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Heterotopia as a site of resistance in a global city: How informal practices can subvert the state and finance capital

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Draft: Please do not quote or paraphrase without contacting me!

I remember that Central was once slow and unexciting. One of my first memories was my father's office of garment export in Tak Shing Building, 20 Des Voeux Road. I was bored and I missed home, so I cried. His colleagues—some of whom were my relatives, others who were *like* relatives—comforted me with balloons, but they did not console me. Despite the boredom, I always looked forward to the catered lunch brought to the office in tiered tin containers. I also enjoyed the ferry ride from my home in the Kowloon side to Central.

Central nowadays is nothing like boring and slow. I can take an express train from Central to the airport in 23 minutes. With much irony, the airport railway was built on landfill that used to be the sea that separated my home from Central. The harbour view that my family and I used to enjoy had become part of a decade-long re-development that enabled Hong Kong to compete with other global cities.

The company for which my father had worked soon moved to the Kowloon side, the building was located in a (then) newly developed commercial area after the demolishment of British military base. Catered lunches were no longer provided, but the employees would *yum cha* in a Chinese restaurant downstairs. However, these free luncheons did not last long because the company soon closed when Hong Kong factories moved north of the border. My father's company was not

quick enough to set up business ties with mainland Chinese factories. I no longer heard words such as U.S.-imposed tax tariffs in his conversations with colleagues.

Years later, I passed by Tak Shing Building and with much irony, there was a Hong Kong-based fashion brand with an Italian name selling smart-casual attire made in mainland China. To confirm the store front still exists, I googled what had become of Tak Shing Building. I found that it is now under "re-development" because old buildings are not tall enough, flashy enough to ask for high rent.

Also with much irony, locals and tourists keep on looking for some intensely localized sites and practices *behind* the façade of tall, flashy buildings. The street vendors on the sides of Stone Slab Street, street temples on Hollywood Road, the dai pai dong in Mei Lun Street are all considered to be some "authentic" sites for locals to reminisce Old Hong Kong and for tourists to experience Real Hong Kong. The Old and Real Hong Kong is one that was yet a global financial center that can boast world-class business facilities. This Old and Real Hong Kong sets itself apart from other business centers of global cities, such as Tokyo's Marunouchi, Shanghai's Pudong, and Singapore's Central Business District. However, this Old and Real Hong Kong has also quickly become cliches when they have come to represent a city that has already disappeared. In the words of Abbas (1997), these sites only appear so that the city can disappear.

This paper began with my story about rapid changes and this is also a story about local populations living in global cities who are subject to state policies that directly affect their livelihoods, daily lives, and local practices. Standing in the shoes of the crying little girl who has become a political economist, I wonder how a neoliberal state and finance capital have worked together to destroy some intensely localized practices—such as eating catered lunch with the entire company—in the name of maintaining economic competitiveness. In the name of

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(re-)development, informal practices gave way to world standards, as evident by reliable transportation infrastructure, first-class amenities for global travellers, and world-class business services for global corporations. To accomplish this task, I draw on the heterotopia concept first introduced by Michel Foucault (1984/1967) and later adapted by David Harvey (2006, 2013) to examine how locals can enact resistance in global cities by transforming meanings of space and time.

Focault's heterotopia

In Foucault's seminal lecture "Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias" (1984/1967), a heteropia is a half-real, half-imaginary site where the division between the two is not clear cut. To him, modern humans do not live in a void, but "a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (p. 4). In a single real place, several spaces that are incompatible can juxtapose. An example Foucault gave is the movie theatre in which a two-dimensional projection screen shows moving images; this surface may give illusions of another place and time, such as pre-historic worlds that pre-date the modern invention of movie theatres.

Utopias are not real sites, but they give society a vision of a place in a perfected form. Most societies, however, have counter-sites on which they enact utopias. These places are called heteropias: the mirror that lends to mixed, joint experience, a "simultaneously mythic and real contestaton of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1984/1967, p. 4). In these sites, real places and vision of utopias are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. An example would be places of worships. Disciples understood that they are not in heaven or afterlife in these sites, but they express a desire to reach the utopia by praying and chanting. Statures, paintings, and scripts in these real sites all represent heavens of various forms.

The temporality in a heterotopia is not fixed. Foucault used the term "heterochronies" to describe a temporality that is flowing, transitory, and precarious. He gave an example of festivals at fairgrounds. These events only temporarily occupy a real site; once they end, the site will be dismantled.

A heterotopia's spatiality and temporality will debilitate standardized global practices in cities because they disrupt the meanings of space and time whilst interrupting the maximization of flows of people and money. Heterotopia forms when the wrong people showing up in the wrong place doing the wrong thing, including localized practices that are seen to be incompatible with global standards.

Harvey's heterotopia

Drawing on Foucault's heterotopia, Harvey adapted this concept to examine how heterotopia, as a liminal space, may weaken capital's claim to space. Harvey (2006, 2013) argued that space is neither static nor monolithic. He therefore advocated for a city "heterotopia", a social space with possibility. These spaces, however, struggle to stay because capital and state often exercise social control to eliminate such diverse spaces.

Unlike Foucault who believed that an utopia is projected on a heterotopia, Harvey suggested that they stand on opposite ends because an utopia was contrived as an accomplished and rationalised spatial order of capitalism and the state. These spaces are built from how residents do, feel, sense, and articulate the meanings of social lives. He asserted that human qualities of the city arise from daily practices in diverse spaces in the city (Harvey, 2013). Relating to the concept of the common, space is a process rather than a thing. Space is also a

changing set of social relations between self-defined groups and existing social order and physical environment (Harvey, 2013).

Another way to critique urban processes under capitalism is to destabilize the notion of space (Harvey, 2006). He brought in the dialectics between time and space (Harvey, 2000) to provide the typology of space being absolute, relative, and relational. An absolute space can be measured; a relative space is relative to time. A relational space is understood from residents' past experiences, social relations, memory, and desire. The meanings of absolute, relative, and relational space are always dialectical. For example, a 300-square feet apartment in Hong Kong may appear to be cramped even to a New Yorker but a homeowner in Hong Kong cherishes this space as a middle-class haven. To Harvey (2006), acknowledging the changing multiple meanings of space is important for the formation of political subjects. Social and political beings can seek alternative political possibilities when they see space as a social process that is open to changes, rather than an unchanging "thing" that is external to urban life.

To conclude, both Foucault and Harvey rejected that space and time are monolithic. The concept heterotopia points out that space and time are fluid and messy. When localized practices take place in a heterotopia, populations will be able to resist standardized global practices.

Some examples of localized practices during anti-extradition bill protests and COVID-19 lockdown

The anti-extradition bill protests (2019–2020) and COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023) were sweeping large-scaled events that changed the political outlook, economic prosperity, and social fabrics of Hong Kong. Unlike the gradual changes which I witnessed but did not understand as a

little girl, both events severely harmed the local populations. While the Hong Kong government was the visible actor who exercised control over the local populations, the Central Chinese government and finance capital were also actors who inflicted violence on local populations.

In the following I used three case studies to show how the concept heterotopia of Foucault and Harvey will lend insights into how informal practices in global cities were forms of resistance against a neoliberal state. The first case study is the lunch hour protest of white-collar professionals in the Central area; the second case study is Lennon Wall in pedestrians' tunnels; and the third case study is home-made and black market nose-and-mouth masks at the beginning of the pandemic. In all three cases, protestors and citizens re-interpreted what space and time mean in an urban space by being in the wrong space at the wrong time doing the wrong thing.

In the first case, responding to online calls to gather along pedestrians' bridges in the Central area, white-collar professionals temporarily occupied the passages and shouted slogans to support protestors. After the hour, the supporters dispersed and went back to work. They returned to the bridges in the next day or so. In the lunch hour over weeks, the bridges formed a heterotopia on which the professionals projected their desire for political changes. Both spatiality and temporality are significant during this hour. As an architectural infrastructure, these bridges were built to ease foot traffic in the heart of Central. The maximized movement of people and vehicles facilitates capital flow. In addition, these bridges connect buildings that symbolize different kinds of capital and stages of capitalism. At one end, the Mandarin Oriental symbolizes old colonial power which made profits from extracting natural resources and colonizing the "natives". Jardine Matheson that owned the hotel chain along with a few buildings in Central was founded in Canton when British merchants forced open the Chinese market with unfair treaties. In another end, there is the Sun Hung Kai-owned International

Financial Center. The conglomerate made its fortune by investing in real estate in the 1960s and selling a home ownership dream to a new middle-class who saw Hong Kong as a permanent home. Between the old and new powers is the Exchange Square that houses the Hong Kong Stock Exchange which connects global investors to China-based public companies (Lee, 2010).

Another spatial significance is that these bridges can take pedestrians from the heart of Central to the airport by the express railway. Pedestrians can travel in and out of Hong Kong to another global city without needing to walk in city streets at all. The movement of people is similar to the "footloose" capital in the global economy; capital can come and go where profits are made.

These flash protests also bore temporal significance. White-collar professionals in a global city are supposed to be productive workers during work hours and consumers during lunch break. Standing for an hour in the bridges was then an act of resistance because it is an "unproductive" activity in a global economy. Being stagnant in spaces of flows is a refusal to engage in movements that move global capital. During this act of defiance, the identity of the white-collar professionals changed from an economic being to a political one. By being a political being during that hour, they performed something "wrong" in the wrong place at the wrong time (Beckett, Baggulery, & Campbell, 2017;Ting 2022).

Another case study to show the formation of heterotopia was the many Lennon walls popped up in public places in Hong Kong during both the Umbrella Movement and the anti-extradition bill protests. Citizens wrote down their hopes and dreams on post-its and left them on the walls of public places. These places are usually dull and utilitarian, such as underground tunnels that connect train stations to residential areas. This architectural infrastructure was built with little aesthetic consideration. Similar to pedestrian bridges, underground tunnels were built

to move people from one point to another. The government strictly prohibits lingering in tunnels, such as begging or hawking. When the walls were transformed into message boards, pedestrians were invited to linger in the tunnels, read each other's messages, reflect, and leave a note. The messages construct a utopia, a collective imagination of what the future may be like.

Like the hourlong chanting in pedestrian bridges, Lennon walls were also temporary because post-it notes are inherently disposable. 3M invented post-it notes for users to record quick thoughts or to note down reminders. Messages on sticky notes are expected to be discarded or moved to a more permanent space. In addition, the adhesive glue was designed to leave little mark on the surface. Once the note is peeled, the surface will bear no trace. In this way, Lennon walls are unlike street arts where the artists hope to mortalize their imprints.

The third case study is the informal production and distribution of nose-and-mouth face masks at the beginning of the pandemic. When East Asia first experienced the spread of covid, face masks were in tight supplies. Some retailers increased the prices by two or three times but still ran out of stocks. Citizens then turned to each other to ensure that the most vulnerable have enough supplies. For example, some citizens self-funded trips to Japan to buy a large number of masks then freely distributed them in low-income areas; some sewed face masks for the elderly (Associated Press, 2020); some political groups received shipments from overseas distributors and gave them out in poorer neighborhoods (Cheng, 2020); overseas friends and relatives, including myself, sent them to Hong Kong. Since the pandemic occurred in the midst of the anti-extradition bill protests, the many acts of face-mask distribution can be seen as a political act to show what actions citizens can take when the market is disrupted and when the state had no strategy to adjust the market.

Before the pandemic, few gave thoughts to the production and distribution of disposable nose-and-mouth masks. Manufacturing masks does not require specialized technical know-hows, expensive equipment, or significant capital investment. They are produced in countries where workers are lowly paid (such as China, southeast Asia, Mexico) rather than in expensive cities such as Hong Kong. In addition, few thought about the supply and demand of this commodity because it always appears to be there. The pandemic wrecked havoc to the global supply chains of this mundane commodity. Consumers quickly questioned why something so mundane could be in severely low supplies within a short period of time. Some asked why Hong Kong moved away from manufacturing necessity goods and had to rely on supplies from other countries. The Hong Kong government who usually plays a nanny state role was not able to secure supplies, leaving many question its competency and credibility at times of crisis. The government did not seize on this opportunity to earn confidence from the populations from its violent treatment of protestors.

The informal and disperse networks of mask production and distribution disrupted an assumed orderly global supply chain. Some of the distribution was not through "proper" channels such as acquiring bulk of supplies overseas. Some other distribution did not rely on commercial entities such as retailers but through neighbourhood centers or personal networks. Some even gave them out to strangers in public places such as subway stations

These informal production and distribution of masks created a heterotopia that revealed the arbitrary spatiality and temporality imposed by the global economy. In pre-pandemic time, shops are where business transactions take place; the exchange of goods with cash usually does not take that long; the customers and owners are likely to know each other. During the pandemic, the places to receive masks vary; money may or may not change hand; the parties

may know each other; if they don't, they may take this opportunity to create a relationship. These varying ways to produce and distribute masks could debilitate the naturalized way of securing necessary goods. They also provide a way for consumers to relate to each other as citizens and residents. By seeing themselves not as consumers but society members, Hong Kong people have demonstrated that they did something wrong outside the market.

Re-imagining the little girl in another Central

History is often perceived to be on a linear timeline; and changes in a place testify progresses in a society. The anti-extradition protests and covid lockdown were believed to bring Hong Kong many steps back because the many decisions that the Hong Kong government made were believed to harm the flows of global capital. However, as reflected in my personal story about Central, the state and capital work together to build global cities. The globalization of a place replaces many localized practices in the name of meeting international standards for economic competitiveness. However, crises such as mass protests and a pandemic revealed the many cracks and gaps covered up by the state and capital.

The concept heterotopia proposed by Foucault and modified by Harvey is effective at understanding how to theorize these fractures revealed during crises. To Foucault, heterotopia forms when the wrong people show up in the wrong place doing the wrong thing. To Harvey, heterotopia is a people-driven common that belongs to neither a public nor private place. A heterotopia is never a fixed place but a space where a vision of utopia is projected; it is formed when social beings establish relationships with each other. In the three case studies, I have shown that there are multiple spatialities and temporalities in the heterotopia formed during the anti-extradition protests and covid lockdown. Protestors, supporters of pro-democracy

movements, and citizens transformed neoliberal spaces into commons where they enact their political selves and share their collective hopes. By transforming these spaces, they reject a temporality imposed by the state and capital. Actions such as lingering in passages that facilitate human movements and disrupting market activities were political acts to resist such imposed temporality.

When we accept that spaces in a heterotopia can afford political resistance, the little girl who has become the political economist can imagine another Central, not the one that bored her nor the one that was built by tearing down old buildings or on landfill, but one that is formed by residents' affects.

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