ABSTRACT

This study uses Foucauldian governmentality as a framework to examine the interplay of neoliberal and place-based discourses, as well as the political rationalities aimed at governing citizens. It identifies neoliberalism as an ideological project and different parties play a role in the facilitation and circulation of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality. The possibility for accommodation of the two mismatched theoretical position, poststructuralism and Marxism, is also discussed. This study not only focuses on the apparatus of technologies of domination, but also responds to a recent call to recognize the creative possibilities and freedom of an individual. This study addresses how neoliberalism shapes our understanding of reality, and how the citizens are being governed.

A genealogy of poverty and welfare discourse is examined in this study through a complementary combination of qualitative coding analysis and quantitative content analysis of 20 years of Hong Kong newspaper articles. Seventy in-depth interviews with poor people, social workers, and volunteers, and participant observation were conducted in three NGOs for one year. Five central governing practices among poverty news articles supporting neoliberal rationality and mentalities were found. They are individualization, distanciating government from citizens, promoting social mobility, the creation of a decent subject, and the
fragmentation of society. Four oppositional claims are also found. They are exercising human rights, fighting for social justice, anti-stigmatization, and seriousness of poverty issues. Three major shifts in discursive strategies were identified as coinciding with the major socio-political changes in Hong Kong. The result shows that the mobilization of moral panic prompted a shift in the discourse regarding poverty from a story-like form of social citizenship to rational language of economic citizenship. Then, following a rise in the anti-neoliberalism movement, the basic arguments in public discourse began taking social justice into account. The public discourse has shifted the focus to sensationalized language of political citizenship.

In this, news media use their institutional power to determine the legitimate way to discuss poverty. Faced with journalism preference of scientism, rationality, and extraordinary stories, social actors and government officials use survey, official statistics, rational language and demonstrations to attract media attention. Journalists condition the audience to act as good citizens by repeating the self-reliance project. The individuals are either conditioned to behave themselves or to monitor the behavior of others in economic terms.

This study further examines how the society in terms of power and knowledge constitutes subjectivity. It first illustrates how gazes might transform social relations in our everyday lives. Individuals might submit to power as technology of domination
under constant surveillance. Three types of gazes were identified as prominent in the gatherings among poor people. These three different types of gazes determine the normal, acceptable behavior and traits of those deserving help: they cannot meet their basic material needs, use resources well, and have good work attitudes. At the same time, poor people accomplish goals and actualize themselves as technology of self. The study shows technologies of self can be identified in five domains: they are engaging in volunteer work, enrolling in retraining programs, fighting for social rights, fulfilling social roles, and modifying the appearance of identity via technology. Technologies of self provide spaces for self-regulation and better understanding of poverty. All these technologies have been used to illustrate the different ways in which the self has been changed by their self’s consciousness. The poor shape their lives by exercising their power to choose what activities they want to engage in and turn these technologies into ongoing identity work. This study on one hand illustrates specific processes that the knowledge system of poverty brings about a specific ethic of self-discipline, which forces an individual to fulfill a moralistic obligation. On the other hand, it also acknowledges the potential for oppressed groups and the poor themselves to create their own identity, regain their subjectivity, and struggle against domination.
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