

# Natural Attributes of City Vendors, Governance Dilemmas and Countermeasures

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**Abstract:** *For a long time, the guerrilla warfare between urban management and urban vendors in China has been an unfavourable factor for the stable development of the society, and at the same time, the governance of urban vendors is also one of the challenges for the inclusive urban construction planning in the 21st century. However, the negative image of urban vendors as "urban invaders" is merely an object of service under the political economy, and the positive impact of the vendor economy cannot be ignored. How to solve the dilemma of spatial governance of itinerant hawkers is a pressing problem that concerns people's lives. This paper begins with an introduction to the development history of the hawker economy, analyses its natural attributes and characteristics as well as the dilemmas it faces, and studies the development path of urban hawker governance based on Foucault's idea of governance and from the perspective of mediated survival, with a view to providing certain countermeasures and insights for future urban planning and governance.*

**Keywords:** *City vendor, City governance, Mediated existence*

## 1. Introduction

Vendors have long been "defended" and "attacked" in the country's urbanisation. Influenced by urban exclusionism, itinerant vendors are considered to be "misplaced" in relation to urban civilisation and "urban invaders". Therefore, for a long time, traders and city management have been playing the tragic game of "cat chasing mouse".

However, the "exclusion" of itinerant hawkers did not start out as such. In ancient China, vendors were an integral part of the urban economy, and in the early days of reform and opening up, they were also regarded as a dynamic individual economy. However, in the course of continuous political and economic and social development, vendors have also been regulated and controlled many times. In the Republican era, vendors were considered a problem for city management; After perestroika, vendors were required to be evicted and banned. From this, we can see that the "exclusion" or otherwise of itinerant hawkers is more a matter of the needs of the political economy of urbanisation.

In order to adapt to the normalised situation of epidemic prevention and control, the Central Civilisation Office has explicitly deleted the assessment of non-occupying business, street markets and itinerant hawkers from the 2020 National Civilised City Assessment Indicators. There have been policy responses across the country, Chengdu, Sichuan Province allows 17,891 mobile hawker sites; Xuchang City, Henan Province, allows nearly 20 itinerant vendors to settle in convenient service points; Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, has also opened up some streets to provide vendors with places to operate. The street vendor economy has been described by our national leaders as the "fireworks of the earth", and it is considered to be the lifeblood of China.

## 2. Development History of Mobile Hawking

### 2.1. The hawker economy has existed since ancient times.

"In the middle of the day, a market is set up to bring all the people of the world together, to gather all the goods of the world, to trade and to withdraw, each in his own way." The practice of buying, selling and exchanging "things" has been in existence since primitive society. In the Tang and Song dynasties, the prosperous development of the economy of Chang'an City in the Tang Dynasty and the "City of

Night" in the Song Dynasty under the Fangshi system reflected that this was the flash period of the hawker economy in the long history of China. The painting "Cargo Man", created by Gu Xianlong in the Qing Dynasty, shows the scene of a cargo man carrying groceries and selling them. In fact, in ancient China, vendors were an integral part of the urban economy.

## ***2.2. Vendor economy throughout China's development history***

In modern times, in the course of the country's continuous political and economic and social development, vendors have been more strictly regulated and controlled. In terms of the attitudes faced by vendors, in the Republic of China (ROC), vendors were considered a problem for urban management. After the reform and opening up of China, in order to create a national hygiene city and build an efficient and comfortable urban environment, vendors were even asked to be evicted and banned. However, due to the survival of mobile vendors with the characteristics of purpose, urban vendors are still in the "dark" to find their own space for survival, and the struggle with the city administrators is getting more and more intense. And in the post-pandemic era, in order to enhance social stability and provide a dynamic factor for the country's economic development. The "stall economy" has been rekindled under the policy of deregulation. From ancient times to the present day, the hawker economy has continued to permeate the long history of China, which explains the necessity of the survival of hawkers from the perspective of the historical viewpoint.

## **3. Characteristics and Plight of Urban Vendors**

### ***3.1. The need for urban vendors in terms of their characteristics***

#### ***3.1.1. Spatial mobility as the most distinctive feature of urban vendors***

"Peddlers and sellers of milk in their carts", vendors in urban areas do not have fixed business premises. A vendor may set up a stall in place B today and in place C tomorrow. This kind of mobility and disorder in spatial order is its most significant feature and also the survival law of urban mobile vendors.

Behind this spatial mobility is the urban vendor's keen sense of regional customer flow and market demand. From the consumer's point of view, this is the psychology of trafficking for the consumer's consideration, generally in line with the consumption habits of consumers in a particular region. It can be argued that residents of these areas also need the ease of purchase provided by the presence of these mobile vendors in their consumption.

#### ***3.1.2. Autonomy and flexibility characteristics as vitality factors in the urban vendor economy***

Vendors have autonomy and flexibility in choosing the products they sell, and vendors can artificially specify the types of products they sell based on market demand and consumer preferences. Not only that, vendors can also flexibly adjust their selling products according to the needs of different markets or the corresponding seasons, festivals and hot topics. This market sensitivity and responsiveness is a source of dynamism for the economic development of urban vendors. In turn, this is a service attribute that allows urban vendors to survive. This is because when some vendors buy and sell goods flexibly according to market demand, they will also have exchanges with fellow vendors in a particular area and have dealings with residents and consumers, and they may even form a network of relationships that is conducive to the flexible selection and sale of goods. For example, in the post-epidemic period, networks of relationships such as mobile vendor stocking groups and community welfare WeChat groups have emerged, where people can communicate about what goods they should choose these days, how they should choose them, and be notified of the timing of trafficking. This also strengthens the interactive stickiness between mobile vendors and consumers, not only in terms of emotional value, but also by utilising social media platforms to shorten communication costs.

Vendors also have the autonomy of choice to enter and leave at any time as there is no contractual cycle. Urban vendors are free to choose when they want to sell, and if they perceive that the market for a particular product is not favourable, they can choose to suspend selling for a certain period of time or never sell again, without having to pay the relevant site compensation. This makes the operating costs of itinerant hawkers lower compared to those of shop-front businesses, and gives the hawker economy the vitality of a flexible living space.

Whether in terms of spatial mobility, autonomy or flexibility, these characteristics have their natural

rationale and have also become the energising factors of the hawker economy.

### ***3.1.3. Social benefits of urban vendors from the characteristics of their group type***

The lower operating costs, lower professional skill requirements and low business thresholds of itinerant vendors have enabled a large proportion of the relatively disadvantaged groups in the city to find an outlet for employment. Many of these groups are people who have been laid off from their jobs, people who are hard to employ (people with disabilities, scavengers and vagrants), and farmers who have moved to the cities to find opportunities because of poverty in the countryside (some of them are full-time vendors and others are part-time vendors). The post-pandemic era has also seen the emergence of many business owners who have been forced to set up stalls because of the economic blow they have suffered, private business owners who are themselves formal entrepreneurs, and students who have not yet graduated from school, among others.

From the characteristics of these relatively disadvantaged types of groups, it can be seen that the urban hawker economy is in fact peddling for the operators who are forced to set up stalls, without making them lose the economic source of their livelihood due to the lack of formal jobs, and providing many employment opportunities for the community while safeguarding the stable development of society.

## ***3.2. Analysing the dilemma of urban hawker governance from the perspective of diverse subjects***

### ***3.2.1. Contradiction between the spatial disorder of hawker operations and the requirement of orderliness in urban spatial control***

While stability has always been the goal of state rule and urban planning, the spatial mobility of urban vendors makes planning and governance more difficult for city managers. As traders in urban areas do not have fixed business addresses, it is difficult for managers to keep track of the business dynamics of the traders and to regulate this group. Over the years, the social acceptance of the hawker economy is low, and the corresponding policy also puts the hawkers in a state of being banned, and the city management chases after the hawkers to escape from the type of "cat chasing the mouse" farce is constantly staged. According to statistics, there were 2,626 cases of violent resistance to the law between 2005 and 2009. This reflects the plight of urban vendors in terms of their room for survival, and the conflicts between urban management and vendors have also increased social instability.

### ***3.2.2. The contradiction between the autonomy of vendors in entering and leaving the market and the difficulty of pursuing responsibility for urban control and management***

The natural attributes of urban vendors, who have the autonomy to choose the products they sell and the flexibility to enter and leave the market, pose a huge challenge to both urban sanitation and the supervision of market safety. When there are problems with product quality and food safety, it is also difficult to pursue responsibility due to the autonomy and flexibility of the vendors, which is not conducive to effective tracking and control by the relevant departments, and it also fails to safeguard the interests of purchasers in consumer rights.

### ***3.2.3. Urban vendors have a difficult consumer relationship with regional buyers***

Urban vendors in the location of the operation will be based on market demand to consider the high traffic flow, the products sold in line with the user's preferences, so there is a target serviceability and convenience for regional buyers. And this consumer relationship that facilitates the consumer is not only difficult to completely decide, but perhaps creates a cycle of consumption due to random purchasing behaviour. The chances of consumers making another hawker purchase (of the same type of goods or of different goods) after having bought a less-than-ideal hawker product once are still high. And a vendor selling poor-quality goods will not be deterred from continuing to do so after the first item sold.

Nowadays, there are fewer laws and regulations related to urban vendors, coupled with such a consumption cycle, vendors are prone to the existence of the "fluke mentality" of not being responsible for the aftermath, which will also bring difficulties to the governance of urban vendors.

## **4. Analysis of Existing Governance Methods**

### ***4.1. Existing spatial governance ideas***

In Foucault's thinking on governance techniques<sup>[1]</sup>, it is important that there is not only a progressive layer-by-layer relationship from problematisation to rationality to governance techniques to counter-

guidance, but also a closed loop. That is to say, from "counter-guidance" back to "problematism" and so on down the line. This closing of the loop is also a spiral, a virtuous cycle of identifying problems and improving them, and continuing to identify problems as they are improved.

Based on this governance technique, postmodernists argue that the logic of zoning or spatial placement can be used to set up spaces with specific rules and norms and use this specific space to discipline and modify behaviour.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### ***4.2. Advantages of space evacuation zones***

The relief zone manages itinerant hawkers by means of spotting, coding, registration and surveillance, and will specify the location of the hawkers' operations using relevant management techniques. Setting up diversion zones and providing fixed locations for itinerant hawkers to operate can reduce enforcement costs and safeguard the image and attractiveness of the city. It is also a dispositive spatial rationality, a socio-spatial governance programme that is supportive, inclusive and positive. Prof Huang Gengzhi then took Guangzhou as an example and investigated the 120 de-escalation zones applied by Guangzhou's urban vendors at the time.<sup>[3]</sup> These relief zones are divided into different types, all of which require control over the products sold by the vendors and the selling hours. It can be said that this is conceptually an exploration in the direction of regulating the corresponding behaviour by delimiting the space of reasonableness.

This governance application of spatial de-cluttering can also be implemented in tourist attractions. For example, in the Dujiangyan Ancient Town scenic spot in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, local vendors have been assigned a fixed business address on the ground with a yellow warning line, and are required to set up stalls only from 5 p.m. to 11.30 p.m. on weekdays, Monday to Friday (and all day on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays). The setting up of such an evacuation zone, the delineation of fixed business addresses and the stipulation of stall hours are conducive to the control of the scenic spots and the safety and order of the scenic spots.

#### ***4.3. Deficiencies in the set-up of space evacuation zones***

To analyse only the Dujiangyan Ancient Town Scenic Area in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, is obviously one-sided. Because the evacuation zone here is inherently within the scenic area, the behaviour of stall selling and the development of tourism in the scenic area play a positive and mutually fulfilling economic role. According to the survey, the vendors in the scenic spots are basically residents living in the neighbourhood, and some of them still have their own main businesses or are still operating shops of a commercial nature in the scenic spots. Therefore, the provision of such evacuation zones is also an icing on the cake for the lives of local residents.

Vendors are mobile, flexible and autonomous and emphasise low costs. However, the location of the stalls in the evacuation zone is restricted and the types of products sold have become homogeneous, and the rents of the evacuation zone have also made the operating costs of the stalls higher as well. It also loses the flexibility and autonomy of the vendors.

The spatial demarcation of the zone is used to provide fixed business sites for vendors, but the natural attributes of itinerant vendors are in conflict with this, and this contradiction is in the Foucaultian art of governance, the "counter-guidance" part of the process.

### **5. Pathways for the future development of the hawker Economy**

#### ***5.1. Ideas for future space governance***

Studies have shown that the effective use of urban idle space resources to set up street vendor evacuation areas, this spatial "divide and rule" is conducive to negotiating stakeholders and providing a "buffer zone" for social conflicts. But at the same time, this grooming zone is not perfect because it has negative effects. How should this contradiction between the order of public space and the use of informal public space be resolved? This is the exit to be further explored in future space governance.

In the face of such positive and negative effects, the inspiration for urban planners should be: to actively consider the natural attributes of informal subjects, to continuously improve and refine the spatial planning and governance of the idea of links, the formation of a benign closed-loop from the "anti-guidance" back to the "problematism" and then down to the next spiral.

If the rules of the formal economy are imposed on the informal economy, without taking into account the rules of operation of the informal economy, it may lead to more serious contradictions and conflicts.

### **5.2. "Good law and good governance": participating subjects need to be more diversified**

Nowadays, there are obvious large gaps in the laws and regulations governing the hawker economy. Reasonable regulation of natural attributes such as the disorderly nature of spatial mobility of urban vendors requires a more complete, scientific and systematic regulatory system. Accelerating the improvement of the relevant legislation can also better address the opportunities for the development of the hawker economy in the post epidemic era.

How, then, should "good governance" be understood? Yu Keping considers this to be a governance process and activity that maximises public interest<sup>[4]</sup>, meaning that the natural attributes of the object of governance should be respected and taken into account in order for this method of governance to work, and to achieve the objective of enacting relevant laws to regulate stall hawkers. By improving the relevant laws and regulations on urban vendors and increasing the strength of assistance and relief, not only will it be conducive to the orderly development of urban control, but it will also safeguard the use of vendors' own rights and broaden the channels for vendors to defend their rights in an "accessible" manner.

### **5.3. The street vendor economy is more "out of the loop" under mediated survival**

Mediated existence means that the radius of our behaviour, such as our daily lives, is built into the web woven by the media. The development of a vendor economy can use the everydayness of the media network to demonstrate presence to audiences. For example, now that watching videos has become a part of our daily lifestyle, vendors can use social media platforms to broadcast live from their stalls, filming and posting long and short videos introducing their stalls, products for sale, etc. or creating their own persona by recording relevant vlog to attract more people's attention to promote business development.

In the post-pandemic era, urban vendors can also promote themselves through multiple social media platforms. For example, the establishment of a welfare community and the facilitation of exchanges such as product selection and real-time communication with customers through "cloud vendors"; Vendors can also post relevant trafficking content on media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Jieyin, Shutterbugs, Weibo and other media platforms to attract more people to focus on and thus increase economic benefits.

## **6. Conclusions**

Behind every urban vendor is a family that needs to survive and longs for a happy life, and the happiness of this family is the driving force behind the development of a nation.

Urban vendors are also a profession that should be recognised, and the past image of "invaders" and the attitude of "total banning" should be gradually diluted and disappear in line with the needs of policy and economic development. To reconcile the interrelationships between order and informality in the use of modern public space and to address the dilemma of governance of hawker space, the insights brought by this paper are: the first is to be based on the closed-loop logic of Foucault's Governance Technique, which continually identifies problems to solve them, and continues to identify problems in one solution and in improvement, forming a virtuous cycle. The second is that more consideration should be given to the natural attributes of informal economic agents in the setting up of future relief zones. Truly thinking about them and for them will lead to a more reasonable, fair and functioning spatial governance programme. Thirdly, it is necessary to improve the laws and regulations relating to urban hawkers, so as to make the participating parties more diversified. This is also conducive to the orderly development of urban control and the protection of the rights of the vendors themselves. The fourth is to start from improving the social and economic benefits of street vendors, use the vendor's own initiative. In the opportunities brought by mediated survival, you can promote yourself through multiple social media platforms, so as to enhance the stability of business survival space and bring more vitality factors to the social economy. The opportunities presented by a mediated existence can be promoted through multiple social media platforms to enhance the viability of the business and bring more vitality to the socio-economy.

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