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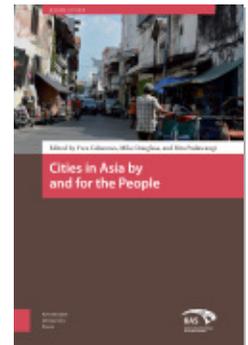
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5 The Struggle to Create Alternative Urban Spaces

An Attempt by a Theatre Group in Hong Kong

Ngai Ming Yip

Abstract

Hong Kong is exemplary of predatory capitalism. Not only are most of the newly created public spaces being corporatized by the oligarchic land powers in the process of urban growth or gentrification, but the state is also obsessive about sterilizing the city in the attempt to craft Hong Kong into 'Asia's World City'. FM Theatre Power (FMTP), the largest alternate independent theatre group in the city since its establishment in 2001, has incorporated a deep-seated mission of challenging the state hegemony over public space management—particularly the restrictions concerning citizens' freedom of performance in public spaces. Equipped with the craft of public art—impromptu art that involves the audience, performances in public space, and insurgent art that reflects political issues—FMTP began to illegally occupy part of the pedestrian zone in Mong Kok for regular performances. Rounds of verbal warnings, arrests, and prosecution have not deterred their determination; instead, they have expanded their 'sphere of influence' to other tourist areas with flash mob performances. Such actions have successfully attracted copycats that have quickly filled the Mong Kok pedestrian zone with street performers. This has indirectly led the local council to relax restrictions on street performances, and such acts have even been embraced. In this chapter, I investigate the progression of the struggle of FMTP in the creation of alternative urban space by exploring how this public art movement endeavoured to integrate the excluded, linking insurgent art with the lives of ordinary people, cultivating their capabilities in the creative expression of ideas, and scaling up the social resistance that led to policy and finally success reclaiming the lost public space. Yet the contradictions generated by the movement,

both within the community and with mainstream society, led to the movement's eventual demise.

Keywords: performance art, public art, social movements, public space, alternate space, Hong Kong

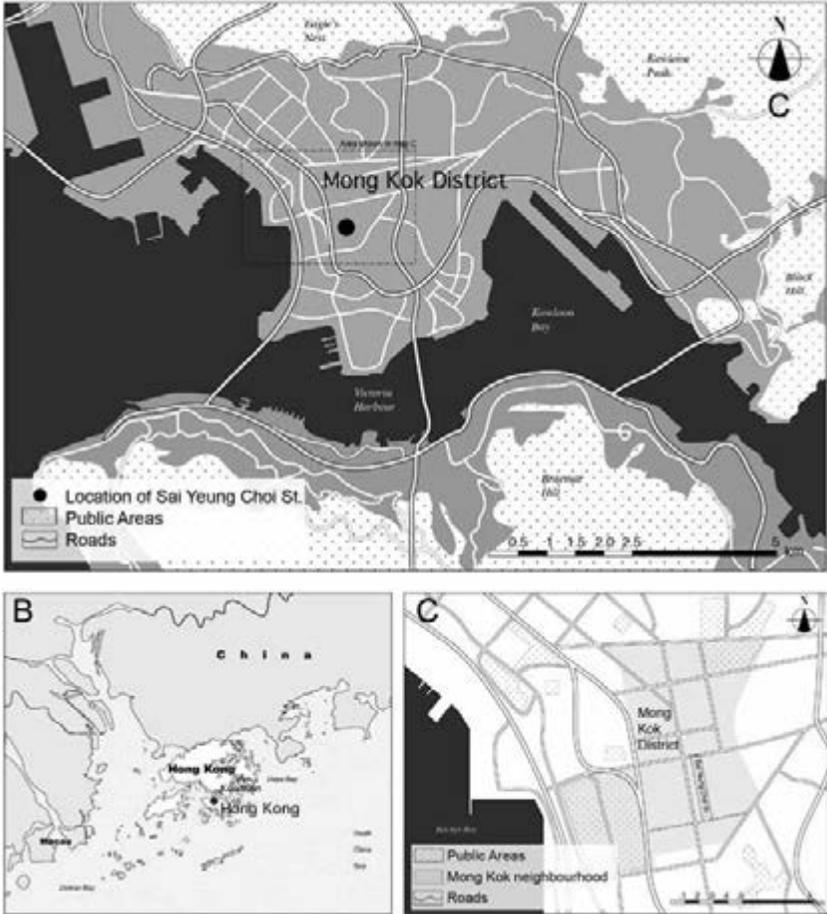
1 Introduction

Hong Kong is a highly regulated city. Even large-scale demonstrations organized by civil society groups and with half a million participants are highly orderly. Furious actions like looting, stone-throwing, or arson—which are not uncommon in demonstrations in the West—can only be traced back to a couple of small-scale social unrests in the early 1980s. And yet Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 caught the attention of the world and locals alike because tens of thousands of demonstrators employed more 'militant' means and occupied central city streets to express their political demands. It was also the first time that Hong Kong's civil society groups turned the 'public space' into a Habermasian 'public sphere', in which political thoughts, public policy, and political development were openly debated at a large scale and with persistence. More importantly, such debates were largely self-initiated, with a lack of explicit organizers or hierarchical command chains.

Also, contrary to previous large-scale demonstrations, which were predominantly unilateral articulations of demands using straightforward mottos and symbols, the Umbrella Movement extensively utilized creative and artistic forms of deliberation. Public art was explicitly employed as icons of resistance and defiance. Of course, such forms of expression are not created in one day: there has been a long process of acquisition, experimentation, and consolidation in incorporating art into social actions.

FM Theatre Power (FMTP), the largest alternate independent theatre group in Hong Kong since its establishment in 2001, has a deep-seated mission to challenge state hegemony in the management of public space—particularly the restriction of the freedom of performance. Equipped with the craft of public art—impromptu art that involves the audience, performances in public space, and insurgent art reflecting political issues—FMTP began to 'illegally' occupy part of the pedestrian zone in Mong Kok, one of the business retail areas in Hong Kong, for regular performances. FMTP's actions have indirectly led the local council to relax restrictions on street performance.

Figure 5.1 Maps of (a) Mong Kok District, (b) Hong Kong, and (c) Mong Kok Neighbourhood



Source: Ariel Shepherd

While FMTP enjoys widespread support from the independent media, political activists, and progressive public intellectuals, there are tensions between them and the community of residents and business proprietors in the neighbourhood, as well as with other performers in the area. A social media group dubbed ‘Kicking FMTP out of Mong Kok’ was set up in August 2008, accusing FMTP of vulgar artistic forgery and, more importantly, monopolizing public space. The struggle to reclaim public space for performance and entertainment has unfolded into a battle of internal conflict within the artist community

In 2010, FMTP unexpectedly made a U-turn, seeking official recognition and refraining (nearly altogether) from street performances. Since then, challenges to the official restrictions on performing in public spaces have proliferated in other districts. To a certain extent, the blossoming of public art during the Umbrella Movement indirectly benefited from such proliferation.

In this chapter, I investigate the struggle of FMTP to create alternative urban spaces by exploring how this public art initiative endeavoured to integrate the excluded, link insurgent art with the lives of ordinary people, cultivate people's ability to creatively express ideas, and scale up social resistance, all of which led to policy changes and finally success in reclaiming the lost public space. This initiative also generated a number of contradictions both within the community and with mainstream society, which eventually led to the initiative's demise.

2 Social Movement, Cultural Producers, and the Creative Class

David Harvey (2001) is optimistic about the ability of artistic groups or 'cultural producers' to make an impact on social movements. Harvey argues that cultural producers are able to act as proactive forces to trigger the public awareness of locals and incorporate local people's interest in fighting the tidal wave of global neoliberalization.

However, studies on gentrification and the role of the creative class reveal a more pessimistic picture. More often than not, art in general and artists in particular are merely decorative factors or, even worse, victims of globalization, who are exploited by capitalists in the gentrification process. as Jamie Peck (2005) put it in his paper titled, 'Struggling with the Creative Class'.

Rather than 'civilizing' urban economic development by 'bringing in culture', creativity strategies do the opposite: they commodify the arts and cultural resources, even social tolerance itself, suturing them as putative economic assets to evolving regimes of urban competition (Peck, 2005, p763).

Such cynicism can be traced back to disillusionment about the artist community being a progressive force. Manuel Castells (1977) considered the struggle around the provision of and access to collectively managed services financed by the state to be one of the three pillars of collective consumption in urban social movements. The artist community, which often struggles

to get access to such publicly managed space as their production base, spearhead many of such constestations. As sites of cultural and artistic resistance and spaces occupied for autonomous, alternative ways of living have been routinely co-opted by the state, the artistic community has gradually been losing much of its radical political edge (Köhler and Wissen 2003). More detrimental is the demotion of the artist community to an agent of the establishment, when artists are 'used to establish urban-cultural ambience' and 'displayed by the city as (cultural) locational factors in the competition to attract investors' (Mayer 1993, 161). For these reasons, it is unclear whether the artistic class is able to defend the cultural and social identity and character of places, in particular.

The creative city policies that have become one of the most popular tools in the repertoire of neoliberal globalization have indirectly converted the creative class into a public enemy. As the beneficiary of creative city policies, the artist community is often engaged in the struggle for its own immediate and narrow interests, while the interests of the most deprived groups (who were their partners in previous struggles) have been largely undermined. For this reason, the artistic class is no longer able to mobilize large numbers of people. There are, however, exceptions. Independent creative workers and artists have been successful in fighting for space in Berlin and Hamburg, Germany, and have become 'a strong voice in [the] contestation of the present-day urban order' (Novy and Colomb 2003, 1818). Their success has, to some extent, been attributed to their efficacious exploitation of the contradictions in the neoliberal economy. On the one hand, to be competitive and extract monopoly rent, capital has to 'support a form of differentiation and allow divergent and to some degree uncontrollable local cultural developments that can be antagonistic to its own smooth functioning' (Harvey 2001, 409.). On the other hand, doing so stimulates 'new spaces for political thought and action within which alternatives can be both devised and pursued' and enables '*a segment of the community concerned with cultural matters* to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism' (Harvey 2001, 410, my italics). Hence, more diversified social and ecological relations emerge from these capitalist relations.

Newer forms of mobilization might be the defence of the status quo by a privileged minority. As a journalist noted regarding the Hamburg case (Novy and Colomb 2003),

Some might ask what exactly gives the artists the right to demand studios more or less for free in a prime downtown location. After all, those who care about social issues—and that describes the core of the

anti-gentrification movement—might also argue that the buildings could be put to better use accommodating other, needier people than middle class artists for whom squatting is little more than a lifestyle choice. (Oehmke 2010, 4)

Entering the new century, public art is gaining attention in the struggle for artistic citizenship. The concept of ‘artistic citizenship’ attempts to integrate the public sphere to art, so that public art is no longer produced in enclosed containers, but instead ‘the immediate physical world around the work—city, square, building, park, airport, university campus—becomes its frame’ (Campbell and Martin 2006, 3). Gathering and encountering—calling the people together—is one inherent element in the operation of art; it is both the means and ends of art. For many artist communities, the public project of art is their point of departure for their professional trajectory, which is grounded and committed to civic participation. Public art has thus blossomed across the world.

3 Disappearing Public Space in Hong Kong

As a densely built-up city, public space has always been a luxury in Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong seems not to have performed too bad in the provision of public space, at least in terms of formal public space. In a comparison between eleven cities across the globe, from Cape Town to Mexico City to Berlin on various aspects of public provisions, Hong Kong scores fairly in the middle (Parkinson 2013). It performs well in the accessibility of public space (because of efficient public transport) and the integration of public and private spaces.

As the population expands and land use is intensified, there has been a concern that public spaces are beginning to ‘disappear.’ Old buildings and iconic landmarks have been demolished, making way for luxurious apartments for the rich or gigantic tower blocks of offices and retail stores for international capitalists and tourists. At the same time, the neoliberalization of public space has hit Hong Kong the same way as it has hit Western cities (Cuthbert and McKinnell 1997). Public spaces are increasingly being commodified and corporatized as more and larger shopping malls or entertainment spaces are being built. Despite still being largely accessible to the public, such corporatized sites are under intense surveillance and policing. Unnecessary restrictions on the use of public space inevitably limits how the public can enjoy such spaces and may indirectly intensify social exclusion

and segregation (Low and Smith 2006), although it may very much depend on the exact terms of the contract between the state and the private or social organizations who own and/or manage such space (De Magalhaes 2010).

In addition to this corporatized pseudo-public space, the Hong Kong government has been offering incentives to encourage private developers to provide more 'genuine' public space. This is apparently similar to the thinking of some Western cities in which the expansion of public space is perceived as an important ingredient in recreating a world city (Cochrane and Jonas 1999). Under the 'Public Open Space in Private Developments' initiative, private developers are rewarded with extra floor space if public space is incorporated into their commercial or residential developments. Despite increases to the overall quantity of public space, paradoxically, this initiative further exacerbates the incorporatization problem. If the incorporatized 'private' space mentioned earlier is already problematic, this provision of 'public space in private developments' again places genuine public space under private control. Hence, it is the responsibility of the private management regime, which in the local context most probably means the agents of the powerful real estate sector, to define how 'public' these spaces actually are.

The intention to corporatize public space has been reflected at both the design stage and the management practices. Many privately provided public spaces in gated residential developments have in fact been built in venues that are more accessible to their own residents, while for other members of the public such access is inconvenient. This has apparently removed such space from the public realm. Private management regimes also manage such public space the same way as their corporatized space—and some even make profits from such spaces. For instance, one gated development has put the 'rewarded' public space in the podium garden on the seventh floor of the car park tower, and the only lift accessible to the public was difficult to locate on the ground floor (*The Sun* 2008).

The disappearance of public space is also fuelled by political considerations. The new government of the Special Administrative Region, eager to get rid of the symbolism of colonial rule, intensified the decolonization drive after the changeover of sovereignty to China in 1997 (Abbas 1997). Icons of colonial rule, which are often precious public space, are among their targets. For instance, the Queen's Pier in the Central District, which was the official landing site of previous governors, has been demolished despite intense protests in support of keeping it.

While formal or institutionalized public space may be on the retreat, the order imposed by the representations of space is always being contested by

representational space and spatial practice (Lefebvre 1991). In the production and reproduction of public space, power and resistance are constantly interacting to shape and reshape its landscape (Winchester, Kong, and Dunn 2003). The highly regulated city management regime of Hong Kong has placed the city's public spaces under a whole array of rules and regulations. Activities and behaviour in public venues are subject to the bylaws of respective sites, and are often confined to the state's idea of approved usage.

The forces of globalization, diverse local interest factions, and escalating demands for democracy have expanded the spectrum of stakeholders as well as reinforced their quests to redefine public space. For instance, foreign domestic helpers (mainly Filipinos) are perhaps the first group in claiming their right to public space. Exploiting the move to classify the street in front of Statute Square in the Central Business District (CBD) as a pedestrian zone on Sundays (originally proposed by the Jardine Group with the intention of boosting pedestrian flow and their business on holidays), foreign domestic helpers have occupied the area on Sundays as a site for leisure and meeting friends since the mid-1980s. Concerns about the 'abuse' of public space were initially raised, but it was soon tolerated and subsequently routinized (Law 2002).

Besides such static activities, rallies and processions in public spaces have been increasing in recent years and, in fact, Hong Kong is becoming a 'city of protests'. It is estimated that in 2012 alone, over 7000 demonstrations and public processions were launched (HKCSS 2015), with the overwhelming majority held in streets or other public spaces. While the overwhelming majority of such protests are small-scale and on issues concerning the livelihood of a few local people, there have also been a few high-profile political rallies, which embarrassed the Hong Kong and Chinese governments. For example, annual anti-government rallies are held on 1 July in commemoration of the return of Hong Kong to China. Tens of thousands of people routinely turn out for these rallies. Since 1990, vigils have been held on 4 June in Victoria Park on Hong Kong Island to pay tribute to the victims of the Tiananmen suppression in 1989 and demand that the Chinese government take responsibility for it. Similarly, Falun Gong, which was being accused by the Chinese authority as a religious cult and was subsequently outlawed in Mainland China, regularly holds rallies on busy streets in the city to voice their demands.

Under the Public Order Ordinance, it is against the law to have public meetings of more than 30 people without a 'letter of no objection' from the police commissioner. In the application a lot of information has to be disclosed, including the organizers' information, the purposes and routes

of the procession, the equipment that will be used, and the plans to keeping order amongst the participants. Almost none of the organizers of these public rallies (including Falungong) have attempted to challenge this control of the use of public space.

Despite the rarity of rejections of public rally applications (although there may be negotiations in the rallies' details), this restriction makes similar events held on a regular basis in public spaces, like public performances, inconvenient and creates a high administrative burden. It also curtails the deployment of public space as a Habermasian public sphere and is a restriction on the freedom of speech. This may not be a problem for most civil society groups, which only occasionally employ public space as a venue for expression. FMTP, an amateur theatre group composed of young people, daringly embarked on a deliberate (and successful) effort to contest the hegemony of the state over the regulation of open space.

4 The Struggle for Alternate Space

FM Theatre Power (FMTP), established in 2001 by a group of amateur university students and graduates, has not only been one of the most vibrant, but also one of the most controversial theatre groups in the city. It has staged dozens of dramas on socially contentious issues and has been successful in attracting regular audiences of young people (Shiu and Wong 2012). Their desire to create an alternate space for performance was inspired by the mass demonstration on 1 July 2003, in which half a million people in Hong Kong marched on the street demanding the resignation of the then-Chief Executive. Dissatisfied with the traditional approach of one-way communication during performances in formal venues, they believed that drama could be a powerful instrument for changing people. Encouraged by the huge rally turnout, it sparked off 'an urge to express ourselves on the street [...] because (we believe) changes start on the street' (Mo Lai, interview by the author, 21 June 2014).

Public space for performance is tightly regulated in twenty-first century Hong Kong. This is in sharp contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when public performances were part of the city's life. The city's 'sterilized' regime cleaned up street trade, and at the same time killed the street performances that were often associated with street trades (e.g., kung-fu shows to sell herbal medicines, daring snake-slaughtering shows to sell snake gallbladders). Public performances now need a licence from the government, including approval from a number of departments: Food

Figure 5.2 Banner on the ground to attract attention



Source: Photograph by FM Theatre Group

and Environmental Hygiene; Cultural and Leisure; Fire Services; Police; Home Affairs; and the department that manages the venue. Even one-off performances in public places require a temporary license for which the application process for approval is tedious. Unlike many other countries, there are no public venues, parks, squares, or plazas that are open for public performances.

Such bureaucratic procedures of approval have made it practically impossible to hold regular performances in public spaces. For this reason, FMTP decided to challenge the managerialist regime by simply ignoring such procedures. The pedestrian zone in Sai Yeung Choi Street in Mong Kok (MK) was logistically the most obvious choice for them, as it is within walking distance from their practice studio in Tai Kok Tsui (TKT). Marketed as the 'West Kowloon Cultural Street Project', a deliberate antithesis to the grand official project of West Kowloon Cultural areas, they began daily performances in the street. Fully acknowledging their spectators, who were people from all walks of life (in sharp contrast to their regular audience of the young and educated), they began to experiment with different forms of performance.

Inspired by the theatrical concepts of 'theatre of the people, for the people, by the people', 'invisible theatre', 'forum theatre', and 'newspaper theatre', they attempted to involve the audience in interactive performances in the form of 'spec-actor', as pioneered by the Brazilian theatre director and politician Augusto Boal (Banky, interview by the author, 21 June 2014). Adapted to the local context and tied to current popular issues or talks of the town, the performances began to gain popularity. Sometimes the 'Reality Theatre' was so real that passersby, unaware that it was a performance, would even call the police. In response, FMTP began to place a banner on the ground to define their performance space and indicate it was a performance. This banner eventually became a landmark in the pedestrian zone (Winnie, interview by the author, 16 May 2014).

In May 2008, FMTP extended their presence out of Mong Kok by successfully organizing a flash mob titled 'Frozen Times. Square Reborn' in front of the Times Square in Hong Kong. Participants were mobilized by FMTP through social media to go to the venue and hold a frozen position at the same time. This was a direct response to the 'fake public space' debate: 3000 square meters in front of the shopping mall in Times Square had been awarded as an incentive through the 'public space in private developments' policy. While the developer was mandated to open this space to the public, they set harsh rules for its use while openly defying the restrictions and profited from renting it as a venue for commercial marketing activities. It was uncovered by the media that the developer of Time Square had illegally leased a corner of the public space to Starbucks on a long lease and charged as much as HK\$ 15,000 a day for commercial use of the piazza (Gentle 2008, A1).

The action of 'freezing' was a thought-provoking artistic expression of defiance against the unreasonable rules prohibiting any organized activities or performances in the public space at Time Square. Only static but unorganized activities like strolling or joining a group of friends were allowed. '[E]xcessive lingering' would be cause for intervention by the security guards (Lee 2008). Hence, "no motion" fitted perfectly with their rules' (Mo Lai, interview by the author, June 21, 2014). This flash mob attracted over a hundred participants responding to the appeal on social media and subsequently drew the attention of both traditional and new media. For instance, it attracted over 100,000 views on YouTube. This added momentum to subsequent actions by other social and political groups, as well as a large-scale review by the legislature on the provision of public space in private developments.

However, it was also in 2008 that the group experienced the most difficulties in their struggle for street performance. Antagonism from their

competitors in the physical, social, and political space began to build, eventually leading them to withdraw from Sai Yeung Choi Street South and launch new initiatives diversifying their performance in other areas and in new venues for street performance. For example, Theatre Everywhere is a 'guerrilla-type performance' in the open space of busy areas around the city. Replicating their performances in Mong Kok, a series of 'One person One story' performances have been held in the shopping centres of public housing estates with the sponsorship of the property management companies. These performances target the (especially old) residents and encourage them to voice their feelings about their lives, lost community, and even negative sentiments towards the gentrified shopping centre where the performances take place.

5 Challenge the Management Control

When FMTP started their street performances in Mong Kok, the biggest challenge they faced was catering to their new audience. Regulars in the MK shopping areas were ordinary people from all walks of life, but largely from the poorer spectrum of the city. Very few had ever been to a modern theatrical performance in a formal venue (perhaps with the exception of old people going to traditional Cantonese operas). Constraints on the performances were also significant. For instance, the performance space was cramped, there was a lack of theatrical lighting, and there was no backstage to support the show. More significantly, there was no stage at all on the street. To attract the interest of passersby, they launched short performances that aligned closely with ordinary people's lives, like discussing love on Valentine's Day or family relationships on days close to Chinese festivals. Gradually the shows involved more social elements, like equal opportunities (e.g., the difficulty of pushing a wheelchair on a busy street, during which they even asked a police officer on duty to help) and social discrimination (e.g., people with disabilities facing job interviews). Political issues like universal suffrage also gradually appeared in their shows. In 2008, they openly supported a candidate in the legislative council election and incorporated the campaign in their street performance—though this may have attracted trouble.

When they succeeded in charming a bigger crowd, it touched the nerve of the management regime. Despite the lack of a law that directly prohibits performances in open spaces, such performances are in fact nearly impossible to sustain for long, especially if they are able to attract a crowd.

Police officers will ‘caution and advise’ the performers to go; if they do not comply, they risk arrest. Several laws could be invoked to prosecute arrested performers: unlawful assembly, if there is a crowd of more than thirty people; begging, if they accept tips; excessive noise, if loud speakers are used; the obstruction of public space;¹ and even loitering, if the police cannot find another excuse.

With time and experience, FMTG developed a series of strategies to extend their rights to and opportunities of performing in Mong Kok. This includes intensive research on relevant laws and the limits of their enforcement, including article 34 of the Basic Law (mini-constitution) of Hong Kong, which protects people’s freedom to participate in artistic and cultural activities. For instance, they would explicitly ask police officers for the legal basis of intervention and had no reservations about providing them with photocopies of the relevant laws if the officers showed their ignorance. They were also not reluctant to follow them back to the police station for further investigation if asked to do so. They highlighted the photocopies as a way to ‘educate’ the front-line law enforcement officers on their limits of power. Frequent turnover of the front-line officers made such effort frustrating. They then began to send written notices to the police stations detailing the exact time, location, duration, and scale of their performance, ‘with no intention in seeking approval (or objection) but to hint to the officers not to launch unproductive interference [to our performance]’ (Mo Lai, interview by the author, 21 June 2014). The intervention of police officers substantively diminished after they started to send written notices.

The risk of being charged for begging was genuine: the FMTP really wanted to collect donations from the audience to ease their financial burdens. To solve this problem, they came up with a mischievous innovation: a living statue show, with a notice in front of the statue saying ‘DO NOT give money, if you do, it will sing’. Of course, the curious audience lined up to give money, expecting a song from the statue. They would have used the notice as evidence in their defence if they had been prosecuted, although this did not happen. Winnie said, ‘They were told at the first instance not to pay, so anything they did was beyond our control’ (interview by the author, 12 June 2014).

1 This law about the ‘obstruction’ of public space seems to imply that public space is not for static use, but only for use as passage for a ‘flow.’ Take Times Square, for instance, public space is often not a place for staying: security guards politely question whether you have lost your way if you are considered to be stationed in one spot or have been loitering too long. In fact, benches or sitting facilities are rare provisions in public space in Hong Kong, regardless of whether the space is genuinely public or a corporatized one.

Figure 5.3 Banner on the ground to define the performance area



Source: Photograph by FM Theatre Group

The reaction of the shops was an important concern for the theatre group. They worried that they would be unwelcome if they attracted a big crowd in front of a shop and blocked their business. Such worries did not become reality; instead, as their performance became popular it attracted more people and enhanced the businesses of nearby shops. The spot where the theatre group performed even became a landmark of the pedestrian zone. 'They welcomed our presence. They even served us drinks after our show and allowed us to store our equipment in their store overnight and occasionally helped us to earmark the spot (as it was first come, first served basis) for our performance' (Mo Lai, interview by the author, 21 June 2014).

To neutralize the threat of being charged with unlawful assembly, they placed a big banner on the ground to mark the performing area and tried to limit the audience to less than 30 people. If prosecuted, they planned to defend themselves on the grounds that they should not be held responsible for people who watch from outside the defined area. This also eased conflicts with other groups performing in the vicinity.

6 Landscape of Conflicts and Resistance

Public space is a landscape for conflicts and resistance (Winchester, Kong, and Dunn 2003). FMTP perceived the major obstacle which prevented them from claiming public space for performances was the urban management regime: the police, the street hygiene regulators, and private security guards acting on behalf of owners of the corporatized or 'privately provided' public

space. However, despite numerous occasions (particularly in the beginning) where the police intervened and a few incidences where they were taken to the police station, no arrests were made (with the exception which will be described in next paragraph which was not related to their performance) during their five years of performing in Mong Kok (2003–2008).

It seems that as the theatre group was equipped with a better understanding of the law (e.g., both the boundaries and procedure of the enforcement of the laws), explicit interference from the urban management regime was largely neutralized. Of course, tactful strategies of interacting with law enforcers were also crucial for such encounters. The only arrest was made in October 2008, perhaps by accident, when a member of the group engaged in physical contact with an official of the Food and Hygiene Department trying to stop her from selling T-shirts (which was prohibited in the pedestrian zone), and both parties reported being injured (*Apple Daily* 2008 A6).

While the tactics of resistance was largely successful with the officials, the main source of conflicts was among the people who were competing for use of the public space. Initially, as reported by the theatre group, their foremost concern besides the police was interference from the triad society (local mafia), which had been rooted in Mong Kok for decades. In this, they appear to have been overcautious, as no incident involving the triad society ever occurred (Chow 2015). Instead, when the patrons of the pedestrian zone increased and attracted more street performers and commercial marketing activities, the congested physical space of the pedestrian zone created intense competition. FMTP, which was the most popular performers at that time, unsurprisingly became the target of aggression. As recalled by Banky Yeung, the art director of the theatre group,

Strange things just happened. The group which performed next to us, then turned on their loud speaker unnecessarily to top volume. This forced us to use loud speakers as well (author's remark: they tried to refrain from using loud speakers so as not to break the environmental protection law). This attracted the police and both of us were warned. We tried to convince them that both of us should turn down the noise, but they didn't listen to us. (Banky Yeung, interview by the author, 21 June 2014)

This antagonism gradually built up, both online (e.g., in social media) and offline in the pedestrian zone and traditional news media. The police, which had already accepted the presence of the theatre group in the pedestrian zone as part of the daily routine and no longer bothered paying attention to them, suddenly stepped up their interference, taking action in response

to alleged complaints about the noise, the obstruction of pathways, and making prohibited commercial sales. Although most such complaints were unfounded, they inevitably created interruptions in the performances and diverted their energies into dealing with police queries.

A new front of attack gradually built up in the pro-Beijing media when FMTP had stepped up the social and political elements of their performances. It became especially severe when the theatre group openly supported a candidate for the Legislative Council from the pan-democracy camp. The theatre group even produced a play as part of the election campaign. This provoked an intensified attack from the pro-Beijing media, which accused them of excessive occupation of public space, use of vulgar language, and creating nuisances for passers-by by forcing them to participate in their shows (*Wen Wei Po* 2008). This seems to have been a politically motivated attack meant to disgrace the FMTP and indirectly called for tighter control on the freedom of expression in public spaces, as ‘performing is a right but it cannot be placed above everything [...] and rights and obligations should complement each other’ (*Wen Wei Po* 2008).

The most severe raid was not launched directly from social groups that supported the authority, but instead on social media. On 20 August 2008, a Facebook group called ‘Kick the FM Theatre Power Out of Mongkok’ was set up. It was able to attract over 20,000 followers—nearly 40 times the number of followers on FMTP’s official Facebook page (EVCHK 2013). Hundreds of messages were posted on Facebook; according to Chow Lam Fong (2008), most of them focussed on accusing the theatre group of the following:

- Occupying excess public space for their own performance while obstructing passages;
- Forcing passers-by to participate in their show against their will;
- Unfairly earmarking particular spaces and affecting the rights of other performers;
- Rationalizing their self-indulged art form in the name of public art;
- Engaging in commercial activities (e.g., selling T-shirts).

FMTP quickly responded to these accusations and called for an open debate in the pedestrian zone. A marathon forum, lasting six hours, was eventually organized on 24 August 2008, with about 100 participants. However, most of the participants were supporters of the theatre group, and only a few of their opposition expressed their (relatively mild) views openly during the forum. This raised questions about how genuine the size of the Facebook opposition group was (*Alone in the Fart* 2008). Yet the theatre group’s shows were harassed by the opposition in the days following the forum.

The reaction of FMTP to such accusations was proactive, but their detractors seemed to be unconvinced. Responding to the complaint that they were occupying too much public space, FMTP changed the strategy of their performance by launching over a dozen solo performances on the street, within the same area occupied by broadband service stalls (about 1m x 1m) (Yeung 2014), but if put together these small performance spaces made up nearly the same area as their earlier performance space. This arrangement was later adapted further into the 'chairperson' show, which featured a solo performer occupying just one chair—an artistic and symbolic defiance of the unfair accusation.

The burst of intense opposition on the Internet and the open forum triggered further deliberations on both sides. The diehard opposition still insisted on 'kicking' FMTP out of Mong Kok, a sentiment that was echoed by the mainstream pro-establishment media's calls for the 'restoration of order' in the pedestrian zone. The District Council, which was responsible for the policy of the pedestrian zones in their jurisdiction, threatened to close the pedestrian zone if local police and government departments did not step up their effort to 'clean' the street. Cultural critics and opposition politicians worried about the administration taking such excuses to 'eliminat[e] the space of differences and an alternate space for expression' (Chan 2008, Do8) and 'put an end to the "democratic street" and democratic debates on the street' (Mo 2008, 10) which would lead to the 'shrinking of [the] public sphere for the civil society' (Fong 2008).

Despite FMTP's compromises on some aspects of their performance, they stood firm on the principle of freedom of expression and the right to perform in public space. However, their momentum and, more importantly, their morale was compromised. This led to their gradual withdrawal from Mong Kok altogether (which was replaced with 'Theatre Everywhere'). Of course, the difficulties they faced in Mong Kok are part of the reason for their withdrawal, but more importantly the public space in Mong Kok has degenerated in their opinion:

As more and more tourists flood in, many of them from Mainland China, shops there are being transformed, gearing towards their taste. Fewer and fewer local patrons come. Yet it is not merely a matter of obstacle in language but a difference in taste, the cultural content, as well as the motivation, to be involved. We have attempted to use Mandarin to involve the Mainland tourists but in vain. They are very different from local Hong Kong people. We are gradually losing our audience, and eventually our impacts. (Banky Yeung, interview by the author, 21 June 2014)

After their retreat from Mong Kok, FMTP was successful in getting funding from the Arts Development Council (funded by the government), becoming the youngest theatre group to be funded. While this indicates a recognition of their accomplishment in art and empowers them to stage more socially oriented performances, it nevertheless attracts the suspicion from their critics that they have been co-opted by the establishment.

7 Concluding Remarks: Public Space Reborn

The struggle of FMTP to create an alternate public space may not be regarded as a total success. Despite their initial success in challenging the urban management regime on the restriction of performing in the public space and setting a foot at the pedestrian zone, they eventually withdrew from their 'hard-earned turf.' After they left, the opening hours of the Mong Kok pedestrian zone were greatly reduced from every evening to only weekend evenings. However, their pioneering move has made at least a partial contribution to fundamental changes in the ecology of public space in Hong Kong.

When the MK pedestrian zone was first opened in 2001, it was no more than a buffer area created to ease the congestion of the busy shopping streets. While there was still tight control on unauthorized street vending and direct selling has always been prohibited, the area was quickly exploited as a venue for legal marketing. The FMTP group boldly opened up the possibility of an alternate public space of expression when they started their street performances in 2003. They were not the first street performance group in that area, but most of the other groups had only attempted to slip past the surveillance of the urban management regime; they had no intention of challenging the authorities. FMTP is perhaps the pioneer in daring to challenge the regime to open up a 'space of hope' for open public deliberations.

Their persistence in pressing the limits of the public space management regime was a success, which in turn opened up opportunities for both street performances and more explicit and regular political deliberations in public space. The Mong Kok pedestrian zone became packed with street performances, singing, acrobatics, drama, dances, and kung fu performances that converted the place from a static, commercialized, and lifeless space to a vibrant and expressive cultural venue in the city. The space also became an important venue for political debates: forums with explicit social and political content have been more frequent in the pedestrian zone on weekends.

Figure 5.4 Performance on issues of political dissent



Source: Photograph by FM Theatre Group

This was not limited to Mong Kok. Amateur singers and music groups started to occupy public space everywhere; street music proliferated all over the city. The urban management regime seems to have created new management strategies featuring less control and more tolerance. Unless performances create serious blocks to pedestrian or vehicle traffic, or

produce excessive noise, they now largely let them continue. The authorities have also tried to imitate 'Music Under NY' in setting up more orderly performances on the street. An 'open stage' project was launched in 2008 in selected public spaces for the approved performances of amateur performing groups. Of course, when the West Kowloon Cultural Project is completed in the early 2020s, culture as a form of city branding is perhaps a more important underlying driving force of these changes.

Apart from these impacts on the policy of public space use in Hong Kong, FMTP has brought about a more enduring change: an artistic form of expressing social and political demands. This seems to have had an impact on subsequent political movements, including the Umbrella Movement.

However, FMTP's accomplishments are not totally satisfactory from a social movement perspective. Throughout this process, FMTP has only been fighting on its own; there was no attempt to form a wider coalition for the advancement of the common good. In fact, there was no explicit strategy for framing the issues, soliciting social support, or orchestrating action. Hence, it was far from a 'planned movement.' However, given that FMTP is only a theatre group and not a social movement organization, it seems overly harsh to set high demands for them to advance their actions as a social movement. Their mission was art creation. Despite the incorporation of social and political elements into their performances and their clear inspiration for being 'an agent of change' and 'facilitator of social change,' they are not social activists. Therefore, they should not be blamed for not being able to perform as an agent of social movement in scaling up the actions. Banky Yeung said, 'We do street performances hoping that people can be involved in the participatory creation of changing the world [...] Actors need action [...] they are the "activists" who turn thoughts into action' (Yeung 2014).

The group may also be a victim of the neoliberal expansion of space. The financial burden of maintaining an amateur performance group is never small; the relatively affordable rent in an industrial building is perhaps all they can afford. A change in state urban policy has made the conversion of old industrialized buildings easier and offers opportunities for such buildings to release their 'potential' value. The immediate knock-on effect of this is the speculative manoeuvre of increasing the rent—instantaneously increasing FMTP's running costs. It was thus tempting to seek state funding, not just to solve the immediate financial burden but also to open the opportunity for further development. However, this inevitably creates the impression that the theatre has been co-opted, at least among critical artists and social activists.

Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that fighting for an alternate space is not entirely altruistic but a selfish act done as a means to boost attendance in their shows. However, this should not dwarf the impact of FMTP's struggle for alternate space for art performances. In their case, the skills of cultural producers, given the appropriate intention, have been demonstrated to be instrumental in raising the consciousness of people in claiming back their public space.

Public space is in fact an 'exclusive space' (Mitchell 2003) that requires active effort to claim the right to its use. Public space is also a landscape of conflicts and resistance (Winchester, Kong, and Dunn 2003) in which struggle and negotiation are necessary to make such claims. The case of FMTP offers a vivid demonstration of this in Hong Kong. The Mong Kok pedestrian zone was turned into a conflicted and contested terrain. This works both ways: the same space is a breeding ground for advocates to express their claims, and yet they do not have the monopoly over their claimed turf. Physical space is the social sphere of expression against the oppression of the state, but it can also be the site of struggles between social actors along the political spectrum. Hence, 'resistance may be the struggle between the powerful and the marginal or the less powerful against the dominant. It may be the continued tension between groups locked in struggle for supremacy and independence' (Winchester, Kong, and Dunn 2003, 125).

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