

# Recensioner

**Elton Chan.** *The Last Urban Frontier. Commodification of Public Space and the Right to the City in Insurgent Hong Kong.* Lund University, 2023. PhD Thesis.

This book is a doctoral dissertation, including a *Kappa* and four papers that are either already published or in the process of being published soon. In methodological terms, the author conducted a multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnography. This was combined with the analysis of 70 documents, 11 in-depth interviews, informal conversations with different stakeholders, and the review of 100 online posts and 30 hours of live stream video footage. As the title of the thesis indicates, this research encompasses both the commodification and the political use of public spaces in Hong Kong. The notion of ‘the last frontier’, in particular, intends to emphasise that capital expansion is not limited to the redevelopment and gentrification of inner cities, but can also incorporate the design and renovation of public spaces. Neoliberal urbanism has thus increasingly made public spaces subject to profit-making goals, usually due to the real estate developments surrounding them.

Chan also aims to highlight the singular position of Hong Kong as a geopolitical frontier based on its past colonial character ruled by the British empire first, and the increasing control that China is exerting over this city/Special Administrative Region since 1997. The recent protest movements in Hong Kong, especially in 2014 (Umbrella Movement) and 2019 (anti-ELAB/extradition reform), made the city and its pro-democracy camp an outstanding symbol of the resistance against China’s authoritarian rule. Eventually, the repression and crackdown of these movements was also followed by the annihilation of the rule of law, the freedoms of press and expression, and voting rights, among other measures enacted by the National Security Law in 2020.

A key sociological aspect of this dissertation is its aim of investigating the features of public spaces such as inclusivity, accessibility, and publicness, in relation to broader political and economic phenomena. Hence, everyday life uses of public spaces are linked to broader and global dynamics of neoliberal urbanism.

First, the portrait of the historical trajectory of this territory to become a global financial city is accurate. It pays attention to significant events such as its major destination for Chinese migrants after 1949, the origins of the public housing programme following the 1953 fire in the Shek Kip Mei squatting settlement, the rise of industrialisation coupled with satellite and New Towns in the 1960s and 1970s, and the

city's interface role once mainland China was open to the global market since the late 1970s. As a global city, both before and after its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong is characterised by a pioneering neoliberal approach in which the government widely favours a free-market economy with very low corporate tax rates and a meagre public spending in social welfare. This has led to extremely high social inequality as attested by the 0.473 Gini index in 2016 (p.30), which indicates ingrained wealth and income disparities.

In terms of the urban planning systems, "virtually all land in Hong Kong is leasehold and owned by the government" (p.33) so land developers and managers must apply for the renewal of the leases once they have expired. As a consequence, "revenue from land 'sales' and lease extensions constitutes one of the main sources of income and a large proportion of the fiscal revenue of the Hong Kong government" (p.33). These operations include land reclamations, redevelopment of derelict areas, and various mega-projects launched over the last decades. The planning process is essentially top-down despite certain participatory mechanisms recently implemented in a superficial manner. In this context, public spaces (apart from the forests and parks that cover almost 70 per cent of the territory) are scarce, increasingly privatised, and commercialised. Among them, Chan situates shopping malls due to their ambiguous status in Hong Kong once they have proliferated in the new towns, intimately linked to residential buildings and transport stations, or replacing large sections of the city core.

The author suggests a theory on public spaces according to the assumption that they are both sites "for social interaction and leisure" and for "political struggles and expression" (p.43). Beyond the features of inclusivity, accessibility, and publicness, which are usually noted by political philosophers, Chan interrogates the consequences of neoliberal urbanism in public spaces. These are mainly identified as privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation. However, while following research done in the notorious case of the High Line development in New York, Chan stresses that the commodification of public spaces entails distinct dimensions that the above mentioned. In particular, the traditional approach to public spaces invites sociologists to analyse who owns, who uses, who manages, and who pays for the creation, maintenance, and redevelopment of public spaces. With the full-fledge expansion of urban neoliberalism, public-private partnerships, privately-owned public spaces, and their development mainly according to the interests of capitalist firms in the same area, have been commonplace. According to the literature, the consequences of these policies are: The homogenisation of public spaces, the restriction of access to homeless and other undesirable social groups, the limitation of political activities, the promotion of commercial and consumerist uses, the increase of public and private surveillance, and defensive designs that prevent social gatherings (p.50-52). Following the paradigmatic case, the High Line *effect* in New York, Chan defines the commodification of public space as a process of shaping it driven by the promotion of real estate business and speculation in the surrounding area. Both the government and private actors become involved in the commodified social production of urban public spaces.

Chan also follows an urban political economy approach by which urbanisation

processes are seen as a ‘secondary circuit’ of capital circulation coupled with a ‘growth machine’ by which a coalition of state and private elites promote urban development at the expense of the general interest. Hence, commodification mainly means the domination of exchange value over the use value of land, so that capital accumulation is fostered. This rationale concludes with Lefebvre’s notions of ‘everyday life’ and ‘the right to the city’ to capture the emancipatory potential of the working-class when appropriating and participating in the production of urban spaces, giving meaning to them and enjoying its use, while resisting the alienation and marginalisation that its capitalist production entails. Given the difficulties to trade land and to yield monopoly rents from land uses such as public spaces, their exchange value “largely lies in its ability to attract investments and raise nearby land values and real estate prices” (p.111). Consequently, Chan contends that the commodification of public space consists of the process than ends up with the domination of exchange value over use values, especially in the surrounding area of the public spaces.

This study relies on various empirical case-studies: 1) The regeneration of three waterfront public spaces across the Kowloon territory of Hong Kong, with different forms of ownership, management, planning and design, but all resulting in commodification and “a similar decline in inclusivity, accessibility and publicness of the public space” (p.154); 2) The street occupations of the Umbrella Movement during the 2014 protests as an example of the opposite, i.e. participation, porosity, and prefigurative democratic organisation; 3) The anti-ELAB protests in shopping malls, following the guerrilla-style strategy that the pro-democracy movement took in 2019, were not originally planned, but, to some extent, these protests were tolerated in most cases and activists had a sense of relative safety inside the malls.

These examined cases show that the Chinese central government is interested in the full integration of Hong Kong in its model of one-party rule and state-led capitalist development, with its supposed benefits of political stability and national security at the core of the regime. This applies to both the commodification of public spaces where capitalist firms do not represent any challenge to the existing political regime, and where dissenting bottom-up politics in public spaces is largely banned. Chan thus argues that both processes reinforce each other. Nevertheless, the temporary appropriation of shopping malls by pro-democracy protesters and the tent camp occupying a central highway during the Umbrella Movement are examples of the cracks in the prevailing regime, which opened up possibilities for grassroots practices of the right to the city.

In sum, this research is a refreshing and critical approach to the understanding of urban public spaces, and especially their implications for social justice. The study could have included more contextual background and assessment of prior research in relation to other urban struggles in Hong Kong because, in my opinion, there are many other urban frontiers for the expansion of capital (transport, tourism, housing, water, etc.) equally concerning. A sociological approach to public spaces should also be sharper when it comes to distinguish their social representations from the actual social practices shaping them. Moreover, Chan does a good job by interpreting different

scales of the political and economic production of public spaces in Hong Kong, but all the inhabiting social groups and class contradictions at play can yet deserve further investigation. Finally, public spaces may be the targets of commodification but, in my reading, are even more powerful as tools for the gentrification of the surrounding areas, which is a key, but sometimes implicit, argument of Chan's thesis.

*Miguel A. Martínez*

Professor at the Institute for Housing and Urban Research  
Uppsala University