

Title: 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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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 & 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.

Keywords: Hong Kong, political crisis, social media, tourism impacts

Introduction

Luo & 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 & 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 & 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 & Zhai (2017).

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 & 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, 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; Cyranoski, 2017; Holz, 2007; Mason, 2013; Tran, 2017). Thus, the literature review and the background to the study provided by Luo & 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 & 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 to 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 & 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 (Figure 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, Figure 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:

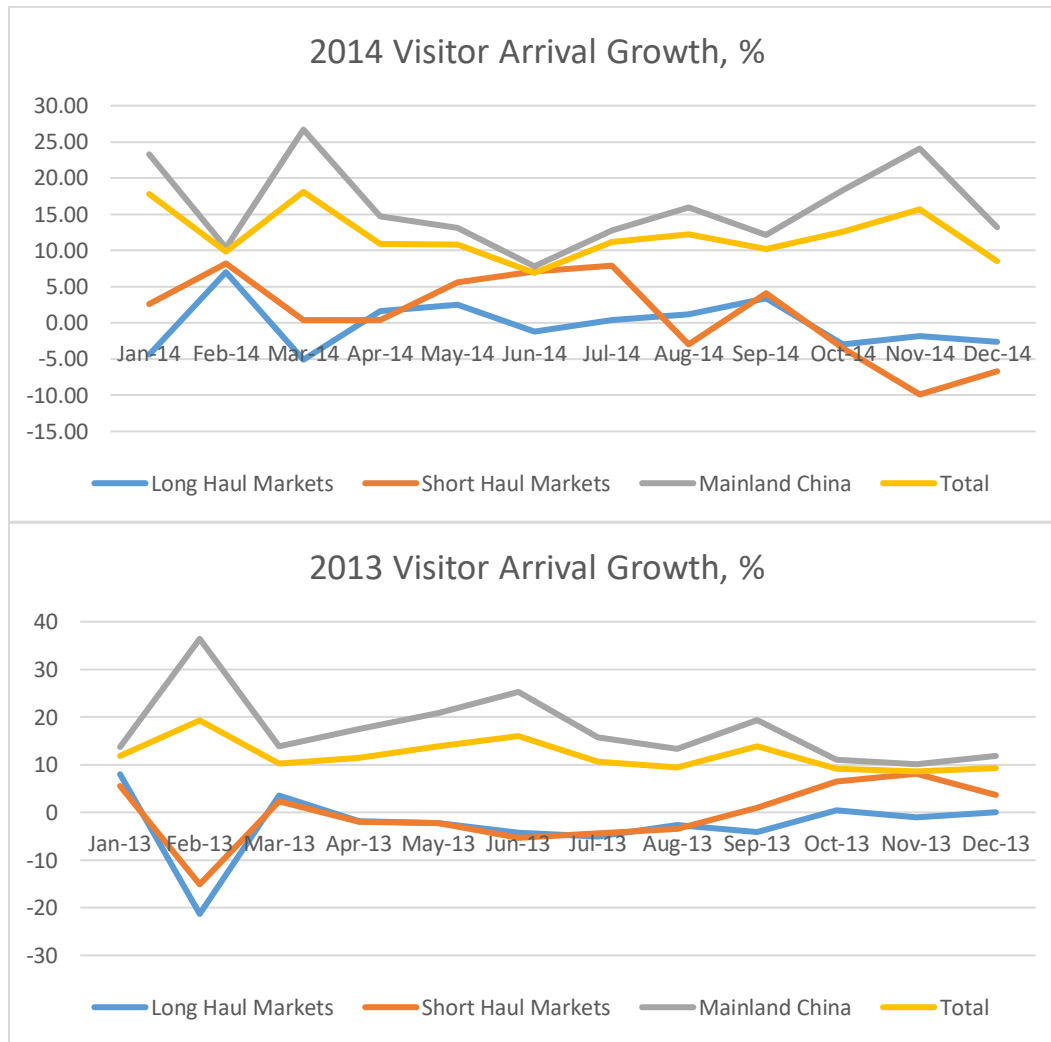
- weaker Renminbi (Kim, Lee & Mjelde, 2016; Shaffer, 2015),
- stock market volatility in Mainland China (Geerts, 2015),
- anti-graft campaign that in particular affected tourism revenue in Macau (MGTO, 2015; Wong & Wai, 2016),
- one-visit-per-week limit for Shenzhen residents travelling to Hong Kong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

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)

Figure 1. Growth of visitor arrivals to Hong Kong by market in 2013-2014



Source: HKTB (2013, 2014)

Even though, the last two events may be somewhat related to Occupy Central, these are separate events. Unfortunately, Luo & Zhai (2017) do not specify these other factors that have affected arrivals to Hong Kong from Mainland China. Moreover, Luo & 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 of this sentence is outdated as the visitor arrival numbers to Hong Kong grew in 2017 so far. There has been a 1.9% growth in visitor arrivals in the period from January to August 2017, including 1.9% growth in visitor arrivals from Mainland China (HKTB, 2017). All of the above clarifies information about the Occupy Central and its impacts on tourism in Hong Kong.

Sentiment analysis of censored material

The second point that this rejoinder aims to address is the issue of undertaking a sentiment analysis of censored material. Luo & Zhai (2017) paper is based on the analysis of posts and comments on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website. Internet in China, including Weibo, is strictly censored. The so-called Great Firewall of China has been a subject of many academic studies and media reports (e.g. King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; King, Pan & Roberts, 2014; McDonnell, 2017; Minter, 2017; Normile, 2017; Sullivan, 2014). Some reports and studies focus specifically on analysis of censorship on Weibo (e.g. Auer & Fu, 2015; Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Vuori & Paltemaa, 2015; Zhu, Pridgen, Crandall & Wallach, 2013). Zhu et al. (2013) estimate that 30% of deletion of sensitive posts occurs within 30 minutes of posting and up to 90% of deletions occur within the first 24 hours. King et al. (2013, 2014) suggest that posts with potential for collective action face more censorship. King et al. (2013, 2014) reverse engineer Weibo censorship. They suggest that it is possible to discuss sensitive topics on Chinese media, especially if they do not threaten a collective action. However, even the posts that are supportive of the government may face censorship as a bulk of deletions is done automatically based on programmed algorithms. Sullivan (2014) warns that appearance of some critical comments on Weibo does not mean liberalization of China, and reporting of local incidents that do not threaten central government may be useful to maintain control in the country. Indeed, McDonnell (2017) suggests that there is an increasing control by the Communist Party of China over what citizens are supposed to think, including what is allowed to be said online.

Hong Kong University’s project on censorship monitoring in China titled Weiboscope has reported a record-level censorship of Weibo posts on the day Occupy Central started, i.e. 28th of September 2014 (Boehler, 2014). However, censorship of Weibo appears downplayed by the authors. Following is a quote from Luo & Zhai (2017, p.160): “Although public opinion on Weibo is in some degree under control, there is no denying that Weibo users played a very important and active role in spreading messages about Occupy Central.” Luo & Zhai (2017) suggest that after the protest started there was a growth in negative comments and the reduction of positive comments. This could be a result of censorship. Within a censored environment a sentiment analysis of media that compares the number of positive and negative emotions may be irrelevant. Even a content analysis of themes within the text may not be very useful as not all themes can be identified. Luo & Zhai (2017) suggest that in the resolution stage of the crisis the sentiment towards boycotting travel became more apparent. Such finding would be useful for any destination management organization to react to. However, it would be also interesting to find out whether some tourists would visit Occupy Central and recommend others to visit it. Considering that large pro-democracy protests

do not happen in Mainland China, Occupy Central can be viewed as a unique tourist attraction. Indeed, Hutchison (2014) reported that: “Chinese tourists have also been keen to view the pro-democracy art and take selfies in the area.” Luo & Zhai (2017, p. 169) in outlining limitations of their study acknowledge the following: “Although big data have been increasingly used in tourism research, it is still questioned for its quality and credibility as supportive proof. Second, although this study has pointed out the phenomenon of tourism boycott on social media, its actual impact on tourism destinations remains to be explored.” It is impossible to know what the sentiment about Occupy Central was, which voices were silenced and what was the full spectrum of thoughts among Mainland Chinese about Occupy Central protests. HKTB (2014) statistics suggest that there was no immediate boycott of tourism by Mainland Chinese visitors. Moreover, the long-term effect has not been studied to objectively understand the impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong tourism.

Conclusions

Luo & Zhai (2017) have undertaken an interesting study on an important topic of secondary crisis communication. Indeed, considering vulnerability of tourism to various crises, social media communications about crises merit more research. Furthermore, authors should be commended for discussing a timely topic of Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong. However, it is surprising to read some unsupported claims regarding the impact of Occupy Central on tourism in Hong Kong. Therefore, an extended discussion of such impact (or lack of it) has been provided within this rejoinder. Moreover, this rejoinder raises concerns regarding analysis of social media platforms based in China due to strict censorship of Internet in China. Censorship makes it impossible to analyze what people think. The only subject that can be studied is what people are allowed to publicly express.

Internet, social media and big data provide researchers with access to large volumes of information. This information may shed new light on various aspects of life. The internet is however not entirely free and does not necessarily provide objective information collected from a randomised sample. This does not mean it is useless, but rather that researchers must be critical and sceptical about the quality of the information solicited from social media. Similarly, the news media and even academic community are under pressure to produce publications that contribute to a dominant discourse. Tourism academics should be mindful of that, ensure that their arguments are supported by various references and engage more in debates over the current issues in tourism, including critiques of publications.

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