

DOCTORAL THESIS

Perceiving and practicing citizenship: a study on youth activists' experience in social movement in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how youth activists in Hong Kong make sense of citizenship and practice citizenship by participating in different kinds of social movements. Informed by the work of Faulk (2000) and Isin (2008, 2009), citizenship is conceptualised as a framework as well as a practice where the definitions are developed and constructed accordingly.

A qualitative method is adopted in this research in which in-depth interviews are conducted with 16 youth activists between 18-29 years old and a thematic analysis is carried out for analysis purposes. The major findings suggest that youth activists, even though they are at the forefront of the citizenship movement, find citizenship to be both a familiar and an alien concept. Nevertheless, participation in social movements raise their concerns about citizenship and has compelled some of them to explore a local identity and strive to develop a Hong Kong citizenship from the bottom up. By taking part in social movements, the youth activists build and accumulate experience in citizenship movements, and create diverse and multiple meanings of citizenship.

Three types of citizenship acts are found in this study: responsive acts which are emotionally-driven, confrontational and adversarial. The related practices reproduce a market-oriented and exclusionary type of citizenship. Then there are resilient acts of citizenship which are driven by ideology, and emphasise the importance of connecting citizens in the community to collectively advocate for the realisation of citizenship. These citizenship practices tend to produce an open and inclusive type of citizenship. Finally, there are reinvented acts of citizenship, which emphasise autonomous everyday life practices in the community. These are driven by the reflexive practices that are applied in daily life, which tend to inspire a communitarian type of citizenship.

The findings of this study also suggest that the authoritarian-neoliberal regime in Hong Kong has a dominant influence over the construction of citizenship. This has been a major force that dictates the direction of youth activism towards exclusionary practices, downplays equal citizenship and causes solo actions in

social movements. This citizenship practice reduces the capacity of youth activism from advancing towards activist citizenship, and leads to speculative citizenship characterised by uncertainty and precarity.

Notwithstanding the structural constraints, it is found that alternative practices still exist, and the reflexive capacity of youth activism should not be underestimated. It is argued that different acts of citizenship practiced by different groups of activists are not mutually destructive but rather, feed each other in their controversies and debates, and through communication, thus inspiring alternative acts that erode the dominant conception of citizenship, answer to justice as well as inspire activist citizenship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLE	ix
ABBREVIATIONS	x
Introduction	1
Study Background	1
Research Objectives	6
Major Research Questions	6
Major Themes/ Concepts of this Study	7
Organisation of Thesis	10
Conclusion	15
Chapter 1 Conceptualising Citizenship	17
Marshall's Theory of Citizenship	18
Criticisms of Marshall's Theory	22
Framing Citizenship	26
Dominant Theories of Citizenship	30
Conclusion	42
Chapter 2 Reframing Youth, Citizenship and Youth activism	44
Youth and Citizenship	45
Active and Activist citizenship	60
Social movement and Citizenship	68
Conclusion	76
Chapter 3 Contextualising Citizenship and Youth Activism in Hong Kong	77
Social and Political Participation of Youth before 1997	77
Development of Citizenship in Hong Kong	81
Primary Forces that Have Shaped Citizenship in Hong Kong	88
Social Movement and Youth Activism in Hong Kong	102
Social Movements: Umbrella and New Preservation Movements	108
Conclusion	115

Chapter 4 Methodology and Research Design	116
Research Objectives and Research Questions	116
Research Design	121
Research Respondents	127
Data collection	136
Data analysis	139
Validity and Reliability	142
Ethical Considerations	144
Ethical clearance	147
Conclusion	147
Chapter 5 Responsive Acts of Citizenship: Defending the Exclusive Market	148
Citizenship	
Responsive Acts of Citizenship: Valiant Struggles	152
Site of Responsive Acts of Citizenship: The Streets	156
Scale of Responsive Acts of Citizenship: Regional (HKSAR)	162
Actors of Responsive Acts of Citizenship: Warriors	171
Conclusion	178
Chapter 6 Resilient Acts of Citizenship: Cultivating Universal Citizenship	180
Resilient Acts of Citizenship: Community Organising	181
Site of Resilient Acts of Citizenship: Civil Society	189
Scale of Resilient Acts of Citizenship: Global	196
Actors of Resilience Acts of Citizenship: Community Organisers	202
Conclusion	207
Chapter 7 Reinvented Acts of Citizenship: Inventing Autonomous	209
Citizenship	
Act of Citizenship: Autonomous Life Practice	210
Site of Reinvented Acts of Citizenship: Culture and Everyday Life	216
Scale of Reinvented Acts of Citizenship: The Locale	221
Actors of Reinvented Acts of Citizenship: Modern Ascetics	227
Conclusion	231
Chapter 8 Youth Activism and the Meanings of Citizenship	233
Imagined Citizenship	234
New Meanings of Citizenship Through Youth Activism	238
Diverse and Contested Meanings of Citizenship	241

Possibilities and Ambiguities in Understanding Citizenship	254
Youth Activism and Limitations of Market-Oriented Citizenship	258
Conclusion	277
Chapter 9 Evolution of Speculative and Activist Citizenship	279
Culmination of Crises with Market-Oriented Citizenship	280
Possibilities of activist citizenship	297
Conclusion	308
Conclusion	310
Summary of Major Findings	310
Contributions and Implications	317
Limitations of Research and Recommendations for Future Studies	328
Conclusion	330
Appendices	331
Appendix I: Interview guide	331
Appendix II: Informed consent statement	333
Appendix III: Respondents' profile	335
References	336
CURRICULUM VITAE	359