for example, she observes that “itel’s design approach significantly benefits from Shenzhen’s maker ecosystem, including the rapid prototyping and ‘modularization’ of mobile phone production” (Lu, 2021, p. 30). In addition to this Shanzhai-esque, Shenzhen-specific mode of production, the company also “works closely with local dealers and distributors to build an intensive distribution channel” in Ghana (Lu, 2021, p. 31). Its practice “demonstrates a long-term commitment to its African partners and a willingness to compromise regarding profits” (Lu, 2021, p. 37), again not unlike Shanzhai phones’ success within China in the early 2000s. Furthermore, what enabled Transsion phones to beat Apple and Samsung in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Egypt are the same reasons for Shanzhai phones to achieve immense popularity domestically. These include: dual, triple, or even quadruple SIM cards that allow users to curb the costs of using different networks, extra-long

battery life that accommodates locations with unpredictable electricity supplies, and of course, low price. Related and similar to Shanzhai’s ties to the placeness of Shenzhen, itel’s popularity in the Global South is “based on both its ‘place’ in the global ICT industry and its customers’ ‘place’ in the global consumer society” (Lu, 2021, p. 36).

Such relational placemaking enacted in Transsion’s mobile phone design thus points to another layer of the politics of transparency. As I have argued elsewhere, Apple, among other tech companies, is known to exert tight control over information about its new product development for fear of IPR infringement, which stands in stark contrast to Steve Jobs’ professed aesthetic emphasis on the transparency of the Apple Stores’ architectural façade (Yang, 2014). Yet historically, the production of Shanzhai phones is known to defy the norms of Euro-American IPR regime in that small-scale workshops in places like Huaqiangbei – now a “maker’s hub” - operate as creative clusters that depend on an eco-system of knowledge as well as resource sharing (S. Lindtner, 2014). Moreover, the outsourced manufacturing of tech companies like Apple also in many ways provides the technological basis – oftentimes through “unwilling” transfer of know-how – for the Shanzhai phone sector. It is this “illicit” form of transparency, as it were, that enabled Shanzhai or Shanzhai-inspired Transsion phones to thrive within China and in the Global South, respectively.

Perhaps of even more significance here is what Miao Lu calls “the politics and poetics of optimization” (Lu, 2021, p. 36). A main reason for Africans to favor Transsion’s Tecno phones over those designed in the Global North is the phone camera. In the words of Arif Chowdhury, the vice president of Transsion, Tecno cameras “adjust more light for darker skin, so the photograph is more beautiful” (Quoted in Marsh, 2018). Since 2013–2014, the company has focused on adjusting its algorithms in “beautifying Africa” (非洲美颜), also known as “Africa Focus.” The goal, as Chowdhury points out, is to allow Africans to optimize their pictures in “their favorite chocolate color” (Jiemi Feizhou Shouji Zhiwang [The Secret of the King of Cell Phones in Africa], 2018). A software engineer who works on algorithms at Transsion interviewed by Lu put it this way: “The problem we need to tackle is not just on the technical level. Instead, what we need to do is to understand the beauty of dark-skinned people. What Africans want is not whiteness but beauty” (Lu, 2021, p. 35). The “think global, act local” motto of the company is manifested in part in its ability to promote a standard of beauty alternative to the globally dominant preference for lighter skin color. This is an example of the kind of “cost-sensitive, context-conscious, and demand-driven” strategy that brings in “a Southern perspective of design” (Lu, 2021, pp. 36–37). It points to the ways in which the Shenzhen-Global South nexus via ICT production may defy “the cultural imaginary of Silicon Valley as the center of future-making for everywhere.” (Lu, 2021, pp. 36–37).

To be sure, such optimization of Transsion phone cameras for darker skin tones is based on the collection of massive visual data gathered on the African continent, deploying the asymmetrical logic of transparency practiced by tech giants like Facebook and Google. Chinese companies are also known to export not only digital infrastructure, as in the case of another Shenzhen-headquartered company ZTE in Ethiopia, but also surveillance technologies such as facial recognition systems to authoritarian states like Zimbabwe (Hawkins, n. d.). Yet it is precisely at the level of digitization that another tension of transparency emerges. While Transsion replicates the norms of global tech firms in terms of data collection, its roots in Shanzhai design also challenges their norms of secrecy by way of making visible what is often hidden by these firms – namely, the exorbitant amount of surplus value that global firms like Apple extracts through its IPR-protected brand image and features. At times, the desire to cut costs may generate unintended consequences. For example, in 2020, Tecno phones were found to be pre-loaded with a malware that secretly extracts money from African users’ airtime account (Ziady, 2020). Transsion has blamed a third-party vendor for the mishap, claiming that the company “did not profit from the malware” (cited in Silverman, 2020). But one couldn’t help but wonder if the

incident was a result of the company's relentless cost-cutting measure that is meant, paradoxically, to serve the "bottom of the pyramid" (BOP) population" (Lu, 2021, p. 24).

Amidst these contradictions, Transsion's Southern-informed design also produces another effect of digital placemaking that is less immediately discernible. That is, it enables African subjects to join what Jodi Dean calls the "commons" – likewise imaginable as a kind of place – of "secondary visuality" (Dean, 2016). As "a feature of communicative capitalism," secondary visuality refers to "the incorporation of images into mass practices of mediated social and personal communication" (Dean, 2016, p. 3). In secondary visuality, our selfies taken by our mobile phones "lose their individuating quality and become generic" (Dean, 2016, p. 1). From this perspective, Transsion phone cameras' pixelized beautification of blackness defies the normative algorithms of the Global North, which caters to hegemonic whiteness (Benjamin, 2019, p. 109). It indeed augments the possibility for black Africans to engage in "the commoning of faces" globally (Dean, 2016, p. 2).

A vision of this participation can be seen in a Transsion ad that portrays numerous individuals – including several with darker skin tones – posing for selfies using Tecno phones.² While each individual is engaging in a different activity, whether it is throwing a ball or a disc, the angles from which they are taking the selfies and the expressions on their faces are more similar than different. Indeed, the display of their faces in these selfies brings into more concrete visibility a gathering place, or commons, for their secondary visuality. Perhaps understandably, in the *danmu* (onscreen user-generated comments) that scrolls across the ad on bilibili (a popular video sharing site for global Chinese internet users), one of the viewers writes: "In fact, black skin looks quite nice too!" The ad, therefore, arguably enacts Tecno's contribution in the making of "faces as commons," which for Dean creates "new possibilities for collectivity," given its potential to "push back against the individualism of contemporary capitalism" (Dean, 2016, p. 2).

The Shenzhen start-up Transsion, then, opens another "window" of China to the world. What its mobile phones promulgate is a vision of globalization from below, one that potentially unites the subalterns residing in the Global South in defiance of globalization from above, i.e. neoliberal policies and processes generated by major governments and corporations emanating from the Global North. Importantly, this collectivization is predicated on engaging in as well as contesting a set of transparency practices normalized by globally hegemonic tech giants. Shenzhen, then, emerges in this contested engagement as a place that simultaneously unmask the ideology of transparency embraced by corporations such as Apple while appropriating the latter's data collection practices to algorithmically reconfigure mobile phones for users in the Global South. Much like the animation sequences in Jia Zhangke's film, the place-based design of Transsion phones, especially the adjustment of smart phone cameras to cater to dark-skinned Africans, may be seen as a form of digital placemaking practice that works with as well as against the prevailing principles of transparency underlying the global networks of technology production and communication.

3. Light show

If Transsion's algorithmic reconfiguration of mobile phone cameras suggests one way in which the cybernetic is intricately linked to the biological, this connection also manifests itself in the third object of my study – an architectural feature that Gumpert and Drucker call "building skins" (Gumpert & Drucker, 2013, p. 199). On Oct 1, 2018, I opened up WeChat on my iPhone and saw more than a few old high school friends from Shenzhen sharing and reposting pictures of a light show (灯光秀).

² I first came across this video on bilibili but it is no longer available as of March 2020 and can instead be found on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ3iPY-dRLg>.

Architectural landmarks in several major areas in the municipality, including the Central Business District near the Civic Center, were lit up with LEDs (light-emitting diodes) at designated times at night, forming patterns and imageries reminiscent of the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony. As awe-inspiring as the algorithm-based orchestration of the urban spectacle was perhaps the exuberant energy it displayed, both through electricity and through the crowds gathered around it, on- and off-line. In fact, some of the local friends I talked to relayed that a major thread of public criticism towards the shows had to do with the waste of energy in such displays, even though they were presumed to be more environmentally friendly than fireworks, a more traditional form of celebration.

2018 also marked the 40th anniversary of Shenzhen's birth as China's first Special Economic Zone established under Deng Xiaoping. Some of the images from its celebration made it into the *New York Times*'s five-part series, *China Rules*, which came out at the end of 2018 (Pan & Denton, 2018). In line with the now widely circulated journalistic narrative of "China rising" across the Pacific, the display is perhaps more emblematic of globalization from above than from below. An overblown celebration of Shenzhen's success in opening China to the world, the light show was in part inspired by similar displays in Euro-American locales, from Barcelona to Lyon (Li, 2016). Carefully planned and orchestrated by the Shenzhen government, the genre has proliferated in many other major cities across China. Yet it was the Civic Center show in Shenzhen that became highlighted as a representative of the city as "the frontier of socialism" during the CCTV Gala in 2019, echoing the showcasing of *Window of the World* theme park seventeen years before.

In many ways, the light show points to Scott McQuire's theorization of the convergence between media and urban space in his award-winning book, *The Media City: Media, Architecture, and Urban Space* (McQuire, 2008). Tracing the emergence of the media-architectural complex from the nineteenth century to the present, McQuire argues that this convergence – manifested most prominently through the twin axes of spectacle and surveillance – presents ambivalent political possibilities. Among McQuire's examples is the presentation of electric lights in early-20th-century *World's Fairs*. These lights turned the city into "a performative space in which fixity of appearances would give way to increasing flux, and the hierarchy of classical geometry would give way to relational space" (McQuire, 2008, p. 119). Similarly, in the Shenzhen light show, the physical structure of the built environment became malleable, as data flows came to defy the fixity of architectural facades.

Much like the two previous examples of digital image making, the light show appears to simultaneously embrace and contest the vision of transparency embodied by the modernist glass house, which McQuire connects to the communicative ideals of Western liberal societies. Here, the spectacle and surveillance functions of media in public space are combined in ways that reflect the formation of what Ted Striphas calls an "algorithmic culture" (Striphas, 2015). The buildings-façade-turned-urban-screens are not projecting commodities as spectacles in Guy Debord's sense of the term (Debord, 1994). Rather, the imageries are computer-generated and preprogrammed, therefore emblematic of the mechanisms of a surveillance society. The circulation of the programmed spectacle depends on citizen-subjects' willingness to post and share on social media, the data generated thereof allowing companies like Tencent to accumulate profits. In other words, the spectacle does not *hide* social relations as such but instead calls for social media connectivity to magnify its presence, a connectivity that renders citizen-subjects' personal information transparent to tech companies and the state. The light show, then, emblemizes what Birchall calls "shareveillance," which describes the "conditions in which subjects are asked to consume shared data and produce data to be shared, are required to be surveillant and surveilled, as elements of control" (Birchall, 2021, p. 102).

For Birchall, "shareveillance feeds into the way in which the datafied neoliberal security state shapes an antipolitical role for its public"; this is

because “the public” here “is configured as either a flat data set or a series of individual auditor-entrepreneurs rather than as a force with political potential” (Birchall, 2021, p. 95). The constant Euro-American demand for governments around the world to be more open in sharing information, then, manifests what Birchall calls a kind of “transparency imperialism,” which “encourages different nation-states to offer data instead of politics” (Birchall, 2021, p. 83). A case in point is the call on the part of the US state for China to be more transparent about the Wuhan virology lab presumed to be the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic (Smolinski, 2021). The obsession with data arguably elides the lack of a more politically engaged response to the coronavirus crisis during the Trump presidency, the kind that perhaps could have granted greater importance to public welfare than to private interests.

The enactment of shareveillance in the Shenzhen light show is thus instructive for examining the workings of “transparency imperialism” in the Chinese context. Not only does the show inadvertently reveal the inherent tensions of the transparency ideal championed by Western neoliberal states, the spatial experience of the urban spectacle also complicates the making of antipolitical subjects reducible to data. The show, after all, relies on both the materiality of the infrastructure and the “immateriality” of algorithmic data. “Digital buildings,” as Gumpert and Drucker point out, “are capable of changing the relationship of outside to inside and portend new forms of interactivity between people and structures” (Gumpert & Drucker, 2013, p. 212). Grasped as such, the light show can be seen as “a new element in the urban communication infrastructure” whose proliferation in China as well as elsewhere invites us to rethink “the relationship of interior to exterior, and of human-structure interface” especially “when confronted with the new digital media environment of the street” (Gumpert & Drucker, 2013, p. 212). The massive sharing of light show footage and pictures on WeChat no doubt bespeaks this blurring between the interior and the exterior. To view and record the show, one is required to be in the presence of others in public. On the other hand, the posting and sharing of one’s own imageries largely depends on a private mode of mobile phone use, even though one’s audience consists of a potentially transnational public that includes diasporic subjects like me. The light show, then, manifests McQuire’s concept of the relational space in that it creates an opportunity for the making of collective experience by enabling citizen-subjects to establish temporary relations with others through “multiple matrices and networks that overlap and interpenetrate,” beyond territorially defined or place-based boundaries (McQuire, 2006).

For this reason, Joshua Neves’s proposal to engage the “unholy social” with regard to China’s postsocialist context is useful for probing the politics of the light show (Neves, 2011, p. 23). As Neves suggests, “the notion of the unholy is a critical tool for thinking about political society in its nonpublic and non-private configurations”; it aids in “opening up the closed (*mise en abyme*) structure of the social body and highlighting the spectral infrastructures that are elided by the idealistic and ideological discourses presented on-screen” (Neves, 2011, p. 37). The public critique of the light show as a waste of energy points precisely to the contingent outcome of what appears to be a blatant form of state interpellation under “screen postsocialism” (Neves, 2011, p. 35). The place-specific urban spectacle borne of algorithmic culture may not necessarily produce the intended effects of a “society of control” (Deleuze, 1992). After all, its audience consists of a national public beyond Shenzhen for whom the opacity, not transparency, of smog serves as a constant reminder of the environmental challenges and energy crisis brought on by the “Made in China” model and four decades of rapid economic growth, animated most vividly by “Shenzhen Speed.” In other words, the light show might serve as another opportunity to disrupt such binaries as materiality and immateriality, private and public, transparency and opacity, North and South, among others, when examining a kind of politics and urbanism distinctive to Shenzhen.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that transparency provides a distinctive lens through which to examine the placeness of Shenzhen as a media city. All three examples of digital-imaging practices prompt us to look further into the composition of the “window,” by engaging the infrastructure and materiality of digital image making. Together, they evoke what Vilem Flusser calls “the eruption of the dot-interval-thinking,” which has come to replace plane-based and linear thought and presents new possibilities of political intersubjectivity (Flusser, 2003, p. 11). Written from the critical perspectives of digital media and cultural studies, this article by no means captures all the complex empirical transformations that have characterized Shenzhen in the past forty years. But it is my hope that it can serve as an invitation to rethink Shenzhen/China in the global context of digital media and relational placemaking, a re-orientation that defies such binaries as the Global North v. The Global South and transparency v. secrecy.

In *The World*, we have animation sequences replacing live action to enact the texting data through which migrant workers - who bring China to the world - establish inter-personal intimacy, albeit not always with success. Transsion’s itel and Tecno phones cater to the needs and aesthetics of African users in ways that challenge Euro-American norms, even though new patterns of “data colonialism” (Coudry & Mejias, 2019) may be discernible as companies like Transsion expand their operation on the African continent. In the light show, we observe algorithmic formation of imageries on building facades that fuse the spectacle and surveillance principles of the media city to conjure a relational space of inter-subjective connectivity, reflecting a contingent alternative to an otherwise ultra-nationalistic discourse.

These cultural artifacts, then, encourage more investigations into the political implications of situating Shenzhen as a networked place that connects globalizations from above and below. One way to do so is to further explore the linkages between digital image making and place making, or what I have come to call digital placemaking, given that all three examples simultaneously enact Shenzhen’s locality and its role as a nodal point in globalized digital production. At once a manufacturing hub and a counterfeiting hotspot, its apparent “placelessness” is also accompanied by its visibility as a frontier city of Chinese socialism, if not a city of design increasingly discernible on the global map of technological innovation. In this sense, Shenzhen is indeed a multifaceted window that opens China to the world, although it may be more useful to think of “the world” here in the plural. As Juan Du argues in *The Shenzhen Experiment*, “Shenzhen is not a formalized and easily replicable top-down model, but a complex and shifting set of bottom-up and informal negotiations” (Du, 2020, p. 310). The multi-layered engagement with transparency that the city’s digital imagining practices has reminded us of the importance of attending to the contingent, uncertain, and multiple outcomes of this “experiment.” Indeed, if China is at once aspiring to join the First World while struggling with the many contradictions more characteristic of the Third World, Shenzhen’s placeness offers a provocative lens through which to examine the cultural and political dilemmas faced by the nation. Paying more critical attention to this placeness of the city in relation to digital media practices such as those that emerged with the advent of mobile phones would then allow us to better envision the political possibilities of a “rising China” amid the dynamic encounters between the Global North and the Global South.

Credit Author Statement

Fan Yang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing, Reviewing and Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

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