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Theatricality scene theory analysis on Sai Yeung Choi Street South, Mong Kok

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Abstract

This study applies the theatricality framework of Scene Theory to analyze the spatial, social, and cultural characteristics of Sai Yeung Choi Street South in Mong Kok, Hong Kong. Through fieldwork observations and historical research, the essay examines the visual and functional contrast between the street's commercial and residential areas, revealing how commercial aesthetics dominate and mask the underlying residential identity. It further explores how certain transgressive and integrative elements create a dynamic coexistence between public spectacle and private life. A comparative analysis with the neighboring Tung Choi Street highlights how both sites reflect broader societal changes, government regulation, and urban development. Ultimately, the paper argues that the street scene embodies theatrical values such as glamour, formality, and transgression, all shaped by ongoing socio-cultural transformations in one of Hong Kong's most vibrant urban districts.

Keywords

Mong Kok
Sai Yeung Choi Street South
Scene theory
Theatricality
Urban transformation
Street aesthetics
Commercial space
Residential identity
Hong Kong urbanism
Cultural geography
Public space
Neighborhood community
Spatial performance

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1. Introduction

The scene theory includes three important general categories of meaning at stake in a scene—authenticity, theatricality, and legitimacy. Among these three categories, theatricality in the scene is about how to present yourself; it resembles modes of appearance styles. It is also about performance, and there is a certain logic of performance, not of specificity to generality, but rather external to internal and convention to deviance. And a scene can display itself in different ways, like formally, transgressively, neighborly, or glamorously [1].

In 1924, Sai Yeung Choi Street South was opened for Mong Kok village. The original location of this road was flat and had plenty of water. It was a good place to live and cultivate. In the past, watercress and Tongcai were alternately planted. Since watercress (Sai Yeung Choi) was a native vegetable rarely eaten by foreigners in Hong Kong at that time [2], Mong Kok Village was an important vegetable supplier for foreigners on Hong Kong Island in the early days when Hong Kong was forced to open its port [3].

However, after the peninsula was ceded in 1860, the British began a massive nature transformation, reclaiming land from surrounding water continuously for the last century and still doing so, and building typhoon shelters, piers, and roads. Mong Kok, which was originally near the sea, has been pushed inland, and the vegetable fields have disappeared in the process of urbanization. Mong Kok was transformed from a rural area into a modern industrial area. After the Second World War, with the rapid rise in urban land prices and the relocation of factories, the area of the street began to transform into a commercial and residential district close to what it is today [4].

This study aims to apply the theatricality conceptual framework to the scene of Sai Yeung Choi Street South based on the fieldwork on site, to analyze the different characteristics of the street, as well as explore the various dimensions of the theory on site [5]. Based on a fieldwork of a selected site, students shall apply ONE conceptual framework of the Scene Theory (authenticity, theatricality, or legitimacy) to analyze the spatial, social, and cultural characteristics of the site. Exploring the various dimensions of the theory, the students shall qualify and elaborate on the essential elements of the cultural place/space by borrowing relevant concepts of the theory [6].

2. The clash and contrast between the commercial area and the residential area of the street

Despite being an area with both commercial and residential functions, the appearance of Sai Yeung Choi Street South doesn't have many features of residential areas, whether it's the layout of the buildings or the pedestrians on the street.



Figure 1. The picture of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.

The commercial area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South is arranged on the ground floor of the building, close to the street, the appearance of the commercial area is very eye-catching, every shops use lots of light and its product to attract people to come, so the area has the presence of dazzling and shimmering, and the shops also become attractions for windows shopping [7]. Therefore, the scene of the street has the characteristics of glamour and exhibitionism.

In contrast to the commercial area of the street, the residential area on Sai Yeung Choi Street South has no attractive features, as a matter of fact, from the look of the picture, if passers-by don't look up, they can even easily overlook the apartment suites which were on the upper side of the building. This is because the living quarters are hidden in the shadow of the dazzling neon lights. Unlike the vibrant and dynamic commercial buildings that use bright lights and flashy products to draw attention, the upper-floor architecture is more subdued and utilitarian. The buildings often share similar forms and layouts, with minimal variation in style. This part of the street also features the traditional "qilou" design—arcaded buildings that provide a sheltered walkway at street level for commercial use, while the levels above are used for living spaces. This architectural style prioritizes efficiency, low construction cost, and functionality rather than individuality or visual appeal. As a result, the appearance of this area feels ordinary and reserved, in sharp contrast to the liveliness of the commercial zone below. Therefore, this part of the scene has the characteristics of ordinary and reserved, contrary to the commercial area [8].

3. Another feature of the contrast between commercial and residential areas of the street is the atmosphere on the street

Sai Yeung Choi South Street is residential, according to the Mong Kok 2021 Population Census, there are nearly 1,500 people living in this street [9], so the street should be a neighborhood community. But because of the commercial area of the street, the appearance of the street barely has any features of a neighborhood; the most visible parts are the shops that are open for everyone, whether they live here or not. Even the pedestrians in the street are mostly not residents, but come from

other places; they come to the street to work or have entertaining activities, and most of them don't belong to the neighborhood community. Therefore, this section of the street does not convey a sense of community or familiarity. Its appearance feels impersonal and distant, lacking any expression of the private lives of the people who live there. However, although the main appearance of the street feels distant and lacks neighborhood connection, there are still some parts of the street that show the feature of closeness within the neighborhood community [10].

During the fieldwork, this notice attracted my attention because it is one of the few things that show the features of the neighborhood in Sai Yeung Choi Street South. Even so, this notice is located in a part of the street that is difficult to find, especially for passersby—it is placed inside the entrance to a residential staircase; only people who live in the street could notice. So it brought closeness as well as built the personal network on the scene to let this part of the street hold the value of neighborliness. But the comparison between the scene part with commercial value and the scene part with neighborliness value can show that the commercial area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South has a great influence on its residential area, although the function of the residential area is still there, but its noticeable characteristics are almost erased or got distracted by the dazzling commercial area [11].



Figure 2. The commercial area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.

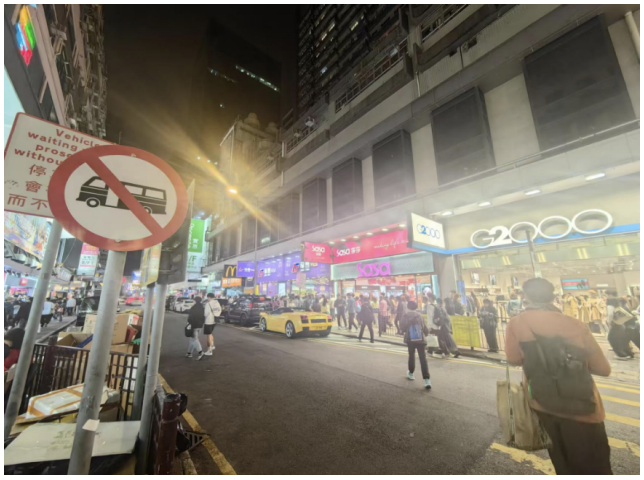


Figure 3. The commercial area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.



Figure 4. The notice in residential area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.

4. The integration between the commercial area and the residential area of the street

Even though most of the residential area on Sai Yeung Choi Street South is overshadowed by the commercial area, some features of the street show signs of the integration of the commercial area and residential area [12].



Figure 5. The upper commercial area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.



Figure 6. The upper area of Sai Yeung Choi Street South.

From the pictures above that I took during fieldwork on site, it can be seen that some shops are open on the floors above the street level, such as a hair & spa salon or a book shop. Shops in the residential area look very different from the rest of the residential buildings. They have lights and signs to attract people instead of an ordinary look like other parts of the building. The other phenomenon in the Sai Yeung Choi Street South that caught my eye is that, despite there being shops open in the residential area, the function and size of the shops are slightly different from those in the commercial area. For example, shops in commercial areas tend to be chain stores or belong to well-known brands, while shops in residential areas include small businesses instead of corporate businesses. What's more, the service shops such as hair and spa salon and foot massage shop are located in a residential area rather than a commercial area. So these shops broke conventional styles of appearance in the area; therefore, these phenomena held the transgression value for the scene of the street [13]. From these phenomena, it is clear that the appearances of commercial area and residential area in the Sai Yeung Choi Street South are not only divided or conflicted but also integrated. And this is heavily link to the consistent transformation of Mong Kok, especially Sai Yeung Choi Street South area [14].

5. The comparison between Sai Yeung Choi Street South and Tung Choi Street

Tung Choi Street is just next to Sai Yeung Choi Street South; however, the appearances of these two streets have significant differences.



Figure 7. Sai Yeung Choi Street South.



Figure 8. Sai Yeung Choi Street South.



Figure 9. Tung Choi Street.



Figure 10. Tung Choi Street.

It is clear that there are two main differences between the appearance of Sai Yeung Choi Street South and Tung Choi Street. The first one is that the shops on Tung Choi Street are mainly stalls, while the shops on Sai Yeung Choi Street South are mostly physical stores. The other difference is Sai Yeung Choi Street South is accessible to vehicles, while Tung Choi Street (at least in this section) is a strictly pedestrian area, with all vehicles prohibited. And the appearance of Sai Yeung Choi Street South looks more organized than that in Tung Choi Street, because the physical stores usually feel more professional and reliable than mobile stalls/hawkers, therefore the appearance of this scene makes the space follow the strict canons of "good form."

However, the appearance of Sai Yeung Choi Street South had more similarities with Tung Choi Street in the past. In December 2000, Sai Yeung Choi Street South was designated as a time-limited pedestrian area by the Transport Department to alleviate air pollution and improve traffic congestion in the area [15]. After that, Sai Yeung Choi Street South became a must-visit place for tourists. To attract tourists or to enhance the development of street performance culture in Hong Kong, many performers would perform in the reserved area, but this phenomenon soon brought serious noise pollution to nearby residents. So the government gradually began to restrict the opening of pedestrian areas. The opening hours of the Sai Yeung Choi Street South pedestrian area were restricted from 2014 until May 2018, when the pedestrian area was completely closed [7]. Since then, Sai Yeung Choi Street South has become what it is today, with heavy traffic and only a few performers.

The reason behind the appearance of Tung Choi Street is that in the 1970s, when the oil crisis broke out, causing a sharp rise in petroleum prices, Hong Kong's light industry was hit badly, decreasing exports, and eventually the loss of jobs. Consequently, many people turned to unlicensed stall keepers. So, to improve the situation, the British Hong Kong Government designated one section of Tung Choi Street as the first stall keepers' approved area in Hong Kong in 1975, and standardized stall keepers' control was implemented [8]. In the 1970s to 1980s, there were only a few proper shopping malls in the city, so the citizens liked to shop in the stalls on holidays.

So based on the historical background, despite the appearance of the stall keepers' area on Tung Choi Street might not as organized as the physical stores area, the appearance actually is the result of government regulation, therefore the appearance is actually based on the ceremonial standards, so both streets' appearance have the value of formality for the space.

Therefore, the appearance of both streets is influenced by external factors, and these external factors are mainly the changes in social characteristics at different times. So, as an important commercial area of Hong Kong, the cultural and social characteristics of these two streets will change over time, sometimes similar, and sometimes different, but their appearances hold the same value for the scene.

6. Conclusion

By applying the theatrical conceptual framework of the Scene Theory, this essay analyzed the appearance of both commercial and residential areas of Sai Yeung Choi Street South, as well as the difference between the appearance of Sai Yeung Choi Street South and Tung Choi Street. It can be concluded that the spatial, social, and cultural characteristics of the site of Sai Yeung Choi Street South, Mong Kok are conflicted, diversified, and susceptible to social influence. This is not due to a single reason, but rather a combination of factors, most notably, its identity as one of Hong Kong's most famous shopping and tourism destinations. The area's constant exposure to shifting social climates, visitor activity, and commercial trends makes it particularly susceptible to transformation. As a mixed-use space, the street's appearance and cultural dynamics are continuously negotiated between the needs of long-term residents and the expectations of short-term visitors. As a result, cultural patterns of conflict, coexistence, and hybridization emerge

between the commercial and residential elements of the street. Looking ahead, it is likely that Sai Yeung Choi Street South will undergo further transformation. With ongoing urban development, shifting consumer habits, and evolving government policies regarding street use and public space, the area may see changes not only in its physical appearance but also in its social function. Whether it becomes more commercialized, revitalized for community use, or restructured to address overcrowding and pedestrian flow, Sai Yeung Choi Street South will continue to reflect the dynamic and often competing forces that define urban life in Mong Kok.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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