



A view of Occupy Central impacts on Hong Kong tourism from the other side of the Great Firewall: A rejoinder to Luo & Zhai



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rejoinder to Luo and Zhai (2017).
- Impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong tourism sector is discussed.
- Additional information about the state of Hong Kong tourism sector is provided.
- Censorship of social media in China is highlighted.
- Application of sentiment analysis to a censored platform is debated.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2017

Accepted 11 February 2018

Keywords:

Hong Kong
Political crisis
Social media
Tourism impacts

ABSTRACT

This paper forms a rejoinder to the paper by Luo & Zhai (“I will never go to Hong Kong again!” How the secondary crisis communication of “Occupy Central” on Weibo shifted to a tourism boycott). It discusses claims Luo and Zhai (2017) make about negative impacts of Occupy Central protests on tourism sector in Hong Kong and debates application of sentiment analysis to censored social media platforms. The rejoinder concludes that there is no clear evidence that there has been a negative impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong tourism. It also urges tourism academics to be more critical regarding the sources of information for their studies.

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1. Introduction

Luo and Zhai (2017) undertake sentiment analysis of Weibo posts related to Occupy Central protests that took place in Hong Kong between 26th of September and 15th of December 2014. The paper contributes to a rapidly growing area of study in the tourism field, namely social media analysis (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Luo and Zhai (2017) relate the analysis to secondary crisis communication. Considering tourism being a sector that is vulnerable to outside shocks, the topic is very much of interest and deserves further research. However, Luo and Zhai (2017) paper is concerning in two aspects: 1) impact of Occupy Central on tourism sector and 2) sentiment analysis of censored material. The present rejoinder discusses these two points. Considering the lack of academic literature on Occupy Central and relevant recent events in Hong Kong, Mainland China and elsewhere, in addition to academic literature this rejoinder makes use of media and industry

reports to provide complementary and alternative viewpoints to those expressed by Luo and Zhai (2017).

2. Impact of Occupy Central on tourism sector

Occupy Central was a 79-day long mass sit-in protest in Hong Kong. The protest aimed to demonstrate support for democratization of Hong Kong political system and to push the government for adoption of universal suffrage for elections of Hong Kong Chief Executive. The protesters blocked major roads in Causeway Bay, Admiralty and Mong Kok areas of Hong Kong. The protests were largely peaceful, although there have been clashes between police and protesters. The government did not cede to the protesters demands (Lam, 2015; Ortmann, 2015). Luo and Zhai (2017) use almost exclusively literature on Hong Kong and Occupy Central published by Mainland Chinese scholars in Mainland Chinese outlets. The two exceptions are Zhang, Chong & Ap (1999) and Zhang, Decosta & McKercher (2015). This is surprising, considering that the topic of the paper is ongoing tensions between Hong Kong and Mainland China that has been an extensive subject of research,

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including research in tourism (e.g. [Loi & Pearce, 2015](#); [Rowen, 2016](#); [Tolkach, Pratt, & Zeng, 2017](#)). It has been widely reported that controls over academic freedom in Mainland China are becoming stricter, publications favouring official government position are encouraged and many academics practice self-censorship ([Bland, 2017](#); [Cyranski, 2017](#); [Holz, 2007](#); [Mason, 2013](#); [Tran, 2017](#)). Thus, the literature review and the background to the study provided by [Luo and Zhai \(2017\)](#) may lack balance. It may not be the fault of the authors, however, as access to publications via such platforms as Google Scholar is limited due to the aforementioned censorship system ([Normile, 2017](#)).

The impact of Occupy Central is a topic of a significant public debate. [Luo and Zhai \(2017, p. 162\)](#) suggest that “there is no doubt that Occupy Central greatly impacted Hong Kong's tourism and retail industries and intensified the existing conflicts between Mainland China and Hong Kong”. Unfortunately, the paper does not provide any references to support this statement. Only a reference to a Chinese official newspaper titled *Ren Min Zheng Xie Bao* is provided within the text of that paragraph, although a full reference is not found in the reference list. Indeed, there is a lack of academic studies on the topic. The Hong Kong government suggests that there indeed has been a negative impact, although exact numbers of such impact are not available. For example, it is estimated that “The percentage of rooms with advance bookings from mid-October to November has dropped from 60 to 70 per cent over the same period last year to 40 to 50 per cent only this year. Besides, some representatives of the retail industry indicated that the business of some shops locating in nearby areas of the Occupy Movement has dropped by 30–70 per cent” ([Legislative Council, 2014](#)). However, the impact on some shops in some areas cannot be extrapolated to reflect the impact of the event on the whole destination.

Some answers related to the impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong Tourism can be seen from the statistics of visitor arrivals. [Luo and Zhai \(2017\)](#) provide a graph of “The yearly increase rate of the number of tourists from mainland China in main outbound destinations in 2003–2013 (Fig. 2, p. 163). The source of data is The Year Book of China Tourism Statistics 2004–2014. The full reference to the original is not provided. The graph provides general trends rather than monthly fluctuations, therefore the actual impact of Occupy Central on visitor arrivals is not clear. Hong Kong Tourism Board ([HKTb, 2013, 2014](#)) does provide monthly visitor arrival statistics by markets. Monthly growth of visitor arrivals by month in 2014 compared to 2013 and in 2013 compared to 2012 are provided in [Table 1](#). The months in which Occupy Central protests took place (September–December 2014) are shaded in grey. Additionally, [Fig. 1](#) provides the graphs of visitor arrival growth during the same period of time.

Based on [HKTb \(2014\)](#) figures it is evident that there was no

immediate impact of Occupy Central on visitor arrivals from Mainland China. Indeed, visitor arrivals during the Occupy Central months grew slightly faster than in the same months the year before. It is plausible that the long-haul markets have been affected by the protests as there was a decline in visitation during the Occupy Central months. Even more negative trend is among the short-haul travellers. It is reasonable to suggest that the visitor numbers would decline during political unrest, and several media outlets reported so ([Noble, 2014](#)). However, as previously stated, there is a lack of evidence that Occupy Central has caused a change in visitor arrival numbers. There could be also other external factors that affected visitor arrival numbers. September 2014 is memorable for the crash in commodity prices that affected exchange rates of various currencies. For example, Australian dollar has lost 7% of value in comparison to Hong Kong Dollar within one month of September ([XE, 2017](#)), and in longer term it lost 25% of value compared to US dollar which Hong Kong Dollar is pegged to ([Mercer, 2015](#)). Changes in currency exchange rates made travel to Hong Kong more expensive for various source markets ([Sun, 2016](#)).

Overall visitor arrivals to Hong Kong grew by 12% in 2014. They then declined in 2015 by 2.5% (including a decline of Mainland China market by 3%) and in 2016 by a further 4.5% (with decline of visitation from Mainland China being 6.7%) ([HKTb, 2015, 2016](#)). Could this be attributed to Occupy Central? It is indeed a possibility that Occupy Central had a long-term effect on Mainland Chinese market, even though a short-term impact is not apparent. However, once again it is impossible to single out the impact of Occupy Central considering other factors affecting international travel out of China and other events that occurred in Hong Kong in 2015 and 2016. Among these factors are:

- weaker Renminbi ([Kim, Lee, & Mjelde, 2016](#); [Shaffer, 2015](#)),
- stock market volatility in Mainland China ([Geerts, 2015](#)),
- anti-graft campaign that in particular affected tourism revenue in Macau ([MGTO, 2015](#); [Wong & Wei, 2016](#)),
- one-visit-per-week limit for Shenzhen residents travelling to Hong Kong ([Tourism Commission, 2017](#)),
- Hong Kong protests against visitors from Mainland China ([Sun, 2016](#)), and
- Mongkok riots in Hong Kong ([RTHK, 2016](#)).

Even though, the last two events may be somewhat related to Occupy Central, these are separate events. Unfortunately, [Luo and Zhai \(2017\)](#) do not specify these other factors that have affected arrivals to Hong Kong from Mainland China. Moreover, [Luo and Zhai \(2017, p. 162\)](#) state that “there is no doubt that the tourism industry in Hong Kong suffered greatly during the Occupy Central crisis event; however, nowadays, although the crisis has calmed, the tourism industry in Hong Kong is still depressed”. The last part

Table 1
Growth of visitor arrivals to Hong Kong by market in 2013–2014.

Market/% Growth	Jan-14	Feb-14	Mar-14	Apr-14	May-14	Jun-14	Jul-14	Aug-14	Sep-14	Oct-14	Nov-14	Dec-14	Total
Long Haul Markets	-4.4	+7	-5.1	+1.6	+2.5	-1.2	+0.4	+1.2	+3.4	-3.0	-1.8	-2.6	-0.5
Short Haul Markets	+2.6	+8.2	+0.4	+0.4	+5.6	+7.1	+7.9	-3.0	+4.1	-3.5	-9.9	-6.7	+0.7
Mainland China	+23.3	+10.4	+26.7	+14.7	+13.1	+7.8	+12.8	+15.9	+12.1	+18.3	+24.1	+13.2	+16.0
Total	+17.8	+9.8	+18.1	+10.9	+10.8	+6.9	+11.2	+12.2	+10.2	+12.6	+15.7	+8.5	+12.0
Market/% Growth	Jan-13	Feb-13	Mar-13	Apr-13	May-13	Jun-13	Jul-13	Aug-13	Sep-13	Oct-13	Nov-13	Dec-13	Total
Long Haul Markets	+8.0	-21.3	+3.5	-1.9	-2.2	-4.2	-5.1	-2.7	-4.1	+0.4	-1.1	0	-2.3
Short Haul Markets	+5.5	-15.1	+2.3	-2.0	-2.3	-5.4	-4.4	-3.4	+1.0	+6.5	+8.1	+3.7	-0.4
Mainland China	+13.7	+36.4	+13.8	+17.5	+20.9	+25.3	+15.7	+13.3	+19.4	+11.1	+10.1	+11.8	+16.7
Total	+11.9	+19.3	+10.2	+11.5	+13.8	+16.0	+10.6	+9.4	+13.9	+9.1	+8.6	+9.3	+11.7

Source: [HKTb \(2013, 2014\)](#).

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