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.
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