

Exploring the space notion in Housing Imagination with Hong Kong parallel trading as an illustrative case study

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Abstract:

The literature on the space notion in Housing Imagination (HI) study is ambiguous, abstract and diverse in viewpoints, thus difficult to understand and learn. This paper makes use of the artifacts of newspaper article extracts and photographs to study parallel trading in Hong Kong with space-related notions as the analytical tools, notably the notion of paradoxical space. It results in the provision of findings that are emotionally engaging/ revealing and more comprehensible in terms of space-related notions. At the same time, the study makes some clarification of the space-related notions and underlines the importance of experience-based learning of HI. On the whole, the space notion is portrayed as socio-spatially aware; it is also recognized as being made up of a set of space-related concepts, some unproblematic while others abstract and ambiguous.

Key words: artifacts, housing imagination, newspaper article extracts, parallel trading, paradoxical space, photographs, space

INTRODUCTION

In the subject of Human Geography (HG) and an associated one of Housing Imagination (HI) (Ho, 2014a; *Housing Imagination Facebook page*), the notion of space is a chief study topic, yet

also difficult to define (Elden, 2009). On top of that, the academic discussion of Human Geography on space is not easy for students new to the subject to comprehend. As such, this makes up a pedagogical challenge to the writer as a teacher on Housing Imagination (HI), with notions of space, place and home covered in the HI syllabus. In this paper, the writer reviews the space notion, with special reference to the concept of paradoxical space. He then employs the space notion to study the parallel trading activity in Hong Kong. By doing so, the writer aims at further clarifying the topic of space in HI. At the same time, the paper provides, via the space lens, an evaluation of parallel trading in Hong Kong, which is a major public concern here.

THE DIVERSITY OF IDEAS UNDERLYING THE SPACE NOTION

The space notion, as explained by Elden (2009), “has many uses and a complicated history”. From an objective theoretical perspective, it can simply be described as a “container for thing to exist in, a place where events happen” (Elden, 2009). It is distinct from the notion of place¹, for some writers, which is “the more experienced, lived form of our encounter with our environment” (Elden, 2009). By now, contemporary human geography has developed a number of space-related concepts. Examples are (Kitchin, 2009):

Absolute space: It is “a geometrical system of organization...within which people and objects are located and move through..” (Kitchin, 2009).

Relational space: It is “contingent and active, as something that is produced or constructed by people through social relations² and practices” (Kitchin, 2009).

¹ See Ho (2014b) for a more detailed discussion of the *place* notion.

² *Social relation* is described as “any relationship between two or more individuals” (Wikipedia, 2016). In addition, social relation can take a number

Paradoxical space: It conceives space as “unpresentable and unknowable, given that it is diversely produced by multiple actors.....often working in contradictory ways” (Kitchin, 2009).

Contemporarily, the space-notion is attentive to socio-spatial phenomena, an example of which is shown as follows:

“Hongkongers are looking for second homes across the border for affordable luxury. As friction continues between sections of Hong Kong's indigenous population - if there is such a thing - and the mainlanders they see as taking over their patch, there's another, less well-known migratory pattern taking place. It's in the opposite direction in search of what you might call "perfect otherness". Growing numbers of Hongkongers are putting their eggs in two baskets by securing a holiday or second home on the mainland ...” (Carney, 2013).

To summarize, while some space-related concepts, e.g., absolute space, are unproblematic, others, especially paradoxical space, are quite ambiguous and abstract. Such diversity of space-related concepts in the literature reflects the multiple theoretical perspectives employed in the subjects of HG and HI. As to the space notion itself, it comprises a number of space-related concepts and is generally socio-spatially aware. The next section further makes clear the analytical role of the space notion in HI investigation exercises so as to deepen our understanding of this notion.

THE SPACE NOTION IN HOUSING IMAGINATION (HI)

The subject of Housing Imagination (HI) covers housing studies-related geographical imaginations (gi's), i.e., housing imaginations (hi's). And, a geographical imagination (gi) is “a way of thinking about the world and considering the relative

of specific forms of interaction, i.e., animal-like behaviors, actions with a purpose, and social actions, which “address other people” while seeking a response from specific people, and social contacts. A social action is able to trigger a series of social interactions (Wikipedia, 2016a).

importance of places and the relationships between “our” places and “other” places” (Gilley, 2010; Ho, 2014a). A typical HI study takes the following steps:

Step 1: Select an artefact, e.g. a photo, a song, a newspaper article or a book, and bring out the housing imaginations (hi’s) from the artefact.

Step 2: Discuss the various hi’s as associated to this artefact, based on the Geographical Imagination lens.

Step 3: Discuss the various hi’s in terms of place, space, and the meanings of home.

Step 4: Examine a few “socially produced discourses” as related to your discussion in Steps 2 and 3.

Step 5: Out of your study outcomes from Steps 1 to 4, come up with some viewpoints and findings that have actionable (e.g., housing policy-related) value for certain stakeholders.

The rationale of studying artifacts in HI (step 1), e.g., photographs, newspaper articles and songs, is this: HI evidences so gained are intended to be emotionally engaging and revealing as well as experience-based³, which objective evidence such as statistical findings are much less able to achieve. The HI steps, especially step 5, also underline the housing practice and policy-orientation of the subject. At the same time, the prime analytical value of the space notion, other than the other notions, in the subject of HI (re: step 3), is manifested in the HI investigation process. This paper now employs the space notion to examine parallel trading in Hong Kong, specifically making much reliance on the paradoxical space notion. Because of that, some additional remarks on the paradoxical space notion are offered in the next section

³ One way to be *experience-based* is to employ field research with photo-taking (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973).

ON PARADOXICAL SPACE

The notion of paradoxical space was put forwarded by Gillian Rose in her book *Feminism and Geography* (Rose, 1993). The fundamental idea about it is “the phenomenon in which someone is liminally⁴ positioned within a clash of two or more cultures or belief systems – to consider the ways women in particular enter these luminal spaces” (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2010; Rose, 1993). Specifically, for Rose (1993), paradoxical space exists because “space can be occupied simultaneously or in paradoxical ways” (Freidus and Romeor-Daza, 2009). For instance, safe space⁵ is considered as paradoxical space because it is “simultaneously safe and unsafe, inclusive and exclusive, separatist and integrated” (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The paradoxical notion has been employed to study feminist politics and the mixed-race identity experience (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2010), see also the *Literature on paradoxical space Facebook page* in the *bibliography*. The paradoxical space has been further elaborated on in the following ways by other writers:

- i. It is “elusive and multiple in meaning” (Hyndman, 1995).
- ii. “A site ...where those with multiple overlapping and different identities can come together...” (The Roestone Collective, 2014).

⁴ *Liminal* means “on the threshold” (Wikipedia, 2016b). Its noun, *liminality* refers to “the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete” (Wikipedia, 2016c). Finally, those who “pass through a luminal phase are initiated back into society, but as changed, more knowledgeable individuals” (Freidus and Romero-Daza, 2009).

⁵ *Safe space* has been “associated with keeping marginalized group free from violence and harassment.....also encourages “a certain license to speak and act freely”...” (The Roestone Collective, 2014).

- iii. "...objects⁶ can produce pores, or openings for possible intervention, in paradoxical space..." (The Roestone Collective, 2014).
- iv. "On the street is where we negotiate the complexities of cultural differences made deceptively familiar through repetitive encounters of daily life..." (Koefoed *et al.*, 2012).

Due to its intellectual root in feminism, the existing writings on paradoxical space are obscure. They are quite difficult to grasp and apply in real-life situation, at least to the writer and his Housing Studies students. In order to gain some experience-based knowledge on the notion of space and its associated concepts, including paradoxical space, the writer makes use of these space-related ideas to study a real-life concern, in this case parallel trading in Hong Kong.

STUDYING PARALLEL TRADING IN HONG KONG VIA THE SPACE LENS IN HOUSING IMAGINATION

Parallel trading in Hong Kong has been described as "the phenomenon of China parallel traders taking advantage of multiple entry visa policy to import goods from Hong Kong to Mainland China, causing shortage of household goods..." (Wikipedia, 2016d). Indeed, it also creates other serious hardships to the local community in Hong Kong, e.g., hygiene problems, congestions and reduction of local retail stores to serve the local community, etc.. In this regards, parallel trading in Hong Kong can be conceived as a problem situation that can be visualized in rich picture diagrams (Ho, 2015). The focus of analysis here is to make use of the space notion to make sense

⁶ For Roestone Collective (2014), *objects* are made up of "physical substance of the world", but can also include space. Moreover, "objects can be understood only in their relations to other objects or bodies..... and such relationality is ever-changing or always "becoming"....".

of parallel trading in Hong Kong, especially at the location of Sheung Shui⁷. Following the HI approach, newspaper articles extracts and photographs are employed as artifacts on which interpretation and evaluation are carried out via the space lens. This is presented in Table 1 and the six exhibits below.

Table 1: Space-related ideas and corresponding examples from newspaper article extracts and photographs on parallel trading in Hong Kong

<i>Space-related ideas</i>	<i>Related newspaper article extracts and photographs on Hong Kong parallel trading (exhibits 1 to 6) for illustration and evaluation</i>
<p><i>Idea 1:</i> “...place is the more experienced, lived form of our encounter with the environment, and space is the more mathematical...view of this (Elden, 2009).</p>	<p>1.1: “Suitcases and shopping trolleys stuffed with baby milk formula and instant noodles, as well as medication, packed the pavements outside a cluster of pharmacies in Sau Fu Street, Yuen Long...” (Sung and Nip, 2015).</p> <p>1.2: “... There has been a marked decline in the once-pristine appearance of the stations [Hong Kong railway stations, notably the one in Sheung Shui] overflowing bins, cigarette butts, drink containers and a generally rundown look are now the norm. Passengers are allowed to squat and obstruct movement on the concourses...” (Tam, 2012).</p> <p>1.3: Exhibit 5: The Sheung Shui railway station can be overcrowded with mainland visitors, making daily travelling routine of local residents much tougher. Some mainland visitors are used to squatting in public spaces so they are often easy to identify.</p>
<p><i>Idea 2:</i> “...the advent of social/spatial...theory has tended to emphasize the interrelated nature of social and spatial phenomena.” (Elden, 2009).</p>	<p>2.1: “...Observers say that Hong Kong people have long had a sense of superiority over Shenzhen residents, partly because of the difference in living standards.... ties between the two cities took a turn for the worse when parallel trading became an issue and intensified in the past few years...” (Siu, 2015a).</p>

⁷ *Sheung Shui* is in the New Territories of Hong Kong, close to the Shenzhen border of mainland China. For further information on Sheung Shui, please go to *Sheung Shui tradition Facebook page* in the *bibliography*.

	<p>2.2: “More than 3,000 parallel traders are crossing the border every day and over half of them are Shenzhen residents with multi-entry visit permits, according to government sources... the parallel traders, who make a profit by evading import taxes charged by the mainland authorities, account for at least 2.2 million cross-border trips a year...” (Lo, Nip and Lau, 2012).</p> <p>2.3: Exhibit 2: Quite a number of the neighbourhood stores serve the mainland visitors rather than the local community as their main targeted customers in Sheung Shui. The mainland visitors are easy to identify from the luggage they carry with them and their behaviours, e.g., standing still in the middle of the pedestrian pathways.</p> <p>2.4: Exhibit 6: An old woman is packing discarded card boxes from the local retail stores in Sheung Shui for selling to paper collection and recycling shops.</p>
<p><i>Idea 3:</i> “Paradoxical space... is diversely produced by multiple actors...often working in contradictory ways..” (Kitchin, 2009).</p>	<p>3.1: “Considering the multifarious reasons Shenzhen residents have for visiting Hong Kong, including seeing their children born here, visiting doctors, accountants or business counterparts, taking SAT exams or watching banned movies, a wholesale ban would clearly be unacceptable to the Shenzhen authorities...” (Ip, 2015).</p> <p>3.2: “Retailers are finding it increasingly hard to make a living as “radical” anti-parallel trading protesters tarnish Hong Kong’s image as a tourist destination, union leaders said [from the pro-establishment Federation of Trade Unions]...” (Siu, 2015b).</p> <p>3.3: Exhibit 4: As the mainland visitors make purchases with the street stores in Sheung Shui, they block the pedestrian pathway. It then forces people, both local residents and other mainland visitors, to walk on the road, which can be dangerous to them all. The home-place making activities of local residents and their residential quality of life are adversely affected as a result.</p> <p>3.4: Exhibit 5: The Sheung Shui railway station</p>

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	<p>can be overcrowded with mainland visitors, making daily travelling routine of local residents much tougher.</p>
<p><i>Idea 4:</i> “Relational space...to be contingent and active, as something that is produced or constructed by people through social relations and practices...” (Kitchin, 2009).</p>	<p>4.1: “.. Relations between Hongkongers and Shenzhen have always been fraught. On the one hand, Hongkongers pour into Shenzhen for leisure or work and even to buy property, driving up prices..... Local residents complained that the traders have been choking up border that the trading had driven up shop rents, squeezing out small businesses and disrupting the lives of those living in the border towns...” (Siu, 2015a).</p> <p>4.2: Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor is sorting and repacking purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street in Sheung Shui, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily travelling routine.</p>
<p><i>Idea 5:</i> “..spaces can be occupied simultaneously or in paradoxical ways...” (Freidus and Romero-Daza, 2009).</p>	<p>5.1: Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor is sorting and repacking purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street in Sheung Shui, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily travelling routine.</p> <p>5.2: Exhibit 3: When the mainland visitors are conducting their purchasing with the retail stores in Sheung Shui, they sometimes block the pedestrian pathway, hindering the daily movement of the local residents. It results in local residents having a more congested life experience and a poorer residential quality of life.</p> <p>5.3: Exhibit 4: As the mainland visitors make purchases with the street stores in Sheung Shui, they block the pedestrian pathway. It then forces people, both local residents and other mainland visitors, to walk on the road, which can be dangerous to them all. The home-place making activities of local residents and their residential quality of life are adversely affected as a result.</p>
<p><i>Idea 6:</i> “..On the street is where we negotiate the complexities of cultural differences made deceptively familiar through repetitive encounters of daily life...”</p>	<p>6.1: Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor sorts and repacks purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily routine.</p>

<p>(Koefoed <i>et al.</i>, 2012).</p>	<p>6.2: Exhibit 3: When the mainland visitors are conducting their purchasing with the retail stores in Sheung Shui, they sometimes block the pedestrian pathway, hindering the daily movement of the local residents. It results in local residents having a more congested life experience and a poorer residential quality of life.</p>
<p><i>Idea 7:</i> "...some urban scholars and planning theorists advance a 'cosmopolitan hope' in which everyday encounters are believed to give rise to hybrid cultures, bursting with creative potential...On the other hand postcolonial thinking emphasizes cultural racism and stigmatization of 'foreigners'...." (Koefoed <i>et al.</i>, 2012).</p>	<p>7.1: "...There are signs the residents' anger is going beyond hatred of parallel goods carriers ... some of the traders are Hongkongers, but the protesters still chant slogans like 'Go back to the mainland'," Chan [Sociology Professor Chan Kin-man, of Chinese University] said...." (Lo, Nip and Lau, 2012).</p> <p>7.2: "...Dai [president of the China Tourism Academy] called on Hongkongers to be more forgiving of habits displayed by some tourists that have created friction with local residents. He said parallel trading had become a "normal global shopping norm"....." (Leung, 2015).</p> <p>7.3: Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor is sorting and repacking purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street in Sheung Shui, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily travelling routine.</p>
<p><i>Idea 8:</i> "...objects can be understood only in their relations to other objects or bodies and such relationality is ever-changing or always "becoming"...." ((The Roestone Collective, 2014).</p>	<p>8.1: Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor is sorting and repacking purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street in Sheung Shui, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily travelling routine.</p> <p>8.2: Exhibit 2: Quite a number of the neighbourhood stores serve the mainland visitors rather than the local community as their main targeted customers in Sheung Shui. The mainland visitors are easy to identify from the luggage they carry with them and their behaviours, e.g., standing still in the middle of the pedestrian pathways.</p> <p>8.3: Exhibit 4: As the mainland visitors make purchases with the street stores in Sheung Shui, they block the pedestrian pathway. It then forces</p>

	<p>people, both local residents and other mainland visitors, to walk on the road, which can be dangerous to them all. The home-place making activities of local residents and their residential quality of life are adversely affected as a result.</p> <p>8.4: Exhibit 6: An old woman is packing discarded card boxes from the local retail stores in Sheung Shui for selling to paper collection and recycling shops. Overall, parallel trading activities in Sheung Shui have tremendous impacts on the economic landscape there.</p>
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Exhibit 1: A squatting mainland visitor is sorting and repacking purchased products into luggage next to a drug store on the street in Sheung Shui, while local residents walk along the same pedestrian pavement as their daily travelling routine. [Photograph was taken by the writer in January, 2016]



Exhibit 2: Quite a number of the neighbourhood stores serve the mainland visitors rather than the local community as their main targeted customers in Sheung Shui. The mainland visitors are easy to identify from the luggage they carry with them and their behaviours, e.g., standing still in the middle of the pedestrian pathways. [Photograph was taken by the writer in January, 2016]



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Exhibit 5: The Sheung Shui railway station can be overcrowded with mainland visitors, making daily travelling routine of local residents much tougher. Some mainland visitors are used to squatting in public spaces so they are often easy to identify. [Photograph was taken by the writer in January, 2016]



Exhibit 6: An old woman is packing discarded card boxes from the local retail stores in Sheung Shui for selling to paper collection and recycling shops. Overall, parallel trading activities in Sheung Shui have tremendous impacts on the economic landscape there. [Photograph was taken by the writer in January, 2016]



The local newspaper article extracts and the six exhibits (photographs), as artifacts recommended to be used in HI investigations (re: Table 1), provide real-life examples to illustrate and reflect on the various space-related ideas. Without these examples, the space-related ideas are quite ambiguous to comprehend. At the same time, the space-related concepts and viewpoints can be utilized to evaluate the artifacts on parallel trading in Hong Kong, e.g., at Sheung Shui, in an emotionally engaging and revealing way. Inevitably, such an HI investigation is highly interpretive in nature. This also implies

that different researchers could make different observations and evaluative viewpoints based on the same set of artifacts. An important objective of the HI study, as this paper demonstrates, is to inform housing policy formulation with knowledge that is experience-based and emotionally engaging/revealing. For example, the HI findings can be used in a focus group exercise on housing policy evaluation. Other than that, the HI literature recommends researchers to adopt a number of theoretical perspectives to conduct the investigation. In this respect, the conventional HI theoretical perspectives include feminism⁸, psychoanalysis⁹, Marxism and poststructuralism¹⁰ while the systems thinking-based HI recommend soft systems, emancipatory systems, post-modern and critical systems thinking perspectives (Ho, 2014a). Because of the limited scope of this study, the paper is not prepared to further explore exactly how these various perspectives can be employed in an HI investigation to examine parallel trading in Hong Kong.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The space-related literature in Housing Imagination (HI) can be difficult to grasp because the notions and viewpoints involved are diverse, abstract and ambiguous. Yet, they are also intellectually stimulating, emotionally engaging/ revealing and analytically powerful. Therefore, their practical and academic values are unmistakable. One academic contribution of the

⁸ *Feminism* has been associated to a number of ideas over time: women's rights, women's empowerment, women's liberalism, neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, contradictory experiences and ambiguity (Scribd, 2011).

⁹ *Psychoanalysis* is "a method of treatment that helps people understand themselves, their relationships, and how they behave in the world"; it is grounded on the notion that people "are frequently motivated to act by impulse" originating in people's unconscious, resulting in unconscious conflicts and negative feelings (American psychoanalytic association, 2016).

¹⁰ *Poststructuralism* is interested in examining sources for meaning, other than the author of a text, e.g., readers, cultural norms, and other literature, in textual analysis (Mastin, 2008).

paper is to further clarify a number of space-related notions in HI, notably the concept of paradoxical space. Other than this, this study underlines the importance of practice- and experience-based mode for studying them. Finally, due to the newness of the HI subject, this paper serves an important purpose as teaching materials on HI.

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