

Occupy Mongkok Movement - Small Shop Owners in the Struggle of Personal Agencies and Institutional Forces

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Background

This research paper is set at the Umbrella Movement, also named Occupy Movement, a political movement kicked off by the protests initiated by the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism outside Government Head after China's Standing Committee of National People's Congress disallowed civil nominations in the proposed electoral reform¹. Mongkok surprisingly became an important strategic location for this movement after the illegitimate use of police force with pepper spray and tear gas grenades to dispel the protesters triggered more citizens to occupy regions other than Admiralty on September 28, 2014. Yet this put the livelihoods of the affected small business shops in Mongkok on the spotlight. As evidenced by the opinion poll conducted by a public concern group called '佔領撐小店'², the

¹ South China Morning Post. 2014. 'Universal Suffrage' <http://www.scmp.com/topics/universal-suffrage>. Accessed on December 10, 2014:

National People's Congress states that a 1200-member nominating Committee whose composition remains subject to a second round of consultation will elect two to three electoral candidate with more than half of the votes before the general public can exercise their voting right on them.

² 佔領撐小店. 2014. Opinion Poll on the views of the affected small shops in Mongkok. Last retrieved on December 15, 2014.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19IM5t97cSIEqbwH4CyTrouUyEdKI-kZQsPXbe0l3r8/edit#gid=0>

affected small shop owners showed diverse views on whether to support the ‘Occupy Movement’.

In the dilemma of business loss and the social command behind the occupy movement, this paper seeks to study how these small shop owners struggled between institutional forces and personal agencies in deciding whether to support Occupy Movement in the context of neoliberalism. The first part of the paper argues that neoliberalism is a form of structural violence. Yet under such violence, small shop owners and staff justified their sufferings from high land rent and developers’ hegemony as a necessary part of the neoliberal market in the name of ‘market competitiveness’. The second part reviews how these small shop owners dealt with the existing economic challenges which were further intensified in the Occupy Movement. It also studies personal agencies of small shop owners and their workers in their confrontation with the structural violence under neoliberalism.

Methodology

In order to understand the situation small shops were facing, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 4 shops from October 16 to 25, 2014. We asked questions to collect information about the impacts of the Occupy Movement on their sales, their opinion of the Occupy Movement, their difficulties in maintaining their shops, and how they understood factors contributing to such difficulties.

Neoliberalism as a form of structural violence

According to Paul Farmer (2004), “structural violence is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm’s way... The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people... neither culture nor pure individual will is at fault; rather, historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency. Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress³.”

Neoliberalism is an indispensable part of Hong Kong’s political and economic sphere as Hong Kong has adopted non-intervention policy and free market policy for a very long time. Neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual’s freedom and responsibility to survive in the market, has not been only reflected in government policies and the economic development of Hong Kong, but has also been embedded in people’s mind and became a value they embraced. The Lion Rock Spirit is an example of how neoliberalism is embedded and embraced. The flourishing of manufacturing industry in Hong Kong in the 60s-70s provided a material

³ Farmer. Paul. 2004. *On Suffering and Structural Violence: Social and Economic Rights in Global Era* from *Pathologies of Power: health, human rights and the new war on the poor*. Berkeley : University of California Press, c2003

foundation for the existence of the Lion Rock Spirit, which was the belief of individual freedom, responsibility and hard work to realization of a better future in career and livelihood, as the working condition at that time could really allow the hard-work of people to be paid off (Xu 2014). The improvement in quality of life of people and the world-recognized economic achievement of Hong Kong has served as proofs of the effectiveness of the Lion Rock Spirit and neoliberalism, thus these ideologies have been reinforced in people's mind.

Back to the context of small business shops in Mongkok, after the introduction of Individual Visit Scheme in 2003, Mongkok has become the hot shopping paradise for Mainland tourists. Consequently, the land rent of the small business shop has rapidly increased. According to a survey conducted among 150 small shops at New Town Centre (新之城), Argyle Centre (旺角中心) and Sino Centre (信和中心), more than 75% of which were subject to a monthly rental burden costing more than \$25,000. More than 10% of shops faced a yearly rental growth rate of more than 40%. Such rental problem was particularly acute among famous shopping malls such as Argyle Centre (旺角中心) and Sino Centre (信和中心)⁴. Given the intense competition among small business shops inside these shopping malls, they could barely earn enough to cover the high land rent. Such unfavorable condition had put them on the edge of the brick before the Occupy movement.

Neoliberalism as a form of systemic violence

Small shop owners have often internalized harm caused by liberal market as a necessary part for the smooth functioning of our economic and political system, which can be understood as systemic violence⁵. While the small business owners suffer from a natural disadvantageous position with less endowment in the market, why do they still idealize market competitiveness as an engine for advancement for all? Why do they have so much faith in this market when it is no longer regulated? Why are they bound to follow the unfair market rules instead of taking the initiative to change it?

In the case of liberal market, physical violence is not exerted, but the underlying inherently mysterious premise justifies the polarization of resources and the unregulated rent control for the sake of the fairness and liberal market. According to interviews conducted, small shop

⁴佔領撐小店. 2014. '旺角小店營運現況調查發佈會 及 媒體報導'. Last retrieved on December 15, 2014.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/%E4%BD%94%E9%A0%98%E6%92%90%E5%B0%8F%E5%BA%97%E6%97%BA%E8%A7%92%E5%B0%8F%E5%BA%97%E7%87%9F%E9%81%8B%E7%8F%BE%E6%B3%81%E8%AA%BF%E6%9F%A5%E7%99%BC%E4%BD%88%E6%9C%83-%E5%8F%8A-%E5%AA%92%E9%AB%94%E5%A0%B1%E5%B0%8E/747099018701409>

⁵ Zizek, Slavoj. 2008. *The Tyrant's Bloody Robe*. In *Violence*, p. 2. London: Profile Books.

Systemic violence is the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political system to make sense of what otherwise seem to be irrational explosions of subjective violence. Subjective violence is experienced as such against background of a non-violent zero level'; a perturbation of the 'normal' and peaceful state of things.

owners firstly blamed themselves for the failure to survive in this distorted market mechanism. They also rendered themselves passive agents that were bound to follow the rules. These contradictions can be seen in what they said.



(Mr Chan, interviewed on October 25, 2014)

Mr Chan (a tea shop owner whose shop is located at San Tin Lei Street):

“I do not know much about politics, but I have a strong faith in market. The only fair way is to follow it and to survive with our own business tactics, regardless of how harsh these rules are.”

Small shop owners and their workers did not own the rights to set the agenda of market, but considered themselves as the follower of these unfair market rules. They constrained their personal agencies to change the system. While workers reinforced their inability to change the structure, they regarded themselves as labor class necessarily exploited by the capitalistic class.

Mr A (The waiter of a dessert shop located near Nathan Road):

“Of course we want to improve our lives but we are just ordinary workers in the labor class. Of course, we want a fairer society! But the large property developer is killing us, so what else can we do?”

No matter how high-level the occupants' mission sounds, what they are doing cannot practically relieve our rental burden. I do not see any possibility of overturning this unfair reality. All I want in my life is therefore simple. I want to work normally and to secure my job. Then I try my best to serve the client well if there is any so that I can earn enough money to buy good stuff in my leisure time. It is not up to us to change the society anyway!

This can be understood as social alienation⁶ of labor class from their humanities, which is a consequence of being mechanistic part of a socially stratified society within a capitalistic mode of production. Mr. A did not regard himself as a right-bearing individual who could direct his life in the society. Therefore, before he could fulfill his material needs, he did not have the incentive to deal with social problems.

Small shop owners emphasized their passiveness in following the rules as they did not own the right to set the market agenda. But how about the role of government and district councilors?

Mr Chan (a tea shop owner whose shop is located at San Tin Lei Street):

I migrated from the Mainland to Hong Kong because of the liberal market. I do not blame the large property developers for increasing our land rent because it is the natural competition in free market that leads to such high rent. So it will be my failure if I cannot afford the high land rent.

When Mr. Chan was asked about the government's non-intervention in rental control and developers' hegemony, he positioned himself as a neoliberal subject which was a self-responsible, self-regulatory and self-enterprising agent⁷. It justified the government's non-intervention and his own inability to fight against the sustainable rental burden.

Mr B (The waiter of a dessert shop located near Nathan Road):

Li Ka Shing is rich because he is hard-working and he deserves what he has now. You talk about high land rent... it's just an "environmental factor", we don't have control and power to change it.

As we can see in the analysis of the interviews, beneath the structural violence which has led to the closure and business crisis of these small shop owners, the core driving force is neoliberalism's inherently mysterious force that justifies their sufferings as a necessary part of the economic and even the political structure. This can be perfectly explained by Foucault's concept of power and subjectivity. According to Foucault, who is subject to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he make them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he

⁶ Marx, Karl. 1844. "Comment on James Mill," *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: 195

⁷ Bernstein, Elizabeth (2012). "Carceral Politics as Gender Justice? The 'Traffic in Women' and Neoliberal Circuits of Crime, Sex, and Rights." *Theory and Society* 41(3):233–59

simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principles of subjection⁸ This has perfectly illustrated how these shop owners has been constrained under the agenda-setting power of the neoliberal market. Their unquestionable faith in neoliberal market has thus further reinforced the legitimacy of market competitiveness, and ultimately makes them as the most marginalized underclass in the market. Apart from this force, the sense that they were incapable of making changes to the situation has also constrained them from trying to change the situation proactively, but to react in different ways.

Personal agency under neoliberal Hong Kong and in the Occupy Movement

Power should not be thought as one-sided domination in reality and it is often dispersed among different groups. Therefore, the small shop owners can exercise their power in their own way (Yang 2007). The exercise of such power can be seen as a cynic and powerless conformation to the system or proactive and subjective exercise of personal agency and cultural capital.

The faith to the free market mechanism, the belief in the self-responsibility of individuals to survive in the market, and the perception of inability to change the society call for the exercising of a different kind of personal agency. It is not about changing the macro-social neoliberal economy but improving and strengthening oneself that enables their survival in this society. Below are examples of how workers and shop owners exercised their personal agency by adopting different tactics and holding a hard-working attitude.

Mr Chan (a tea shop owner whose shop is located at San Tin Lei Street):

(Proudly) My customers are from all places in Hong Kong and even other countries. They buy my herbal teas because they know how useful these herbal teas are. You know how I prepare them? I find out the “formula” to make the herb teas myself and I frequently invent new herbal teas. That how I attract new customers and keep the old customers faithful to my shop!

The Occupy Movement upset some relatively favorable conditions which some of the small shops developed for themselves and put them into more difficult situation. So, they adopted other “tactics” to survive. For example, some shops offer discount to customers who supported the Movement and some shops sold their products by selling products in the occupied zone with a trolley.

It is understandable that our informants developed such kind of attitude and ways to exercise their personal agency. Informants showed diverse attitudes towards the Occupy

⁸ Foucault, Michael. 1975. “Panopticism,” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. PP. 202-203. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

Movement, namely choosing to support with actions, being neutral, understanding the aim of the movement yet oppose to the method etc. No matter what their attitudes and actions were, these attitudes and actions are always products of negotiation between institutional forces which can be understood as a form of structural violence that is embedded in people's mind, and the personal consideration of factors like livelihood and sense of ability to change the society.



(Ah Lok and Ah Hing, interviewed on October 16, 2014)

Ah Lok and Ah Hing worked in Wrong Side Café. Its owners and these two employees supported the Occupy Movement:

It is not only in this Occupy Movement that we support small shop, but we should realize that small shops face a lot of competition against big chain-stores in their struggle of survival. Therefore, we should support small shop all the time. We helped by giving food and joining the movement, which may not help much. We understand who is the causing so many social problems and we want to support the students, so we want to help them.

In the shop that we conducted interview, we also found people who supported the Movement and exercised their personal agency by engaging in the movement and providing services that they could afford. The belief of a better business environment which can only be

achieved through a democratized government and society, and the realization of only through supporting the action can this be pursued, are the reasons for these shops to support the movement (Socrec, 2014).

Conclusion

To conclude, we observed the negotiation among the structural force (neoliberalism), the reality (sales of the shop) and personal agency. The embedded belief of Lion Rock Spirit in people's mind normalizes the structural violence they experience in the neoliberal society, thus affecting their understanding of the political and economic condition of nowadays Hong Kong, and in turn influences how they exercise their power. As the idea of "the market will regulate itself" and "survival for the fittest" are justified, they exercise their personal agency by working hard to fulfil the requirement of the market and strengthening themselves.

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