Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

HILARY HO

BSocSci (National University of Singapore, 2018)

“Looking beyond face value: Neoliberal practices in a cleft lip and palate NGO”

Department of Anthropology

Friday, September 11, 2020
3:00 P.M.
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Leslie Butt, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Daromir Rudnyckyj, Department of Anthropology, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Susan Erikson, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Graham Brown, School of Business, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

There has been a rise in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as part of a global health system that seeks to treat children with cleft lip and palate (CLP) in resource-poor countries. As a craniofacial abnormality, CLP affects a child’s ability to communicate and consume food, and the stigma associated with the condition leads to both social and physiological suffering. International NGOs use an apolitical humanitarian rhetoric to justify the need to provide this life-saving surgery. This thesis assesses CLP interventions by applying a critique of neoliberalism to explore the ways economic rationalities are extended to the domain of humanitarianism. By employing an ethnographic approach of “studying up,” this thesis critiques a North American NGO, referred to as Mission Smile. To reveal how neoliberal rationalities are embedded in different levels of the organization, this research draws on data from media analysis, participant observation, and interviews with medical volunteers and employees at Mission Smile. This thesis reveals how neoliberal language and rhetoric percolate throughout the organization. Neoliberal rationalities are not only embedded in the organization’s goal to provide surgery to “as many children as possible,” but also undergirds the distribution of humanitarian aid. Moreover, the surgery Mission Smile provides is described as an “investment in a child’s future,” and to enable them to become a contributing member of society. However, this study also shows how Mission Smile volunteers attempt to resist perpetuating neoliberal rationalities. Motivated by their affective desires to help those in need, volunteers develop a moral relationship with their recipients. Volunteers describe an emergence of communitas, a feeling of bubbling joy and shared humanity, which captures a relationship that lies outside the confines of market rationalities.