Book Reviews

Building Colonial Hong Kong Speculative Development and Segregation in the City. By Cecilia L. Chu. Routledge, 2022. 240 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 9781138344655.

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The images of contemporary "urban Hong Kong" are always fascinating - lines of rising skyscrapers with a modern undertone, applied with the complex and mythical courses of Feng Shui. Meanwhile, between the giant buildings, Tong Lau retains its colonial history and sentimentality in every nook and cranny. The notion of East meets West and modernity mixes with history to ignite spotlights in Hong Kong. The dense urban planning and development that rise above the centre of Hong Kong, of course, provide a visual scene that Hong Kong is all about growing and being a city. Hence, a constructed urban landscape accompanies the constructed multifaceted discourses that signifies the intricacy of urban Hong Kong. Understanding modern Hong Kong through the lens of capitalism, speculation and modernity, however, would also entail understanding the sometimes tangential tendencies of heritage or historical building conservation and revitalisation. In Hong Kong's cityscape, perpetual construction and the call for the preservation of colonial remnants are intertwined, providing a seemingly contradictory discourse that if the renewal of Hong Kong's urban landscape maintains the powerful economic statement of prosperity, then what does the preservation of "Old Hong Kong" matter? Cecilia L. Chu's book pinpoints the complexities of Hong Kong's urban space by providing new perspectives. She thus opens a new chapter of reading and understanding of colonial urban Hong Kong.

The book focuses on the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century urbanisation of Victoria, the city's first settlement, while also discussing Kowloon and the New Territories. Chu emphasises the complexities and challenges within the laissez-faire market. She explores issues such as class and racial segregation, reservation schemes for specific communities, and the evolving discourse around modernity, from regulations about sanitation to the standards of housing styles associated with social status. The civil construction in Hong Kong was never a top-down process, and she also introduces the idea of the speculative in Hong Kong urban development, where private capital infiltrated the process from bottom-up. Each chapter examines different obstacles and controversies, revealing how stakeholders enabled speculation that significantly influenced Hong Kong's urban landscape. With an emphasis on race and class issues in early colonial

period and their modern-day implications, this book explores the interplay of East-meets-West and modernity alongside the history of Hong Kong.

In Chapter 1, Chu outlines key issues associated with early colonial Hong Kong's urban development. Land and housing speculation and development were the major capital accumulation and revenue taxation sources (6), and those who settled in Hong Kong enjoyed the relatively high trust of the colonial government (14). Thus, the readers could formulate an overall picture of early colonial Hong Kong's economic, social and political conditions, whereby through housing speculation, some became propertied class. They would have challenged regulations that were not beneficial for their finances. Meanwhile, European residents, who often required special care and demanded segregation to safeguard their property values in this most prominent housing business, were actively engaged in the speculative discourse. As seen from the early colonial archives, Hong Kong presented a visible boundary between the Chinese and the Europeans residential areas, which would commonly be interpreted as racialisation. However, she argues against the notion of the "dual city" and the cause of segregation from the examples given in the housing speculation industry cannot simple be read as racism. Instead, the lines of different cultural and racial communities were quite porous. In the milieu of upward social mobility, the segregation scheme, originally conceived without unchallengeable racial bias, evolved into a mechanism for advancing social standing and fueling the drive to acquire property. Over time, this transformation culminated in a pathway towards embracing the identity of a Hong Kong local community, solidifying the bond between individuals and the city through property ownership and social status attainment.

Chapter 2 continues the discussion of the early colonial housing segregation scheme and its relation to the social and economic development of the time. Chu incorporates different discourses from the colonial government, European and Chinese residents, drawing on a multifaceted portrayal in the early colonial housing speculation market in Hong Kong. This section focuses on the housing construction programme in Taipingshan, the Mid-Levels, and the Peak area. The former was developed as a Chinese area, while the latter two were designated as European neighborhoods. Although it is generally accepted that the colonial government generally held the attitude of "small government, big market" (22), the inconsistencies (25) in its policies revealed a fluctuating commitment to land revenue and prioritizing European interests. Disease outbreaks catalysed the enforcement of segregation, ostensibly to maintain cleanliness and regulate racially defined communities, thus emphasising "cultural differences" (25). Moreover, some Chinese benefited from speculation which enhanced their wealth, and enabled some of them to establish

higher social status. Holding a much powerful social status with substantial volume of money, they gradually gained acceptance from the upper society (which at the time was associated with the notion of being Western). Conversely, Europeans, recognizing the rising influence of the Chinese community, called for the establishing of a "European reservation" to protect their community's homogeneity (45). This dynamic resulted in an urban landscape where the lower levels of Victoria City were linked to Chinese neighborhoods, while upper levels were reserved for Europeans. But Chu goes on to point out the intertwined nuances in this major statement. Even though Tong Lau is commonly known as Chinese house and Yeung Lau as a European house, the classification was based on a simplistic binary discourse. In fact, Tong Lau was constructed to accommodate multiple tenants, while Yeung Lau was designed single occupancy residential dwelling. Over time, due to the reproduction of cultural stereotypes, Tong Lau gradually became associated with being the Chinese tenement, Yeung Lau was believed to be for European. Although historical archives showed not all the Tong Lau were initially Chinese dwellings, evidence also was given by Chu that in order to gain more rental income, some European landlords converted their buildings into Tong Lau. The urban landscape of Hong Kong transcended a simple dual city dichotomy. Landlords' speculation added layers of complexity, intertwining the urban space development with the profit-seeking mindset that eroded fixed boundaries, creating a dynamic and ever-evolving urban space.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Chu outlines the housing and urban improvement linked to the concept of sanitation and the discourse of public health. She incorporates diverse perspectives from different stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on how these discussions were shaped by divergent racial and class backgrounds. After a vigorous phase of urban development, the nascent urbanity of Hong Kong showcased distinguishable racial, cultural or social power characteristics in different districts. Calls for improvement primarily targeted Chinese neighborhoods, particularly the Taipingshan district, which were often regarded as filthy and lacking in adequate infrastructure. While some Europeans urged for sanitation improvements, official statements advocating for European sanitary standards in Chinese homes were seen as disrespectful, as they disregarded "cultural differences" (58). Chu interprets this as a strategy that allowed Chinese property speculation to continue without proper regulation. However, the common characterisation of Chinese neighbourhoods as unhygienic weakened their reputation and perpetuated historical stigmas, particularly during outbreaks of infectious diseases. The worsened reputation was linked to the dynamics between Chinese landlords and their tenants. Driven by profit, landlords frequently exploited tenants, shifting the conflict from racial tensions between Chinese and Europeans to class struggles between

wealthy Chinese landlords and impoverished laborers. Chu notes that these tenants were not fundamentally opposed to hygiene reforms as long as they did not impact their finances (63). Additionally, Chu critiques the government's inadequate investment in essential infrastructure, such as the water supply network, which exacerbated sanitary conditions. Contrary to the common belief that increased demand for water was solely a response to disease outbreaks and that the lower-level Chinese residences were to blame for contamination, Chu claims that the insufficient and contaminated water supply issue was mainly the result of the government and property owners' greed for profit. This reflects the similar situation during the demolishing and reconstruction of Taipingshan district, in that different stakeholders sought profit rather than addressed the labourers' human rights. Yet, the colonial administration's ongoing emphasis on public health for the lower class enhanced its reputation in the free market. In later developments, housing schemes aimed at enhancing living conditions for the working class, revealing complex interactions between elites and labourers. The propertied class prioritised long-term residency over quick profits, nurturing a paternalistic bond with workers via improved housing conditions. The government played a minimal role, maintaining a hands-off approach to benefit from housing and tenancy income.

Chapter 5 shows how Hong Kong's zoning and urban development evolved into an urban improvement plan that reinforced racial segregation. This chapter continues the review of urban development discourses, highlighting economic concerns and the incorporation of an emerging "poor Whites" discourse. At the time, Europeans viewed themselves as "victimised" or "vulnerable" (130) and they strongly requested for reservation, where exclusively preserved for Europeans. In response to this, the colonial government encouraged new housing schemes to be set up at Kowloon and New Territories following the launch of Convention of 1898 for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory. Nevertheless, those housing schemes that were potentially suitable for the lower class did not yield immediate massive profits, ultimately falling short of their initial visions. This outcome was an inherent fate for developments of this nature in the profit-driven colonial Hong Kong. Meanwhile, wealthy Chinese wanted to promote housing schemes for "better-class Chinese". Examples at the time were Kai Tak Bund and On Lok Tsuen. The blueprints of the schemes were holistically considered, including sanitation, modern infrastructure and long-term capital support. Contradicting the lower-class Chinese's struggles introduced in previous chapters, those plans indicated that the appreciation of the urban improvement was not universalistic, which mainly targeting the elite.

The fervor for property speculation deepened the anger over inequality between the propertied and propertyless. Chapter 6

introduces the government policy of rent control to address housing inequality. Multiple stakeholders were involved in the creation of the Rents Ordinance in 1921. Despite its anti-laissez-faire market implications, this reflected the shifting dynamics among European, Chinese, and colonial government entities in the early 1920s. Specifically, the wealthy Chinese were aware of the ongoing labour protests and they gave up immediate profits in order to maintain amicable relations with lower class Chinese. Chu illustrates how social discourse altered class relations in the early 1920s. An upwardly mobile society smoothed class tensions, but also provided justification for inequality. A new identity discourse emerged, with individuals identifying as "Hong Kong citizens" (197) to address urban planning issues. This tendency indicates that the construction of Hong Kong's local identity can be traced back to early housing and urban planning initiatives, highlighting the intricate relationship between urban development and community identity.

Overall, the book provides a chronological exploration of divergent discourses weaving through early colonial Hong Kong, offering a comprehensive view of urban planning. Chu integrates interdisciplinary materials in a clear manner via economics, history, and architecture, hence offering an interdisciplinary approach lacking in previous studies. The book underscores the concept that the perpetual cycles of construction and reconstruction were pivotal in propelling Hong Kong's significant economic expansion and stood as a prominent feature of its prosperity during the colonial era. Nevertheless, Chu reveals the dynamic and multifaceted discourses incorporated in the urban development. Such discourses played a crucial role in civil construction, potentially moulding the layout of urban space. These discourses, though intangible, were embedded in the city's space, forming sentimental connections. The nostalgia for "old Hong Kong" was not at odds with urban development but rather a tribute to past endeavors.