



A city's “urban crack” at 4 a.m.: A case study of morning market vendors in Beijing's Longfu Temple area



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ABSTRACT

Generally found in the old city, “urban crack” refers to a narrow area that is hidden behind a prosperous area and was once flourished but no longer full of energy. Street vendors often regard “urban crack” areas as their main working places because they are from lower socioeconomic groups. However, these vendors occupy cities' marginal spaces during unconventional times, which is a strategy of agency. Choosing the Longfu Temple morning market, a street market in old Beijing city as the study area, this study focused on how the vendors successfully conducted their business in the morning market, which is a type of “urban crack”. Inspired by Cresswell's framework (2010) of the six facets of mobility, the paper constructed a framework for agency to explain street vendors' activities, which includes the following six aspects: motive force, route, speed, rhythm, experience, and friction. Relying on the perspective of time and space, this study revealed that disadvantaged groups represented by morning market vendors are flexible and vigorous. By incorporating agency, these vendors' tactics consider time and space in order to support their way of life. Focusing on street vendors is not a unique case to develop the concept of “urban crack”, this study makes an original contribution to provide a research reference for other countries that are faced with similar social realities.

1. Introduction

At 4 a.m., vendors gathered to prepare their businesses in the Longfu Temple morning market, which is a street market in old Beijing city. After the vendors made preparations for 2 h, they woke the street with their cries. This scene has occurred every day in the Longfu Temple area in the past years. To control the excessive growth of rapid urbanization, recently, Beijing has developed a plan to discontinue its non-core functions. Objects that have non-core functions refer to organizations and businesses that are located in Beijing city but provide minimal contributions to its economic development and environmental protections. Most of these businesses include street markets, such as the wholesale market, the vendors market, and the morning market. These street markets are gathering places for migrant vendors.

“Urban crack”, which is a term developed for this study by the research team, refers to a narrow area that is hidden behind a prosperous area and was once flourished but no longer full of energy. These areas are generally found in the old city. “Urban crack” areas are often ignored by the authorities due to their declining status. But they are

suitable for street markets because their locations are near prosperous areas. It has been a long time since officials focused on maintaining cleanliness and orderliness of these prosperous areas and regularly patrolled these important streets. Generally, officials allow street vendors in marginal spaces during marginal times (such as early in the morning, when officials are not in their positions). Street vendors operate their businesses in the “urban crack” because there is less risk of being expelled. However, this situation has changed in Beijing due to its new municipal plan. The Longfu Temple morning market, which was the largest morning market in Beijing and had operated for more than twenty years, officially ended its business on June 12, 2016.

The morning market operates as a type of street vending and represents a typical spatial form of use in “urban crack” areas. Incorporating a traditional business model that was used in Chinese cities, the morning market sprung up during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Wei, 2013). As the name implies, this market opened in the very early morning and closed before sunrise. Under strict government control, the morning market operated during irregular times and in vague spaces, which allowed vendors to avoid conflicts with

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authorities (Wei, 2013). During the spatial and functional evolution of the old city, vendors took advantage of the street in the declining “urban crack” areas and operated their businesses during unconventional times that had little influence on pedestrians’ daily lives. The vendors were forced to compromise with officials (Kerkvliet, 2009).

1.1. Street vending

Street vending is a traditional occupation that may be found in most cities across the world. It represents an informal economic form, prevails in numerous developing countries (Brown, 2006) and offers an opportunity for disadvantaged migrants to survive in cities with few obstacles (Onodugo, Ezeadichie, Onwuneme, & Anosike, 2016; Xue & Huang, 2015). For decades, urban authorities and elites of certain countries have believed that city degradation is caused by excessive street vendors (Staudt, 1996; Swider, 2014). In these circumstances, numerous municipal ordinances are applied to street vending. Certain countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, allow street vendors and have developed policies for regulating and protecting them (Lau, Hakam, & Liew, 2015; Monga & Singh, 2012). However, in most Asian cities, street vendors do not have a legal status to conduct their business and are rejected from the core areas of large cities (Bhowmik, 2005).

1.2. Street vendors’ agency

Scholars are interested in the relationship between government regulations and vendors’ strategies. From a social perspective, relevant studies have focused on vendors’ activities. Certain scholars perceive vendors’ activities as a struggle against city poverty (Natrass, 1987) or resistance against authorities (Bromley, 2000; Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). In terms of public spaces, de Certeau (1988) argued that when faced with power and ideology, the weak often resist in a circuitous manner rather than unconditionally complying with orders or rules. The strategies of street vendors are flexible and varied. They disappear and reappear and invade a new location. Street vendors generally obey requirements, but may ignore them if enforcement is relaxed. In addition, street vendors have even developed cooperative associations to adjust to policy changes (Lindell & Appelblad, 2009).

Vendors’ tactics can be understood as a reflection of agency. Agency emphasized the capacity of the vendors to adapt to a system that works against them (Bourdieu, 1986), which is less explicit but more crucial for understanding how street vendors respond to restrictions (Steel, 2012). Agency is reflected by two aspects: time and space. In regard to time, vendors can alter how they occupy space by changing their service time rather than having absolute control over the space. By using flexible schedules for their street vending activities, vendors can play hide-and-seek and be in possession of the street space briefly until expelled by officials. Akha souvenir vendors in Thailand began selling in the afternoon or early evening and returned home around midnight (Trupp, 2015). In Beijing, most vendors work during the night (Zeng, Lu, & Idris, 2005). Studies should be conducted to enhance our understanding of vendors’ working times and why they conduct their activities during unsocial working times. In regard to space, numerous studies have focused on how vendors move to different spaces from a macro perspective. Cresswell’s theory of mobility (2010) explored the relationship between individuals’ behavior and social attributes. Mobility refers to individuals’ movement in real space and is a spatial strategy that vendors can use to avoid the disadvantages. Generally, a high level of mobility is an expression of agency. Combining Cresswell’s framework (2010) with Kerkvliet’s everyday politics (2009), Eidse, Turner, and Oswin (2016) formed a hybrid theory regarding the everyday politics of mobility to explain the mechanisms of resistance that are used in response to a national ban of vending in Hanoi’s urban spaces. From a microcosmic perspective, additional studies are needed to focus on the relation between the activities of vendors in a specific market and their agency.

1.3. Policy for rural-urban migrants in Beijing

Street vending is one type of important work that rural-urban migrants can pursue. In the following sections, we briefly discuss Beijing’s policy regarding migrants. During China’s urbanization process, an increase in rural-urban migration is one key factor that has contributed to the development of large cities (Hu, 2007). However, migrant needs are often ignored during the development of cities because of limitations in city spaces (Martin, 2014; Selim, 2015; Yatmo, 2009). In Beijing, most migrants have not received equal treatment as urban citizens (He, 2005; Huang, 2009). If migrants do not obtain an urban residency license (Mandarin: *hu kou*), they may be restricted in regard to employment and social welfare (Wang & Wu, 2015; Yang, 2013). Furthermore, many migrants are lacking in education, which explains why rural-urban migrants are more likely to have low skill jobs, such as street vending (Swider, 2014).

This study focuses on how vendors’ agency plays a role in the city life with the perspective of time and space. In addition, it analyzes the significance of “urban crack” areas for the integration of population and resources to provide policy guidance and a reference for the effective use of urban spaces.

2. Study area and methods

2.1. Study area

The morning market on Longfu Temple Street was booming and had a time-honored Beijing marketplace culture with temple fair traditions and diversified participants. Longfu Temple Street, where the morning market was located, is the core street in the Longfu Temple Historical and Cultural Conservatory Area, which is east of Dongsi Beidajie Street, west of Art Galley East Street and south of Dongsi Xidajie Street (Fig. 1). Adjacent to the Palace Museum in Beijing, the Longfu Temple was once the greatest temple in Beijing. It was well-known for its temple fair, where vendors sold cheap goods on certain days every month. The temple fair drove the development of surrounding business, which made the Longfu Temple area one of the most approachable and lively places for citizens. Although the area has declined in recent decades due to poor commercial development, a lack of administration of the Longfu Temple area provided vendors the opportunity to sell there. Vendors sold their goods in a unique manner that did not disturb the normal business of the stores and parking lots on the street, primarily because the morning market’s preparation and operation occurs during the early hours of the morning.

There are several reasons that we selected the Longfu Temple morning market as the study area. First, this was the largest market among all the morning markets in old Beijing city, which implies that an adequate number of vendors could be investigated. Second, the Longfu Temple morning market was representative of street markets and incorporated a strict management of business times. Third, because of the sudden closure of the Longfu Temple morning market as mentioned in the first paragraph, the agency of vendors in this space is more noteworthy.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

This study used observation, questionnaires and in-depth interviews to collect data (Table 1). During the formal survey, the researchers interviewed vendors prior to the opening of the morning market to avoid interfering with their daily business. Fifteen of the 118 vendors in the Longfu Temple morning market (including 10 fixed vendors and 5 mobile vendors) were selected for the in-depth interviews. All interviewees were rural-urban migrants who were willing to collaborate. To ensure that these interviews were effective, a pre-interview was conducted prior to the formal survey. Researchers approached the street vendors with easy questions. Once the researchers were assured that the

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