The Last Urban Frontier

Commodification of Public Space and the Right to the City in Insurgent Hong Kong

Chan, Elton

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Commodification of Public Space
and the Right to the City in Insurgent Hong Kong

Elton Chan

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
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Abstract:

This thesis explores the production and transformation of public spaces in Hong Kong, a city that is steeped in neoliberal ideals and has seen substantial deterioration in terms of democratic rights and freedoms in recent years. As a result of the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, commodification of urban space has not only exacerbated, but also become more far-reaching and indiscriminate. While existing lines of enquiry such as privatisation and commercialisation remain highly important, it could be argued that they may no longer suffice to encapsulate the exploitative motives and practices of public space due to the growing importance of public space in urban development, as well as the increasingly complex and dynamic models of funding, ownership, and management. Rather than fixating on certain characteristics like public ownership and commercial use of public spaces, the thesis argues that a broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification will be key to not only unpacking its multi-scalar socio-spatial impacts, but also revealing its connection to other urban processes. By rethinking commodification processes in relation to public space, this thesis sets out to establish the linkages between capitalist productive forces and the development and production of public space.

Moreover, drawing upon recent protest movements in Hong Kong and the ways in which protesters appropriated and transformed different urban spaces into spaces of public discourse, the thesis argues that everyday contests over public space use and development are imperative to the city's future political struggles. It is for this reason that the thesis started by examining the commodification of everyday public spaces in Hong Kong, and while inspirations for an alternative public space can be drawn from the sites of political struggles and contestations, it is ultimately in the spaces of everyday life where the right to the city can be formulated and enacted. The empirical cases are centred on three different public spaces in Hong Kong, as well as the protest sites of both the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB protest movement. By adopting a combination of both on-site and digital ethnographic approaches, this study examines the social production of different public spaces in Hong Kong. The main sources of data for this study include participant observations, interviews, documents, live stream footages, and online forums. The cases are analysed and presented across the four papers included in this thesis.

Signature　Date 2023-03-20

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and the Right to the City in Insurgent Hong Kong

Elton Chan

LUND
UNIVERSITY

To our struggles.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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Elton Chan
March 2023
Malmö

List of Papers

Paper 1

Chan, E. (2020). Public space as commodity: social production of the Hong Kong waterfront. *Urban Design and Planning,* 173(4), 146–155.

Paper 2

Chan, E. (2023). Government-driven commodification of public space: The case of Kwun Tong Promenade, Hong Kong. *Cities*, 134, 104204.

Paper 3

Chan, E. (forthcoming). Openness and porosity: A socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square in Hong Kong. In P. Bengtsen & E. Hannerz (Eds.), *Urban Creativity: Essays on interventions in public space*. Årsta, Sweden: Dokument Press

Paper 4

Chan, E. (under review). Take back our city: Reclaiming shopping malls in Hong Kong

Abbreviations

CEPA	Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement
EKEO	Energising Kowloon East Office
ELAB	Extradition Law Amendment Bill
HKPSI	Hong Kong Public Space Initiative
LegCo	Legislative Council of Hong Kong
MTR	Mass Transit Railway
NSL	National Security Law
OCLP	Occupy Central with Love and Peace
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
URA	Urban Renewal Authority

1 Introduction

This thesis is titled *The Last Urban Frontier*, which describes both the object being studied, as well as the setting in which the research is conducted. Although often seen as a city-state, Hong Kong has never gained self-sovereignty in its short but eventful history. After being a British colony for over 150 years and being briefly occupied by the Japanese during WWII, Hong Kong has been under the rule of China since 1997. Even though Hong Kong is one of two Special Administrative Regions of China and is supposed to enjoy a high degree of autonomy, the city has been undergoing what some scholars refer to as 'mainlandisation' – a process of enforced integration and assimilation that is more akin to 'recolonisation' (Jones, 2015). More recently, in the aftermath of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests, China has markedly tightened its control over the city. The implementation of the all-encompassing National Security Law in 2020, which is a piece of legislation that aims to safeguard the national security of China by criminalising acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign powers or organisations, has engendered further debates and questions on internal colonialism (Kwong, 2020; Wu, 2020). In other words, Hong Kong can be seen as a colony in one form or another throughout its history, and its development is largely dependent on, and controlled by, its colonisers and overlords (Davis, 2020). It is against this historical and political context that I maintain it is neither inaccurate nor inappropriate to view Hong Kong as a colonial city today or to examine what is taking place there through a colonial lens.

There are two reasons behind the use of the term *frontier*, which generally refers to the territorial peripherals where 'actors from different worlds meet' without any 'clear rules of engagement' (Sassen, 2013, p. 67). In 1996, the late geographer Neil Smith published his book *The New Urban Frontier*, in which he described how processes of gentrification and uneven development have rendered inner cities as the new urban frontier of capital expansion. Inner cities undergoing gentrification like the Lower East Side in New York City, have in many ways become the new 'frontier of profitability' (Smith, 1996, p. 22). It has been over 25 years since Smith's book on gentrification and the revanchist city was published, but the processes he examined and their impacts on urban developments are not only still relevant in America today but are now also increasingly apparent in cities around the world. Moreover, as neoliberal ideals centred on a free-market economy and entrepreneurial freedom continue to dominate all aspects of life, the practices and

impacts of neoliberal urbanism are no longer limited to the (re)development of inner cities but have become more indiscriminate and widespread. In addition to inner-city neighbourhoods, market-driven and profit-making practices have also penetrated and influenced housing developments and infrastructure projects as well as cultural and civic spaces. The urban growth machine, which Molotch (1976) depicted more than 45 years ago, has become an all-encompassing profit-making monster that will not stop until every square inch of the city is dominated by exchange value. It is my intention in this thesis to examine how the production of public spaces is increasingly subordinated to economic logic by rethinking the process of commodification in relation to public space.

Public spaces, which are traditionally characterised by their accessibility and inclusivity, have long functioned as 'public arenas of citizen discourse and association' (Fraser, 1990, p. 56). However, due to the rolling back of public investment by governments since the mid-20th century, there has been a proliferation of private interests in public space developments. While privatisation has resulted in the decline of publicness in public space, the transformative effect of more recently created public spaces such as the High Line – the famous elevated linear park in New York City – has emphasised how well-designed and carefully curated public spaces are increasingly developed as leverage for profit by both public and private actors (Loughran, 2014). In other words, public spaces are increasingly being instrumentalised as a means to stimulate development and induce growth. They are, as I argue in this thesis, subjected to similar processes of commodification that have governed other facets of urban development. If the gentrifying inner cities were seen as the new urban frontier of the late 20th century, public spaces of today are representative of *the last urban frontier* amidst the total domination of economic logic and market-oriented practices over our cities.

The second meaning of *the last urban frontier* pertains to the context and milieu in which the research of this thesis was conducted. As Duara (2016, p. 211) suggests, Hong Kong is a global frontier in two ways – not only is it located on 'the geographical limits or peripheries' of China, it also characterises 'a liminal space, a zone of openness, indeterminacy, and absence of a relatively fixed identity'. As a former British colony and a major entrepot, Hong Kong has always been a cultural and economic frontier that lies at the intersection between the east and west. The emergence of Hong Kong as one of the world's major financial centres has further reinforced and enhanced Hong Kong's position as a city on the global frontier. According to Sassen (2013, p. 67), global cities such as Hong Kong have become strategic frontier zones for not only global corporate capital but also 'those who lack power, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities'. While Hong Kong largely maintained its status and competitiveness as a global city in the early years of Chinese rule, recent more aggressive attempts at 'subjecting Hong Kong to greater central control on the political, economic, and ideological fronts' (Fong, 2017, p. 528) have seen the former British colony ceding more influence and

control in its 'centre-periphery tug of war' with China (Fong et al., 2020). As Wu (2020, p. 62) argues, the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy in recent years is representative of the 'active penetration of Beijing's state power into the city frontier'. Recent protest movements in Hong Kong have demonstrated the contempt of Hong Kong people for Chinese influence and encroachment as well as their will and determination to fight for freedom and democracy. Even though the outbreak of COVID-19 and the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020 have temporarily stifled the civil and political resistance in Hong Kong, it is clear that China's attempt to recolonise Hong Kong is still ongoing and will continue to face opposition from the Hong Kong people. Oppression, as the saying goes, will always breed resistance. As China continues to expand its power and exerts its influence in the region and across the globe, it is increasingly important for people around the world to stand up to China's aggression. Despite the government's massive violent crackdown on dissent, the people of Hong Kong have demonstrated that the city is one of the last frontiers, geographically and politically, in the fight against China's authoritarian rule and neo-imperialism.

In many ways, it is this dual meaning of *the last urban frontier* that constitutes the point of departure for this research. This thesis is not only a study of the erosion and deterioration of public spaces in our urban centres under the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, it is more importantly also a story about Hong Kong, which is increasingly threatened by the authoritarian rule of China. In many ways, the neoliberalism of Hong Kong, which is largely dependent on its free-market economy and the rule of law (Peck, 2021), is increasingly tinted with China's brand of state capitalism that focuses on stability management and political security maintenance (Peck & Zhang, 2013). The frontier discourse, as Smith (1996, p. xvi) argues, 'serves to rationalise and legitimate a process of conquest' – a process that has intensified in Hong Kong since its handover in 1997. Many have even argued that the enactment of the National Security Law in 2020 has marked the end of Hong Kong as we know it. For a long time, Hong Kong was set apart from mainland China by not only its free-market economy but also the freedoms of press and expression that Hong Kongers used to enjoy. Until 2019, Hong Kong had been one of the few places in China where the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 could be commemorated in public. The candlelight vigil, which used to be held annually in the city centre, was banned in the past three years as part of the government's massive crackdown on dissent. Since the enactment of the National Security Law, more than 200 individuals have been arrested under the law, and over 50 different civil society organisations have ceased operation. Although Hong Kongers still enjoy relatively more freedoms than people in China, recent events are evidence of the further erosion of freedoms and democracy in Hong Kong, and that the city is increasingly indistinguishable from any other Chinese cities. In many ways, Skeldon's (1997) pessimistic projection of Hong Kong's trajectory from 'colonial city to global city to provincial city' has in fact emerged as a rather accurate depiction of reality.

More importantly, the demise of Hong Kong is also reflected in the deterioration of its public spaces. As people are being tear-gassed and pepper-sprayed on the streets, banned from participating in demonstrations and rallies, and arrested for displaying certain slogans or singing certain songs in public, it is crucial that issues pertaining to inclusivity, accessibility, and publicness of public spaces are discussed in relation to broader political and economic struggles. The study of public space commodification in Hong Kong represents an attempt to link public space production to different structural forces that are shaping the global political economy. The struggles between use values and exchange values in the commodification of public space have in many ways contributed to the intense contestations over public space use that have become an increasingly commonplace across the city. As Harvey (2012, p. 73) argues, the 'struggle to appropriate the public spaces and public goods in the city for a common purpose is an ongoing process'. This thesis suggests that the everyday struggles over public space use and development are central to 'the search for justice and the right to the city' (Soja, 2010, p. 45) and are vital to the future of Hong Kong and Hong Kongers. While Mitchell (1995, 2017) contends that it is often a struggle to keep public space public, I will illustrate in this thesis that this struggle extended to different everyday spaces in Hong Kong as formal public spaces became increasingly restricted. The ways in which the people of Hong Kong had utilised everyday spaces such as shopping malls as protest sites during times of police state and authoritarian rule demonstrate how publicness is claimed and not granted. This thesis therefore starts by examining the commodification of public spaces in Hong Kong, and while inspiration for an alternative public space can be drawn from the sites of political struggles and contestations, it is in the spaces of everyday life where the right to the city can ultimately be implemented and enacted.

This thesis aims to contribute to discussions on both public space and neoliberal urbanism. As Low (2000, p. 239) argues, 'understanding the social production and social construction of public space provides insights into how these meanings are encoded on and interpreted in the designed landscape'. The objective of this thesis is to answer her call to examine more closely 'the linkage between public space and the globalising political economy' (Low, 2000, p. 238) by developing a theoretical framework to investigate the different driving forces behind the production of public spaces. By broadening and rethinking existing conceptions of commodification, this thesis sets out to investigate how public space commodification is manifested socially and spatially in public space developments in Hong Kong. My empirical cases suggest that, in addition to affecting the publicness of the public space itself, commodification of public space is also linked to wider urban processes and has profound implications on spatial justice and the right to the city. In many ways, the broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification presented in this thesis is as much a plea to re-centre public space research in the ongoing debates of critical urban theory and neoliberal urbanism, as it is a demand for more critical attention to be paid to the increasingly exploitative practices of contemporary public

space production and development. Characterised by the domination of exchange value over use value in public space production, commodification of public space is not only indicative of the increasingly exploitative nature of public space practices, but it also represents a shift away from private ownership and commercial use of public space. As market-oriented practices in public space continue to proliferate and evolve beyond such issues, this thesis argues that the commodification angle may be better suited for future public space investigations.

In addition, by examining how protesters in Hong Kong utilise everyday spaces as protest sites, this thesis seeks to advance questions on publicness and the right to the city. The cases in Hong Kong are both interesting and pertinent to broader discussions of such issues because of the unique combination of commodification processes and authoritarian repressive control in public space. As I point out in Papers 3 and 4, unlike most protest sites, neither Umbrella Square nor the shopping malls were formal public spaces with any cultural or political significance prior to the protests. In the case of Umbrella Square, the protesters had to literally forge their way onto a highway and transform it from a 'dead space' into a functioning, diverse, and vibrant protest site. The improvisation and appropriation by the protesters had given the ever-changing Umbrella Square its openness and porosity, which, as Sennett (2018) argues, is key to maintaining the publicness of public realm. More importantly, Umbrella Square also provided important lessons to planners, architects, bureaucrats, and other public space practitioners on not only the design and planning but also the management of public spaces. The demonstrations and rallies inside shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protests, on the other hand, were interesting because they subverted the public-private dynamics of urban spaces. While privatised and commodified spaces like the shopping mall have, as widely documented, contributed to the decline in publicness of our cities, it was largely the private nature of shopping malls that had led to the protests taking place inside them. As public spaces became increasingly restricted in Hong Kong, the developers and managements of shopping malls became a buffer between the protesters and the police. Despite its temporary nature, the protection afforded the protesters, as well as their supporters, their spaces of appearance when rallies and demonstrations were banned in other public spaces. All in all, both cases in Hong Kong illustrate how struggles over everyday spaces are not only crucial to the formation of publics but are also imperative to the people's claims to the right to the city.

Aims and research questions

This thesis has four main objectives. Firstly, it aims to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework with which to understand commodification of public space. By establishing the linkages between the urban political economy and the production of public space, I set out to argue that a broadened conceptualisation of

public space commodification is crucial to understanding both the structural processes that are driving public space developments and how they are linked to other urban processes. While I begin to develop how commodification processes have impacted different public space developments in Papers 1 and 2, it is in Chapter 7 where I will formalise my conceptualisation of public space commodification. The second aim of this thesis is to outline the multi-scalar, socio-spatial implications of public space commodification, which is mainly realised through my empirical work in Papers 1 and 2. In addition to examining how commodification is encoded in public space developments and practices, I maintain it is also important to study the implications of public space commodification beyond the public space itself in a multi-scalar manner. Thirdly, the thesis aims to understand the impact of the increasingly authoritarian nature of urban governance in Hong Kong on public space use and production. Drawing upon the findings from all my cases, I will also begin to substantiate the link between commodification processes and repressive state control in relation to public space and how it has affected public space use and production in Hong Kong. Finally, by examining recent protest sites in Hong Kong, this thesis aims to explore how protesters in Hong Kong transformed everyday spaces into political spaces of public discourse where the right to the city can be implemented and enacted. The socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square in Paper 3 outlines how publicness can be achieved through openness and porosity, while the protests in shopping malls examined in Paper 4 are further evidence of how publicness can be claimed and engendered even in a privatised and commodified space.

In short, this thesis aims to answer the following set of research questions:

- What and who is driving public space developments?

- How is public space commodification manifested in Hong Kong? What are the socio-spatial implications?

- What are the impacts of authoritarian rule on public space use and public space commodification in Hong Kong?

- How did protesters in Hong Kong create, claim, and appropriate urban (public) spaces for their struggles over the right to the city?

Structure of the thesis

Since this thesis is conceived as a compilation, it is divided into two main parts – the *kappa* (comprehensive summary) and a collection of papers. The structure of the *kappa* in this thesis is as follows: I will first set the scene for my research by outlining the social, economic, and political context of Hong Kong in Chapter 2. In addition to providing an overview of the historical development of Hong Kong, I

will also chart its emergence as a global city, present its urban planning and development model, and explore how recent events have impacted the development and use of public space in Hong Kong. Chapter 3 describes the object of study. It concerns the idea and importance of public space. Mostly relying on previous research, I will explore how publicness is conceived spatially and how it gives meaning to public space. I will also outline the different processes that have influenced recent public space developments and how they have informed my conceptualisation of public space commodification. Finally, I will explain why and how public space struggles are crucial to the implementation of the right to the city. In Chapter 4, I will establish the theoretical background against which my project has been conceived. Drawing on the works of Lefebvre and his followers, I will discuss how the debates on critical urban theory and Marxist urbanism have informed my epistemological stance on the urban question. More specifically, I will argue in this chapter why a political economy perspective is pertinent to public space research. I will also examine how the production of everyday spaces can lead to the enactment of the right to the city, which is central to any contribution to critical urban theory and Marxist urbanism. Chapter 5 presents the methods and methodological approaches adopted in the empirical research. In addition to discussing the research process and the methodological thinking that has informed it, I will also outline the manner in which the data has been collected and analysed before discussing the ethical considerations. Chapter 6 provides an overview and summary of the four papers. Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter of this *kappa*. In this chapter, I will synthesise and discuss the overall findings of this thesis by outlining my conceptualisation of commodification in relation to public space developments and practices, as well as exploring the socio-spatial implications of public space commodification and its link to spatial injustice. I will also discuss how the authoritarian turn of urban governance in Hong Kong has affected public space use and production before I suggest potential future topics of study.

The second part of this thesis consists of four papers. **Paper 1** provides an overview of public space developments in Hong Kong by outlining the commodification process in three different waterfront public spaces. It also illustrates the variegated nature of public space commodification and how commodification relates to other processes at work such as privatisation and commercialisation. **Paper 2** is an in-depth study of the Kwun Tong Promenade in Hong Kong that demonstrates how government-driven commodification of public space has exacerbated spatial injustice and uneven development in the neighbourhood, and how members of the local community are disadvantaged as a result. **Paper 3** is a socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square, the main protest site of the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Based on Sennett's conception of openness and porosity, I contend that Umbrella Square is an ideal typical public space that not only informs future public space developments but also stimulates the insurgent use of existing urban spaces. **Paper 4** contemplates how privatised and commodified everyday spaces can become critical sites of political struggles in Hong Kong by examining the ways in

which protesters utilised and appropriated shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protests. Looking at events that took place in three different shopping malls, I argue that the protesters' appropriation of shopping malls not only represented an important first step of reclaiming the right to the city but also exemplified how such struggle and resistance can be extended beyond traditional protest sites and into different everyday spaces.

2 Hong Kong:
Where East and West Clash

Figure 1.
View of Hong Kong from Victoria Peak

This thesis is as much about public space commodification as it is about Hong Kong (Figure 1). In order to understand the transformation of public spaces taking place in Hong Kong, it is crucial to appreciate the different forces and processes that have shaped the development of this frontier city between China and the West. In this chapter, I therefore set out to present the social, economic, and political contexts in which my empirical work on public spaces in Hong Kong was conducted. Despite Hong Kong's relatively short history as a former British colony and a Special Administrative Region of China, a lot has happened since its inception as a city in the mid-19th century, and it has undergone drastic transformations that entail complexities beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis. Instead of tracing and covering every aspect of Hong Kong's development, this chapter will mostly focus on issues that are pertinent to my research on public space. I will start by providing a short overview of the historical advancement of Hong Kong and highlight certain significant events that have shaped its urban development. I will then examine how

Hong Kong's connection to both China and the West has played a crucial role in its emergence as a global city and why its future largely hinges upon regional and international geopolitics. Finally, I will conclude by looking at the planning process and development model of Hong Kong and how recent events have impacted the development and use of public space.

From fishing village to international financial centre

Hong Kong, officially known as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), is one of the special administrative regions of the People's Republic of China. Despite being part of China, Hong Kong – as a special administrative region – is supposed to have a high degree of autonomy including its own economic and governance system. Located by the Pearl River Delta on the south-eastern coast of China, Hong Kong has a population of around 7.5 million and occupies just over 1,100km^2 of land.[1] The territory is made up of Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula, the New Territories, and over 200 outlying islands that spread across the subtropical archipelago in the South China Sea (Figure 2). Due to the rugged and hilly terrain, the majority of its population is concentrated in the built-up urban areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, as well as in the new town developments in the New Territories. In fact, as Ng (2020) notes, only 270 km^2 (about 24%) of all land in Hong Kong is currently developed while almost 50% of the land is designated as country parks, conservation areas, and coastal protection zones. As a result of the shortage of land available for development and the immense population growth that has taken place for a large part of the 20th century, Hong Kong has developed into one of the world's most densely populated cities with an urban form that is distinctly compact and vertical. The urban development of Hong Kong, as I will illustrate, is in many ways intrinsically linked to the city's unique geographical location as well as its historical development from a fishing village to a global city.

Prior to its cession to the British Empire, Hong Kong was a sparsely populated fishing village and salt production site that had been loosely under the control of Imperial China. After losing the First Opium War in 1842, the Qing dynasty of China surrendered and ceded Hong Kong Island to the British Empire as part of the Treaty of Nanking. This marked the establishment of Hong Kong as a Crown Colony of the British Empire. Its territory was later expanded when the Kowloon Peninsula was ceded in perpetuity to the British Empire in the aftermath of the Second Opium War between the Qing dynasty and British-French forces in 1860. By the end of the Second Opium War, Hong Kong became a major entrepot between

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1 This population density corresponds to if over 2/3 of the Swedish population lived in an area slightly smaller than the island of Öland, or if the population of Washington State, USA, lived in 0.6% of the state land area.

the East and the West. Not only was the colony an important trading post for British companies, it also served as a transit point for Chinese emigrants from South China to Southeast Asia. It was also in these early years of British colonial rule that critical infrastructure and public services such as gas, electricity, public transport, and hospitals were first set up in the city. The establishment of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) in 1865 was particularly significant as it laid the foundations for Hong Kong to become the international financial centre it is today (Chiu & Lui, 2009). In 1898, the colony was further expanded when the British obtained a 99-year lease for the New Territories – including the over 200 outlying islands, formalising the territory of the Hong Kong we know today.

Figure 2
Map of Hong Kong

Towards the end of the 19th century, the population of Hong Kong continued to grow steadily despite the outbreak of the bubonic plague pandemic in 1894 and political turmoil in China which eventually led to the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912. As a result of the population growth and booming economic activities, more infrastructural facilities were set up as the urban area of Hong Kong continued to expand. The early years of the 20th century saw the establishment of the first

university in Hong Kong and the construction of a railway line between Kowloon and the Canton region of mainland China. While Hong Kong remained largely unaffected during WWI, the Chinese Civil War in the 1920s and 30s greatly impacted the economy of Hong Kong. More importantly, the crisis in mainland China left the region vulnerable to invasion by the Japanese. The Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937 and further threatened the development of Hong Kong. By 1939, Japanese forces had already reached Guangzhou – about 120km north of Hong Kong. On 8 December 1941, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong on the same day they attacked Pearl Harbour.[2] The Battle of Hong Kong lasted just over two weeks, and the Allied forces surrendered on 25 December 1941, which marked the beginning of the Imperial Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong. Under Japanese occupation, most economic activities were halted as the Japanese opted for strict military rule over the economy-based development model used by the British colonial government. As a result, residents of Hong Kong lived in constant fear, hardships such as impoverishment and homelessness became commonplace, and the population dwindled from over 1.6 million in 1941 to an estimated figure of 600,000 in 1945 (Ho, 2018).

After three years and eight months, the Japanese ended its occupation of Hong Kong when they surrendered on 15 August 1945, and British control over the territory was officially restored on 30 August 1945. The post-war years saw a substantial population boom in Hong Kong as a result of the influx of Chinese immigrants fleeing the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent establishment of the Communist regime in mainland China. According to Ho (2018), the population of Hong Kong reached over 2.3 million by 1950, and the growth rate even exceeded the pre-war period. Although the influx of Chinese immigrants provided an important workforce to the growing industries, the population growth put immense pressure on various social services and resources, which led to widespread poverty in Hong Kong (Faure, 1997). The 1950s and 60s were, in many ways, characterised by social tensions and political instability.[3] Moreover, the growth in population also resulted in overcrowding in many urban areas and heightened the need for better urban planning and development. Due to the lack of housing and high rents, many Chinese immigrants had to settle in one of the squatter areas across the city. After a fire broke out in the Shek Kip Mei squatter area that left 500,000 people homeless overnight in 1953, the colonial government built a resettlement estate to house the homeless victims. Despite being implemented as a temporary measure out of necessity, the resettlement estate marked the beginning of an extensive public housing programme

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[2] 8 December 1941 Hong Kong Time; 7 December 1941 Hawaii Time.

[3] The 1950s and 60s also saw two of the deadliest riots in the history of Hong Kong: the Double Tenth riots in 1956 and the 1967 riots. Amidst poor living conditions and widespread poverty, Hong Kong was also blighted by endemic corruption, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974.

that has greatly shaped the urban development of Hong Kong up to the present day. Today, more than 300 public housing estates operate under various subsidised rental or sale schemes and house almost half of the population in Hong Kong (GovHK, 2016; HKHA, 2018).

In addition to the vast public housing programme, the colonial government also relied on the planning and development of satellite cities and new towns to alleviate the pressure of intense population growth. The first satellite city, Kwun Tong, was planned and constructed as an industrial town on the outskirts of the established urban area of Kowloon in the mid-1950s (Ho et al., 2021). The availability of land, as well as a sizable workforce residing in the adjacent hinterland, resulted in rapid industrial growth in Kwun Tong that continued well beyond the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, as a result of land sales and investments from private industrialists, the Kwun Tong industrial development not only paid for itself but also provided a sizable profit for the government (Choi, 1978). As a result of the success in Kwun Tong, nine other new towns have been strategically developed on the fringes of the city since the 1970s. By relocating small-scale industries from the overcrowded city centre to these new towns, the government both decentralised the population and economic activities and provided a much-needed workforce for the booming manufacturing industries and jobs for the residents. Moreover, these new towns were largely designed to be self-contained as all the necessary amenities and community facilities such as schools, clinics, and recreational facilities were provided in close proximity to the housing estates. The integrated planning of new town developments in Hong Kong proved to be so successful in absorbing and managing the intense post-war population growth that it became a 'model for Chinese cities' when China opened its doors to foreign investments and businesses for the first time under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Ho, 2018, p. 4).

The implementation of the open-door policy in China in 1978 marked a significant moment in the development of Hong Kong as the colony greatly benefited from China's increasing engagement and involvement in international trade and finance. The economic stature of Hong Kong as an entrepot continued to grow as trade with Western developed countries as well as other Asian countries soared. Since the 1970s, Hong Kong has emerged as 'a significant node in the regional and global economy' (Skeldon, 1997, p. 265) by becoming a crucial intermediary between China and the rest of the world. While manufacturers and industries migrated northwards to take advantage of China's vast and cheap labour, Hong Kong's strategic location has attracted some of the world's leading global firms to set up branches and regional headquarters in the city, turning Hong Kong into 'a truly global command centre' (Forrest et al., 2004, p. 210). By the end of the 20th century, Hong Kong had transitioned from a manufacturing port to an international financial centre based on the service industry. However, talks on the potential handover of Hong Kong between the British and Chinese governments began in the 1980s, which induced widespread panic in the city and resulted in mass emigration of Hong

Kongers to countries such as Australia, Canada, United States, and the United Kingdom. In the years leading up to the handover in 1997, the Colonial government rolled out a number of large-scale development projects in the hope of regaining the confidence of Hong Kongers as well as retaining some professionals and skilled labours (Ho, 2018). The planning and construction of the new airport on Lantau Island was particularly significant as it consolidated Hong Kong's status as a major hub in international trade and finance.

After more than 150 years of British rule, Hong Kong was transferred back to China on 1 July 1997. As one of two Special Administrative Regions of China, Hong Kong is bound by its mini constitution – the Basic Law – which enshrines the 'important concepts of "One Country, Two Systems", "Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong people", and a high degree of autonomy' for a period of 50 years (GovHK, 2014). Such an arrangement, as stipulated in the *Sino-British Joint Declaration*, should give Hong Kong the political and economic autonomy that is crucial to its status as a major global financial centre. Despite being hit hard by the SARS[4] epidemic of 2003 and the two financial crises in 1997 and 2008, Hong Kong managed to retain its status as an international financial centre and a global city for much of the 2000s, in large part as a result of its increased trade with China. However, as China continues to open its market to global investors and tighten its grips on the former colony, the long-term future and politico-economic development of the city have become increasingly uncertain. On the one hand, Hong Kong's position as the exchange node between the East and the West is becoming increasingly obsolete as other Chinese cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen strive to replace Hong Kong as China's window to the world economy. On the other hand, the Chinese government has, through its regional policies, aggressively sought to integrate Hong Kong socially, economically, and politically with the rest of mainland China. Such encroachment on the territory's autonomy has not only placed Hong Kong into political and economic turmoil but, as I will discuss later, has also threatened Hong Kong's longstanding status as one of the world's leading global cities.

Hong Kong as a global city

According to Sassen (1996, p. 208), 'global cities are centres for the servicing and financing of international trade, investment and headquarter operations'. They are not delimited units but a network of locations that play an important role in

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[4] SARS (or SARS-CoV-1), not to be confused with SAR (Special Administrative Region), is shorthand for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus. The SARS epidemic originated in mainland China and struck Hong Kong in the spring of 2003. According to WHO, Hong Kong recorded 1,755 cases and 299 deaths.

sustaining the globalisation of capital and finance (Sassen, 2016). Moreover, global cities are 'not only nodal points for the coordination of processes' (Sassen, 2001, p. 5), they are often also sites for the production of specialised services and financial innovations. In spite of its limited natural resources, difficult terrain, and lack of a territorial hinterland, in the latter part of the 20th century Hong Kong emerged as one of the most important global financial centres. While perhaps not always categorised in the same tier as London, New York, and Tokyo, Hong Kong has featured regularly in the top 10 of various global city rankings and has branded itself as 'Asia's World City' since 2001 (Chiu & Lui, 2009). As a result of Hong Kong's historical and geographical ties to both China and the West (Chiu & Lui, 2009; Meyer, 2000; Sassen, 2001), the city has served as 'a strategic exchange node for firms from China to the rest of the world and from the rest of the world to China, as well as among all the overseas Chinese communities' (Sassen, 2001, p. 174). As Meyer (2002) contends, Hong Kong has maintained high levels of trade and exchange with both Western developed countries as well as other countries in Asia since the 1970s. Its importance on the global circuit of capital is also highlighted by the number of prominent commercial and investment banks as well as other financial services firms that have chosen Hong Kong as their regional headquarters (Chiu & Lui, 2009; Meyer, 2002, 2015), making the city 'one of the world's largest agglomerations of sophisticated trade, financial and corporate management intermediaries and their producer services' (Meyer, 2000, p. 219).

In addition to its strategic geographical location, infrastructural advancement, and unique relationship with China, Hong Kong's success as a global city also relies heavily on its free-market economy (Chiu & Lui, 2009; Friedman & Friedman, 1980). In contrast to the 'socialist' economy of mainland China, Hong Kong's economy has always been unapologetically capitalistic and neoliberal, and is often described as the freest market economy of the world (Peck, 2021). In fact, Hong Kong was considered by Milton Friedman as a 'modern exemplar of free markets and limited government' (Friedman & Friedman, 1980, p. 34). However, while Friedman and his followers often view Hong Kong as a utopia and laboratory for their neoliberal project (Peck, 2021), others such as Chiu and Lui (2009, p. 46) argue that 'it is more accurate to describe the policy of the colonial state as "selective intervention" rather than wholesale "non-intervention"'. According to Chiu and Lui (2009), instead of adopting a completely laissez-faire approach in all aspects of the economy, the Hong Kong government tends to be rather proactive in certain aspects of policy making, especially in times of uncertainties, transitions, and crises. During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, for instance, the Hong Kong government actively intervened by buying blue chip stocks in an attempt to fend off speculators and stabilise the market. Other major interventions by the government include the failed '85,000 flats policy', which was a pledge by the government to provide 85,000 new housing units every year. Nonetheless, in terms of financial investment and economic policy interventions, the Hong Kong government's involvement has remained relatively limited, and many global financial firms are drawn to Hong

Kong by its free-market economy and low tax rates. As the Hong Kong government maintains, 'open and flexible markets, a simple and low tax regime, an efficient public sector and a favourable business environment with a level playing field' are central to the city's 'much-valued institutional strengths and core competitiveness' (GovHK, 2020a).

While its free-market economy may have given Hong Kong its competitive edge in the globalising circuit of capital, it has also resulted in high levels of income and wealth inequality (Piketty & Yang, 2021). The transition from manufacturing industries to finance and service sectors, in particular, has driven inequality in Hong Kong since the 1980s. According to a recent Oxfam report, the Gini coefficient based on post-tax post-social welfare transfer of Hong Kong in 2016 was 0.473, which was the highest among 'all developed countries and regions' (Oxfam, 2018, p. 8). In addition, the Hong Kong government also spends the least on social welfare in comparison to other OECD[5] countries such as Japan, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. As a result, even though the Hong Kong government had not run annual fiscal deficits for 15 consecutive years prior to 2019–2020 and has an expected fiscal reserve of HK$937 billion by 2025, the wealth disparity in Hong Kong has continued to worsen (Oxfam, 2018, 2022). According to the latest *Hong Kong Poverty Report* by Oxfam, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the inequality in Hong Kong, where now the richest 10% of households make over 47 times more than the poorest 10% (Oxfam, 2022). Although it is clear that the laissez-faire approach of the Hong Kong government has contributed significantly to Hong Kong's wealth and income inequality, it could be argued that such polarisation is also symptomatic of the globalising economy as well as the inherent contradictory and contested nature of global cities. As Sassen (1996, p. 206) argues, global cities are sites for not only 'the overvalorsiation of corporate capital' but also 'the devalorisation of disadvantaged economic actors, both firms and workers'.

Furthermore, Skeldon (1997) also suggests that class polarisation tends to emerge in global cities as a result of the double flow of immigrants. Low-skilled, low-income migrant workers are often needed to accompany and serve the transnational flow of financial and corporate elites in global cities. In the case of Hong Kong, while Chinese immigrants provided the main labour force to sustain the post-war industrialisation, migrant workers from South Asia often filled necessary voids as Hong Kong suffered occasional serious labour shortages in the manufacturing industry. Although the booming manufacturing industry provided some South Asian traders and businessmen economic opportunities, most South Asian ethnic minorities in Hong Kong remain predominantly working class and have increasingly faced racial discrimination and social exclusion (Law & Lee, 2013). In the past decades, there has also been an increasing number of foreign domestic

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[5] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental organisation with 38 members, most of which are regarded as developed countries.

helpers – usually female domestic workers from the Philippines, who reside with their employers – as Hong Kong transitioned towards a service-based economy. As Skeldon (1997, p. 266) notes, increasing demand for these domestic workers is indicative of the 'growing affluence of the Hong Kong population and the increasing incorporation of local women into the labour force in higher-level, higher paying occupations'. Furthermore, since China opened its economy and strengthened its ties with Africa, Hong Kong has also served as a major trading post for African traders seeking Chinese manufactured goods to bring back to Africa (Bertoncelo & Bredeloup, 2007; Mathews, 2011). It could therefore be argued that global cities such as Hong Kong are not only sites for the transnational flow of financial and corporate elites and capital, but are often also centres of 'low-end globalisation' (Mathews, 2011). As highlighted by Mathews in his research on Chungking Mansions, globalisation in Hong Kong entails both high-end financial transactions with other global financial centres like London and New York and small-scale trading and exchange with developing regions such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

According to Sassen (2002, p. 13), global cities such as Hong Kong tend to 'become far more closely tied to the global economy than the regional or national economies'. Moreover, despite its increasing trade and deepening economic ties with China, Hong Kong has become socially, culturally, and politically disconnected from the rest of mainland China as a result of its colonial past. As such, the Chinese government has utilised a number of strategies to manage the eventual political integration of Hong Kong – as well as other breakaway parts – with mainland China. The creation and establishment of the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) and Special Economic Zones (SEZs)[6] are, for instance, crucial to the trans-border integration in the Pearl River Delta region, where local governance and sovereignty are highly variegated and complex (Ong, 2004). According to Ong (2004, p. 75), the utilisation of zoning technologies that 'formalise economic and political action at specific scales within and across national borders' is particularly integral to China's strategy of reterritorializing South China and its desire to create a mega metropolitan region in the Pearl River Delta region. To put it simply, the SAR mechanism, in her view, is merely a 'detour […] toward eventual integration' (Ong, 2004, p. 86). In addition, the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) – the first free trade agreement between mainland China and

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[6] Hong Kong and Macau, both former colonies, are the two Special Administrative Regions of China. They possess the highest level of autonomy among the cities and regions of China. Special Economic Zones, on the other hand, are designations for mainland Chinese cities and regions with more free-market economic policies to attract foreign investments. The first four Special Economic Zones – Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen – were created in 1980.

Hong Kong – and the Individual Visit Scheme[7], both as a response to the SARS epidemic in 2003, has not only strengthened their economic ties but also increased social and cultural interactions between Hong Kongers and mainlanders (Chiu & Lui, 2009).

Even though the economy of Hong Kong may have benefitted from closer ties with China, the increased cross-border exchange has also heightened social tensions in Hong Kong. The growing Chinese influence on Hong Kong's local affairs and the increasing number of mainland visitors have created a variety of social problems and led to the deterioration of everyday life for average Hong Kongers (Wong et al., 2016). The protests against Moral and National Education in 2012, the Umbrella Movement in 2014, as well as Anti-ELAB protests started in 2019 all exemplify Hong Kongers' increasing contempt towards the encroachment and interference from mainland China in various aspects of everyday life including education, the electoral system, and legal and judicial independence. Amidst rising social tensions and growing anti-China sentiments, the introduction and enactment of the National Security Law in 2020 is further proof of China's desire to rein in Hong Kong at any cost. The National Security Law, which is widely viewed as a threat to the judicial independence and the rule of law in Hong Kong, has resulted in an exodus of private and corporate investors as many global firms are also considering moving their regional headquarters from Hong Kong to other cities such as Singapore. As such, Hong Kong's status as a global city and a centre for both 'high-end' and 'low-end' globalisation is largely dependent on regional and international geopolitics, and, in particular, China's attitude towards its breakaway parts and engagement with the rest of the world (Chiu & Lui, 2009; Skeldon, 1997). For many years, it was assumed that Hong Kong's autonomy is largely dependent on its economy, wealth, and status as China's most important financial hub (Rezvani, 2014). However, recent events tend to suggest that the Chinese government does not tolerate any political contention and dissent in the interest of preserving the city's economy and global-city status. As Chiu and Lui (2009, p. 155) argue, 'the future of Hong Kong as a global city should not be understood simply in economic terms', but its development will be largely determined by politics. In fact, as we will discuss, the global and regional geopolitics have already played an important role in shaping the urban development and built environment of Hong Kong.

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[7] The Individual Visit Scheme, which started in July 2003, permits people from mainland China to visit Hong Kong and Macau individually. Previously, mainlanders could only visit for business or as part of a tour group.

Urban planning and development

Land management and urban planning

As discussed earlier, instead of being wholly non-interventionist, the Hong Kong government's policy is better characterised as 'selective intervention' (Chiu & Lui, 2009). One aspect where the Hong Kong government has always played an active and prominent role is in urban planning and development. Since the early years of the colonial government, Hong Kong has operated on a leasehold land management system, and virtually all land in Hong Kong is leasehold and owned by the government. Instead of buying and owning any plot of land, private developers and landowners in Hong Kong are granted leases for a limited time and the developmental right over that period. The leasehold land management system of Hong Kong has remained largely unchanged since its inception in the 19th century and carried over after the handover in 1997. As Hong Kong's largest landowner, the government is responsible for the 'management, use and development' as well as the 'lease and grant' to land users (Choi, 2016). As a result, the government can greatly influence the real estate market by controlling not only the availability of land for development but also where and when such land becomes available. More importantly, 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 (La Grange & Pretorius, 2016). As such, it could be argued that land management is not only vital to the economic and financial stability of Hong Kong – it is also often undertaken by the government as a profit-making mechanism.

In addition to being its largest landowner, the Hong Kong government is also influential in shaping the urban development of Hong Kong through its role in urban planning. The implementation of the Town Planning Ordinance in 1939 laid the foundation for a systematic urban planning mechanism that is still being used in Hong Kong today (Ho, 2018). The two main organisations that are responsible for urban planning in Hong Kong are the Town Planning Board, which mostly comprises non-official members appointed by the Chief Executive, and the Planning Department of the Hong Kong government. As stipulated by the Town Planning Ordinance, the Town Planning Board is authorised to prepare and draft statutory plans such as the Outline Zoning Plans, which indicate the land use zones, major road systems, and development restrictions of individual planning areas. The Town Planning Board is also responsible for considering planning applications and amendments to such plans. The Planning Department, on the other hand, 'is responsible for formulating, monitoring and reviewing land use at the territorial and district/local level' as well as carrying out topical studies and undertaking 'actions against unauthorised land uses' (GovHK, 2020b). As a result of its influence on both urban planning bodies, the Hong Kong government plays a dominant and authoritative role in the urban development of Hong Kong. Despite the

government's attempt to reform the town planning process through various amendments to the Town Planning Ordinance, Ng (2020, p. 1458) suggests that urban planning and development in Hong Kong is still by and large a 'top-down' exercise in which 'there is very little the average citizen can do' to influence the outcome.

Urban redevelopment and state-led gentrification

While the Government mostly focused on developing new towns and public housing estates to accommodate the post-war population and industrial boom in the 1960s and 70s, its priorities shifted towards redeveloping the aging inner city in the 1990s (Ho, 2018). Due to the poor and crowded living conditions, old and deteriorating building stock, as well as the increasing pressure to densify urban areas, much of the inner city of Hong Kong was in dire need of improvement through some form of renewal, rehabilitation, or redevelopment. Prior to 1987, such urban redevelopment was mostly undertaken by private developers through the acquisition of individual properties. However, due to the fragmented ownership of properties, it became increasingly difficult for private developers to assemble the necessary units for redevelopment without the intervention of the government. The Land Development Corporation (LDC) was therefore established in 1988 to lead the Hong Kong government's urban redevelopment effort by working with various private developers based on a public-private partnership model. Hampered by a long and complex redevelopment process and the market decline after the financial crisis in 1997, the LDC was largely ineffective in driving urban redevelopment in Hong Kong and was later replaced by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in 2001. As Ho (2018) notes, the new land assembly procedure of the URA model is streamlined, and the URA receives considerably more support and resources from the government to undertake an ambitious urban redevelopment programme that includes over 60 completed projects to date (URA Website).

Like its predecessor, the URA often partners with private developers in various urban redevelopment projects, most of which are 'typically up-market developments providing high-end residential units and commercial premises' (La Grange & Pretorius, 2016, p. 514). The URA has, on many occasions, drawn criticism for its profit-driven approach to urban redevelopment (Ng, 2002; Shin et al., 2016). In fact, some scholars have referred to the URA-led urban redevelopment in Hong Kong as state-led gentrification (La Grange & Pretorius, 2016). Whereas gentrification in the West has traditionally been led by developers and other private agents (López-Morales, 2019), gentrification in Hong Kong is a distinctly state-led process due to the government's direct involvement in urban redevelopment and is largely shaped by Hong Kong's leasehold land management system and unique urban morphology (La Grange & Pretorius, 2016). Although most property owners tend to benefit from URA-led redevelopment projects, such projects often entail

devastating impacts on local tenants, not dissimilar to other forms of gentrification and uneven development. As La Grange and Pretorius (2016) argue, displacement of residents in URA-led redevelopment projects is commonplace as the compensation provided is seldom adequate for them to remain in their original neighbourhood. In addition, prices in these areas are often driven up by nearby property owners and investors once a project is announced, making it even more difficult for the residents to afford a place in the same area. All in all, despite the URA's insistence on a 'people first, district-based and public participatory approach' (URA Website), urban redevelopment in Hong Kong is still by and large a market-driven process that has excluded and disadvantaged local communities (Ng, 2002).

Mega projects and cross-border infrastructure

Another main focus of the Hong Kong government in recent years has been the pursuance and implementation of different mega projects, which can be generally defined as large-scale and costly development projects that tend to involve transformation of land use (Fainstein, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Lui, 2008). Even though the population growth has slowed down in the past two decades, there has been a drastic increase in the number of infrastructure and urban development projects (Chiu & Lui, 2009; Ho, 2018; McNeill, 2014; Tang, 2016). In his 2007–2008 policy address, Donald Tsang, the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong, announced '10 Major Infrastructure Projects for Economic Growth', which include new urban developments and cross-border infrastructure projects (HKCE, 2007). The scale of these projects, both in terms of financial investment and development area, is at an unprecedented level. Moreover, many such projects are implemented through various public-private partnerships, in which the government assumes the risks while its private partners reap any benefits. Whereas earlier urban development projects such as the various public housing programmes are focused on local provision of services and meeting local needs, these mega projects are centred on civic boosterism and maintaining the city's regional and international competitiveness. This shift in the government's role in urban development from managerialism to entrepreneurialism is generally in line with the literature on globalisation and the global city discourse (Harvey, 1989; Sassen, 2001), as well as with that on the competitive and speculative nature of the modern neoliberal market economy (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). As Swyngedouw et al. (2003, p. 13) suggest, mega projects often 'express a common preoccupation with reasserting the competitive position of place in a globalising world economy'. As such, it could be argued that the Hong Kong government's increasing tendency towards pursuing mega projects reflects not only Hong Kong's precarious status as a global city in the global financial circuit but also its unusual geopolitical situation vis-à-vis China and more specifically the Pearl River Delta region, since the handover of sovereignty in 1997 (McNeill, 2014; Meyer, 2002).

As widely documented by various scholars, China has relied heavily on massive infrastructure and urban development projects to pull itself out of various financial and economic crises in the past decades (Feng et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2007). While perhaps not to the same extent, the Hong Kong government has adopted a similar approach to boost its economy by spending money on mega projects during the economic downturn. As Donald Tsang states in his Policy Address, the high costs of such mega projects are justified because 'both employment opportunities and wages will increase during the construction stage, and, upon completion, the infrastructure projects will boost economic activities and improve the living environment' (HKCE, 2007: 7). Moreover, new urban development projects such as the West Kowloon Cultural District and the Kai Tak Development are largely driven by the government's desire to stay strategic and competitive as a global city by creating a landmark or spectacle to attract foreign tourists, businesses, and investments (Tang, 2016). Furthermore, cross-border infrastructure projects such as the Express Rail Link that connects Hong Kong with Guangzhou via Shenzhen, and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge also play a vital role in the integration of Hong Kong with the Pearl River Delta region by facilitating and encouraging physical exchanges of goods and people between these cities. As such, it could be argued that such mega projects are not planned and developed according to the actual needs and demands of the Hong Kong people but are driven by a multitude of external economic and political factors. Amidst concerns and opposition among Hong Kongers, the Hong Kong government has recently announced the Lantau Tomorrow Vision development, which involves the creation of large manmade islands on the sea, east of Lantau Island. The project is estimated by the government to cost at least HK$624 billion (US$80 billion) (GovHK, 2019), which equals more than half of the entire government reserves. In addition, the government has also allocated HK$84.1 billion (US$10.71 billion), or 11.6% of a recent budget for infrastructure projects including railways, bridges, and expansion to the airport (BrandHK, 2021). Similar projects in the past have been widely condemned by Hong Kongers and have even led to mass social movements, such as the unsuccessful anti-Express Rail Link movement, which was initiated by activists, conservationists, and local residents along the proposed railway line in an attempt to the stop the project. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong government has continued to pursue a number of mega projects in recent years and has prioritised them over the planning and development of everyday spaces for local Hong Kongers.

Contesting public spaces in Hong Kong

According to the *Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines*, every person in Hong Kong should be allotted with at least 2m^2 of open space (PlanD, 2015), which as Ng (2020, p. 1456) describes, is 'one of the most modest open spaces standards in the world'. A recent report published by Civic Exchange shows that each person

in Hong Kong enjoys on average 2.7m^2 of open space. Although the area of open space per capita is 0.7 m^2 higher than the minimum requirement set by the government, it is significantly less than other comparable Asian cities, where the corresponding figures are 5.8m^2 in Tokyo, 6.1m^2 in Seoul, 7.4m^2 in Singapore, and 7.6m^2 in Shanghai (Lai, 2017). While the general shortage of land resources may be one of the contributing factors, the relative deficiency of public space provision is also indicative of how public space is viewed and valued by the Hong Kong government. As Tang (2017, p. 82) suggests, public space in Hong Kong 'has a lower priority in land allocation by the government' in comparison to other urban land uses. As I point out in the case study on Kwun Tong, public spaces are often replaced by residential buildings in urban development and redevelopment projects due to the constant pressure and demand for more housing units in Hong Kong. Furthermore, since public space developments are often conceived as a box-ticking exercise, they tend to focus on size and ease of management rather than spatial qualities and functions. In other words, public spaces in Hong Kong are seldom planned and designed to facilitate social interactions or engender inclusivity and publicness (Chan, 2020).

Figure 3
Privately owned public space in Hong Kong

As the demand for urban public spaces has continued to grow in recent years, the government has resorted to outsourcing the development and management of public spaces to private developers (Figure 3). As part of the lease or planning conditions, private developers are often tasked with incorporating public spaces into their developments in exchange for more favourable planning or development conditions such as a larger developable area or lessened height restrictions. The privatisation of public space, as Hong Kong Public Space Initiative (HKPSI, 2018a) observes, has not only resulted in fewer accessible and inclusive public spaces; these privately owned or managed public spaces are sometimes even reserved and occupied for commercial uses. As Law (2002, p. 1628) suggests, public spaces tend to 'lose their status of "public" spaces' and become 'ambiguous places of control and consumerism' when they are planned, developed, and managed by private developers. On the other hand, as I contend in Paper 2, government-driven commodification of public space has also exacerbated the deterioration of public space in Hong Kong. Flagship public space developments such as the Kwun Tong Promenade are increasingly seen as a low-risk-high-reward means of anchoring and driving urban (re)development projects. These public space developments tend to cater for businesses and private interests rather than local residents (Tang, 2017), and thus often exacerbate the uneven development and spatial injustice that exist within and among different neighbourhoods.

To counter the deterioration of public space and the disappearance of public domain (Law, 2002), insurgent uses of public spaces have become increasingly common in Hong Kong. One early example of such insurgent use of public space is the appropriation of public and semi-public spaces such as footbridges, squares, and even the ground floor of the HSBC Headquarters in Central by Filipina domestic workers on Sundays – the only day of the week when they are free to leave the household they work and live in (Hou, 2010; Law, 2002). As Law (2002, p. 1638) argues, not only is this appropriation of urban spaces a form of national imagining for the Filipina workers, it also 'enables more overt forms of mobilisation'. More recently, large-scale urban social movements such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 have engendered critical discussions on the democratisation of public space development and public space use among Hong Kongers. As I discuss in Paper 3, lessons learned from Hong Kongers' collective experience of Umbrella Square have not only informed the way they view public space developments – they have also led to more alternative and insurgent uses of public spaces such as mobile libraries and public film screenings in recent years (HKPSI, 2018b).

Various events of the past few years have seen Hong Kongers' use of public spaces threatened even further. In the summer of 2019, up to two million Hong Kongers took part in largely peaceful demonstrations across Hong Kong in protest against the proposed Extradition Law Amendment Bill that would allow the extradition of suspects from Hong Kong to mainland China. Peaceful and lawful demonstrations and rallies on various scales took place in public spaces across Hong Kong almost

every weekend. However, as the Anti-ELAB protests escalated towards the end of 2019, the Hong Kong police became more reluctant to authorise large-scale protests and have virtually banned all forms of demonstrations and assemblies since autumn 2019 (Dapiran, 2020). Under the Public Order Ordinance, people must obtain a 'Notice of No Objection' from the police to hold any demonstrations and assemblies – without which, anyone participating in any demonstrations and assemblies of three or more people can be arrested for unlawful assembly. In other words, even though the freedoms of speech and expression are enshrined in the Basic Law, Hong Kongers cannot hold lawful demonstrations and assemblies in public spaces without the permission of the police and the government. While the application for such permission used to be nothing more than a formality, it has become increasingly rare that the Notice of No Objection has been granted since the beginning of the protests. The anti-mask law enacted in October 2019, which banned the use of masks in demonstrations and rallies, was further evidence of the encroachment on rights and freedoms in regards to Hong Kongers' public space use (Dapiran, 2020). Faced with tightening restrictions on public space use and the threat of police intervention during the Anti-ELAB movement, protesters often resorted to gathering and rallying inside shopping malls (Figure 4), where police are discouraged, and in some cases physically blocked, from entering. As I argue in Paper 4, the protesters' deliberate act of reclaiming the shopping malls and utilising them as protest sites in Hong Kong represents an important step towards the enactment and implementation of the right to the city.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the beginning of 2020 gave the Hong Kong government additional impetus to ban large assemblies and regulate public space use. Over the course of the pandemic, various social distancing measures were put in place by the government, including limiting the number of people allowed in public gatherings – at one point, the maximum number of people allowed in a group was two. Other restrictions included temporary bans on dining inside restaurants, the closing of public facilities including playgrounds and sports facilities, and the mandatory use of masks in public. The outbreak of COVID-19, as well as the restrictions imposed by the government, had a profound impact on the everyday lives of Hong Kongers and public space use in Hong Kong. For instance, when dining in restaurants was banned in Hong Kong, many people – especially those who were not working in an office – had to resort to eating takeaways in various public spaces including inside bus stations, on sidewalks, or in back alleys. In many ways, the impact of the Covid restrictions was particularly harsh on the poor and marginalised, especially those who were living in subdivided units or 'coffin homes'[8] as well as the foreign domestic helpers who would traditionally gather in

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[8] Subdivided units typically measure 3–5 m^2 and have shared bathrooms. Coffin homes, or cage homes, generally refer to a specific kind of subdivided unit: cubicles that measure on average 1x2 metres and are just big enough for a bed. According to the 2016 By-census, more than 200,000 people were living in subdivided units in Hong Kong.

public spaces on their days off but were then confined to their employees' homes as a result of the restrictions (Summers, 2020). Whereas other cities around the world have slowly phased out Covid restrictions, restrictions on public gatherings and mandatory facemask use in Hong Kong are still, at the time of writing, largely in place after almost three years since COVID-19 first struck Hong Kong.

Figure 4
Hong Kongers gathering and rallying inside a shopping mall

In addition to having a profound impact on people's everyday lives, the outbreak of COVID-19 also played an important role in the decimation and eventual end of the Anti-ELAB protests. Due to fear of a repeat of the SARS epidemic in 2003, most Hong Kongers were wary of the health and safety consequences of organising large-scale demonstrations and rallies. By early 2020, most of the physical protest activities of the Anti-ELAB movement had been stopped. In addition, COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings were also utilised by the government and police to suppress various political actions. The Tiananmen vigil, for example, had taken place in Victoria Park every year before it was banned by the government in the past three years. Despite the government's decision to invoke Covid restrictions to ban the peaceful vigil, it was widely seen as a political act and part of an all-

encompassing crackdown on dissent. Not only were large-scale demonstrations and rallies banned for health and safety reasons, activists and people canvassing on the streets had also been fined for contravening Covid restrictions even when they were separated into small groups in accordance with the rules. The dynamics between the protests and the pandemic, as well as the government's reactionary attitude to both issues, were exemplified by the fact that at one point, face masks were – for different reasons – simultaneously both banned and mandatory in public in Hong Kong. In many ways, the Covid restrictions were representative of the increasing authoritarian nature of urban governance and indicative of how the government can utilise legislative and constitutional adaptations as a means to suppress political dissent.

The implementation of the National Security Law in July 2020 has further infringed upon the already deteriorating freedoms of speech and expression in Hong Kong (Davis, 2020). Under the National Security Law, certain chants, slogans, or songs can no longer be used or displayed in public as they are deemed to be subversive or have separatist connotations. The National Security Law has also granted the Hong Kong police even more powers as they can now conduct warrantless searches, intercept communications, and control the internet. According to data gathered and published by ChinaFile (2023), up to February 2023 – more than two and a half years after the law was implemented – over 220 individuals have been arrested under the National Security Law and more than 130 have been charged. More significantly, since the implementation of the National Security Law, more than 50 civil society organisations, including student organisations, trade unions, political parties, and news outlets have shut down or disbanded, in large part due to the growing political pressure and the threat of the National Security Law (HKFP, 2022). In cases such as *Apple Daily* (the last pro-democracy newspaper in print in Hong Kong) and *Stand News* (an online independent news outlet), several executives and writers had been arrested and charged under the National Security Law. As a direct result of the National Security Law, Hong Kong has dropped from 80th to 148th in the latest Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

While it is clear that the National Security Law has wide-ranging and all-encompassing implications, its impact is particularly profound and apparent on public spaces. The implementation of the National Security Law has basically ended any kind of physical protests in public. Although other means of protests, including different forms of economic and consumer activism, have continued to exist (Chan & Pun, 2020), the protests and protesters were largely rendered invisible 'without occupation of material space' (Mitchell, 1995, p. 123). As Arendt (1998, p. 204) suggests, the space of appearance needs to be preserved by power, without which, the public realm will 'fade away as rapidly as the living deed and the living word'. By granting more power to the authorities and limiting people's rights and freedoms in public spaces, the government has eliminated the protesters' space of appearance through the implementation of the National Security Law. As a result, the National

Security Law marks a devastating blow to not only the public realm of Hong Kong but also Hong Kongers' struggles over public space as well as their claim to the right to the city.

In this chapter, I have set the scene for my empirical research on public spaces in Hong Kong and highlighted some of the political and economic forces that are driving urban development in Hong Kong. Although not necessarily apparent or obvious, these driving forces are always at work in the urban political economy of Hong Kong and have concrete implications on not only the planning and development of public space but also the way these public spaces are used. It is my intention in this thesis to shed light on the political and economic forces that are shaping the production of public space in Hong Kong by examining the commodification of different public spaces, the socio-spatial implications of public space commodification, and how these implications are countered and resisted by the people. Struggles over public space and public realm are particularly key to the political and social advancement of Hong Kong as political freedoms are increasingly suppressed by the government. As evidenced in recent protests, Hong Kongers sometimes had to literally create their own pockets of public realms in some of the most unexpected spaces of the city for them to be seen and heard. Public spaces, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, are not only key to the advancement of public life but can also contribute to the implementation and enactment of the right to the city.

3 Processes and Practices of Public Space

This thesis is a study of public space. Referring to previous research and literature, I will illustrate in this chapter why it is important to study the processes and practices of public space. In addition to being a place for social interactions and leisure, public space also functions as a site of political struggles and expression. Despite its wide-ranging meaning, public space is in essence an arena for public discourse (Low, 2000; Merrifield, 2012). It constitutes a crucial aspect of public life and an important part of the urban fabric. Drawing upon theories of public sphere and public realm, I will first explore the relationship between the public and public space. I will then chart the processes that have impacted public space developments and practices and argue for a new line of enquiry in public space research. As a result of the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, public spaces are increasingly shaped by processes such as privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation. In this regard, public spaces can be seen as urban frontiers that are increasingly contested and fought over, and public space research should be centred within debates on neoliberal urbanism.

Moreover, the apparent success of signature public spaces such as the High Line in New York is indicative of how public spaces can facilitate the transformation of neighbourhoods and the circulation of capital. The *High Line Effect* has not only played an influential role in public space developments in Hong Kong and elsewhere, but it has also informed my conceptualisation of public space commodification. Existing lines of enquiry centred on privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation remain hugely important. However, they may no longer suffice to encapsulate the exploitative motives and practices of public space due to the growing importance of public space in urban development, as well as the increasingly complex and dynamic models of funding, ownership, and management in contemporary public space production. A broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification not only adds to the existing public space literature, but it also represents a call to pay more critical attention to the increasingly exploitative practices of contemporary public space production and development.

Publics, publicness, and public sphere

In order to determine the meaning of public space, it is important to first understand who the public is and what public life entails. As such, any questions on public space need to be preceded by a discussion on the public sphere. Most literature traces the conception of public life to two distinct models of public sphere based on very different political theory traditions: the republicanism of Arendt (1998) and Habermas's (1992) liberal tradition. Arendt's model of public sphere is conceived in contrast with the private sphere. She suggests that there is a sharp distinction between public and private spheres, and that the duality of the two spheres is similar to living two different lives. In her conception, the public sphere corresponds to the political realm, whereas the private sphere largely refers to family and household. According to Arendt, one is free and equal in public but conditioned by needs and wants in private. In other words, whereas people can express their individuality freely in the public sphere, they tend to be ruled by either necessities or others within the household. Arendt's model of public sphere, as Sennett (2003, p. 383) suggests, is founded on 'equal rights of discourse [and] the notion of freedom of speech'. According to Arendt, the public sphere is the space, more figuratively than literally, where one can be seen and heard by everybody. If one does not appear among others, one does not exist. In many ways, it is in this space of appearance where the public sphere manifests itself and the public can be understood as anyone who appears among others.

Similar to Arendt, Habermas's model of public sphere is also centred on political participation and debates. Unlike Arendt though, Habermas's public sphere is conceived as a historically specific form of an ideal bourgeois public sphere. Central to Habermas's conception of public sphere is the formation of public discourse through critical debates between private individuals. Preceded by the literary public sphere where 'a reading public […] debated critically about matters of culture' (Habermas, 1992, p. 168), Habermas contends that the political public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries was 'made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state' (p. 176). While most 'private gatherings of the bourgeoisie' were found in salons, clubs, and reading societies, the proliferation of journals and newspapers in the late 18th century crystallised 'the "social" life of private people' (Habermas, 1992, p. 72). Like Arendt, Habermas also noted a decline of the ideal bourgeois public sphere as a result of the proliferation of consumer capitalism. According to Habermas (1992, p. 168), the debating public was replaced by 'the mass public of culture consumers', and political journals and newspapers were replaced by commercial mass press. As many scholars have pointed out, the spaces of political debates he describes 'are never totally inclusive and the rules for entrance might be stringent' (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008, p. 144). Habermas's conception of the public sphere is specific to a historical setting dominated by bourgeois men, and is thus considered by many to

be inadequate for the egalitarian and multicultural society of today (Benhabib, 1996, 1997; Fraser, 1990; Hohendahl, 1996). Despite these flaws and inadequacies, Habermas's formulation of how a public is formed and what public life entails remains vital to our understanding of publicness and is therefore key to conceptualising public space.

By establishing and outlining the two models of public sphere, we can begin to unpack the complexities and intricacies of what public space means and entails. Since neither Arendt nor Habermas is particularly concerned with the materiality or physicality of space, the spatial implications of their respective models of public sphere are not very obvious. Although Arendt (1998) uses spatial notions in her conception of public sphere, she makes it very clear that the *polis* is not grounded in a physical location but is based on the 'organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together' (p. 198), and that the space of appearance 'predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm' (p. 199). Similarly, Habermas's discursive conception of public sphere is not contingent upon any particular physical space. The political debates he refers to can, and do, take place in various media including journals, newspapers, and other literature. Even when the gatherings and debates of political and public matters do take place in a physical space, they tend to be in what are formally private spaces such as salons, clubs, and coffeehouses. As such, it is clear that the public sphere Habermas conceived is not necessarily dependent on the public nature of space.

It is against this backdrop that Sennett attempts to understand how the public can be conceptualised in relation to space (Sennett, 2002). As Sennett argues, public life is both material and spatial. The public realm, according to Sennett, is first and foremost a physical location. The decline in public life charted by Sennett as a consequence of the expansion of industrial capitalism and the weakening influence of religion has not only affected social and political behaviours but has also resulted in material and spatial implications on the city. The proliferation of department stores, for instance, is both symptomatic of and contributed to the decline in public life when public interactions became 'more intense and less sociable' (Sennett, 2002, p. 141). More importantly, Sennett suggests that the public realm is not only manifested in a physical location but is also contingent upon specific spatial conditions. As I illustrate in Paper 3, Umbrella Square's function and performance as a public realm is largely dependent on its openness and porosity. While such spatial conditions can facilitate and encourage public life to flourish, hard boundaries such as highways tend to hinder formations of the public and render the areas along them 'dead spaces' (Sennett, 2002, 2018). Furthermore, as I will illustrate later in this chapter, the struggle over the formation of publics also has profound spatial implications. Although the public sphere conceived by Arendt and Habermas does not depend on a specific space, public space is one physical setting in today's world where public life is manifested and shaped. As access to urban

spaces is increasingly regulated, public space becomes particularly crucial to enabling a diverse and multicultural public life to flourish.

The meaning of public space

Despite being highly specific in some contexts – planning and zoning codes, for example, often have very specific and technical definitions of public space – the meaning of public space tends to be both broad and varied. Public spaces can range from identifiable and delimited sites such as parks and squares, to connecting and transitional spaces like streets and roads. While public spaces do exist outside of cities, they are inherently urban, and discussions on the public realm are traditionally linked to cities (Sennett, 2018). As Bodnar (2015, p. 2091) contends, public spaces are 'peculiar to cities' as they constitute the 'clearest expression of the urban predicament, the tension between the physical proximity and moral remoteness of city dwellers'. In addition to being urban in nature, public spaces are also characterised by their universal accessibility, which is often guaranteed by the government or other public actors. UNESCO (2017), for instance, defines public space as 'an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level'. Whereas modern public spaces such as public squares, parks, and children's playgrounds are often considered as places for socialising, gathering, and recreation, traditional public spaces tend to be hybrid spaces of commerce and politics. The Greek agora, Roman theatre, and market square are all examples of public spaces where social, political, and economic exchange take place. According to Tonkiss (2005, p. 67), these formal public spaces are most representative of the ideal of public space, as they are 'premised on a notion of the public as a political community and a claim to certain spaces a simple expression of citizenship'. What sets these public spaces apart from other urban spaces are 'the rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behaviour sanctioned in specific spaces and rules of use' (Smith & Low, 2006, p. 4). As Young (1986, p. 21) argues, a public space is by definition 'a place accessible to anyone, where people engage in activity as individuals or in small groups'. Due to their open and accessible nature, public spaces are often characterised by differences and diversity, and they are sites where 'one should expect to encounter and hear from those who are different, whose social perspectives, experience, and affiliations are different' (Young, 1990, p. 119). In some cases, the publicness of a space is centred on the social exchange and interactions that take place within it. In a Habermasian sense, Tonkiss contends that the publicness of places such as cafes, bars, and restaurants 'is not a question of who owns it, exactly, but of the sense of public life it engenders' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 67). Although the focus of this thesis is on the more formal public spaces, the formation

of publics outside these formal public spaces constitutes an important aspect of my understanding of publicness.

Public spaces are important because not only are they 'public arenas of citizen discourse and association' (Fraser, 1990, p. 56), but the materiality and physicality of public spaces also 'subtly define performances of social life in public meanings and intentions of urban public culture' (Amin, 2008, p. 15). Similarly, Young (1986, p. 21) contends that public spaces 'are both an image of the total relationships of city life and a primary way those relationships are enacted and experienced'. In other words, public space is not only a container in which the public realm exists, but it also shapes the public and public life. More importantly, public spaces also function as important sites for political struggles and 'arenas for public discourse and expressions of discontent' (Low, 2000, p. 204). As Mitchell (1995, p. 110) argues, truly public spaces are not only political spaces where people and organisations can be represented and seen while the 'power of the state could be held at bay', they are also spaces of justice 'where the right to the city is struggled over, implemented and represented' (2003, p. 235). Similarly, Soja (2010, p. 45) notes that contestations over public space are particularly vital in 'the search for justice and the right to the city'. The importance of public space struggles is exemplified in the multitude of social movements that have taken place in cities across the globe in recent years. Occupy movements and large-scale protests have seen public spaces such as Zuccotti Park in New York, Syntagma Square in Athens, or Tahrir Square in Cairo emerge as centres of various political struggles. The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, as I illustrate in Paper 3, also saw protesters occupy space in the middle of the city as a demand for a more transparent and democratic electoral system. As Calhoun (2013, p. 29) argues, occupying prominent public spaces is not only a medium of action but is itself a crucial claim that 'upset[s] the usual symbolic control of those spaces by government "forces of order"'. Unlike the other prominent protest sites, Umbrella Square was not a place with any social or political meaning prior to the protests. In fact, the protesters had to transform the section of a highway into a truly public space that enables public discourses and public conversations, making it possible for people to meet and talk to each other. The occupation of public space, as Harvey (2012, p. 161) notes, is an important instrument for any opposition to be seen and heard, and in spite of the proliferation of social media and online activism, 'it is bodies on the streets and in the squares […] that matters'.

By letting people be seen and heard, public spaces are crucial sites where a public and public life can be formed. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2007, p. 793) argue, it is important to study public space because discussions of public space involve asking the difficult, but crucial, question of 'who the public is'. Public spaces, Amin suggests, play a 'central role in the formation of publics and public culture' (Amin, 2008, p. 5). How publicity is conceptualised and defined is particularly important for those who are underprivileged and marginalised as 'finding a space to be seen

or heard, or simply to be is vital to their ability to develop a political subjectivity and a sense of worthiness' (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007, p. 809). Even though the ideal public space is conceptualised as a space of heterogeneity and multiple publics (Low, 2017a), the definition and conceptualisation of the public are often contested in the struggles over public space. *Being in public*, as evident throughout my empirical cases in Hong Kong, does not necessarily constitute *being public*. The local creative community in Kwun Tong, as I illustrate in Paper 2, had been present on the waterfront before the Energising Kowloon East Office took over the Promenade but was largely ignored in the government's development and was eventually banished from the public space (Chan, 2023). In other words, the distinction between *being public* and *being in public* is central to 'the idea and ideal of public space' (Low & Iveson, 2016, p. 11). As Madden (2010, p. 188) illustrates in his research on Bryant Park in New York, the definition of the public is largely determined by those who own or manage the public space. As a result of privatisation, the definition of the public of Bryant Park is 'being decoupled from discourses of democratisation, citizenship, and self-development and connected ever more firmly to consumption, commerce and social surveillance'. The intended public of Bryant Park, Madden contends, has become those who are deemed 'useful and desirable' by the businesses running the park on the basis of commerce and consumption. This shaping and redefinition of the public, which is also evident in my cases, is characteristic of public spaces under neoliberal capitalism.

Public spaces under neoliberal capitalism

Neoliberalism is a multifaceted, far-reaching, and transformative politico-economic project that 'seems to be everywhere' (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 380). According to Theodore et al. (2011, p. 15), neoliberal doctrines were first deployed in the 1970s as 'a strategic political response to the declining profitability of mass production industries and the crisis of welfarism'. As a mode of free-market economic ideology and theory, neoliberalism has since 'become the dominant ideological rationalisation for globalisation and contemporary state "reform"' (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 380). The neoliberal project has, among other things, entailed the deregulation of markets, dismantling of collective institutions, privatisation and commodification of public services, hyper-exploitation of workers, and the growing influence and power of financial capital (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Theodore et al., 2011; Weber, 2002). In short, neoliberalism is characterised by the ways in which public resources are redistributed and reorganised based on a 'hypermarketised style of governance' (Weber, 2002, p. 520). Instead of a fixed end-state or condition though, Peck and Tickell (2002) contend that neoliberalism, or rather neoliberalisation, should be understood as a dynamic process and analysed with a focus on change. Moreover, as Brenner and

Theodore (2005, p. 102) argue, neoliberalism is a 'process of market-driven social and spatial transformation' that has vast implications for urban development. Not only have neoliberal restructuring strategies shaped urbanisation and the urban form, cities are also central to the reproduction and reconstitution of the neoliberal regime. Such connections between neoliberalisation and urban transformations are encapsulated by what some scholars have called neoliberal urbanism (Lang & Rothenberg, 2016; Theodore et al., 2011).

Neoliberal urbanism generally refers to the form of urban development that is subordinated to the multifaceted neoliberal ideology characterised by hypermarketisation, entrepreneurial freedom, and private property rights. Under neoliberal capitalism, governments and their private partners have become ever more fixated on finding ways to attract investment and generate speculation through various urban development projects (Harvey, 1989; Ong, 2011). As the inter-urban competition continues to intensify, governments have adopted a more entrepreneurial approach in urban development by operating increasingly 'like the private sector or are replaced by private-sector-based systems' (Swyngedouw et al., 2002, p. 573). In the words of Logan and Molotch (2007), cities have become growth machines operated by a coalition of government officials, developers, and realtors with the sole objective of maximising profit. As a result, urban development projects tend to focus on the production of imageries and spectacles (Harvey, 1989), rather than addressing social and political issues. Housing, for example, is increasingly financialised and commodified by both private developers and state actors as an instrument for profit making and accumulation (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Investments in urban infrastructure and the built environment have also become a 'spatial fix' for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2001), and 'a temporary solution to capitalists' search for higher profits' (Zukin, 2006, p. 112). Urban development is not only 'shaped by its connection to the commodity system' (Logan & Molotch, 2007, p. 112), but it is also absorbed and subsumed into the commodity system. As capital continues to commodify every square inch of the city (Soja, 2010), this thesis contends that urban public spaces may represent the last urban frontier of capital expansion under the proliferation of neoliberal urbanism.

Unlike most other urban sites, public spaces are traditionally marked by their universal access and public ownership, which help safeguard the unmediated interactions and encounters that take place in them. However, as a result of governments' shrinking budget for public service provision, as well as the expansion of urban entrepreneurialism and public-private partnerships under neoliberal capitalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 1989), there has been a growing influence of private interests on public space production and management since the mid-20th century (Cybriwsky, 1999; Harvey, 2006; Low, 2006). The rolling back of public investment by governments has resulted in the outsourcing of public space development to private entities. Private developers and businesses have not only provided the necessary funding and resources for the production of new

public spaces but have also assumed control and management over existing ones. As a result, privately owned and managed public spaces have become commonplace across urban centres around the world. As the distinction between what is public and what is private becomes increasingly blurred (Low, 2006), the meaning of public space is further shaped and reinvented by various private interests based on their own desires and needs.

The socio-spatial consequences of privatisation of public space have been studied extensively by urban geographers and sociologists. There is a wide range of empirical research on issues pertaining to the privatisation of public space, most of which are also evident in my fieldwork in Hong Kong. These issues include the homogenisation of public space (Mitchell, 1995; Smithsimon, 2008); restriction of access and eviction of undesirables and homelessness (Crossa, 2012; Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2020; Smith, 1992; Thörn, 2013); heightened policing and surveillance (Atkinson, 2003; Cuthbert, 1995); regulation of protests and other political activities in public space (Springer, 2011); proliferation of advertisement and commercial use of public space (Cuthbert & McKinnell, 1997; Iveson, 2012); as well as the general encroachment on various forms of civil liberties and the redefinition of publicity and publicness (Peterson, 2006). Even though this is not an exhaustive list, it serves to illustrate the wide-ranging and serious consequences of the increasing influence of private developers and corporations in public space production and development. In fact, the privatisation of public space has had such a transformative impact that, in many cases, it has become a struggle just to keep the public spaces public (Mitchell, 2017), and it has even engendered debates on whether the growing influence of private interests has marked 'the end of public space' (Allen, 2006; Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 1995, 2017). However, as Bodnar (2015) argues, not only has public space continued to exist despite the proliferation of private interests, such debates have since led to more critical attention being paid to privately-owned or managed public space developments and the insurgent use of such public spaces and resistance against privatisation (Aidukaite et al., 2015; Hou, 2010; Law, 2002; Sorensen, 2009).

In addition to privatisation of public space, behaviours and expectations of public space users are also being shaped and regulated through commercialisation, which generally refers to the proliferation of commercial uses in both state-owned and privately owned public space (Kärrholm, 2008, 2009; Sorkin, 1992). Not only have shopping malls become de-facto town squares in cities across the world, traditional public spaces such as urban parks and public squares also increasingly feature cafes, restaurants, and bars, many of which have segregated areas reserved for paying customers only. Despite being 'the highest public garden' in London, Sky Garden is home to four restaurants and bars, and access to large areas of the rooftop public space is only granted through some form of consumption (Figure 5). Similarly, as I discuss in Paper 1, private developers in Hong Kong have also encroached on privately owned public spaces for various commercial uses, and in some cases, they

extract rent from supposedly public corridors and areas. Moreover, public spaces are also increasingly utilised for festivals and other temporary events centred on entertainment and consumption (Carmona, 2010; Kohn, 2004; Smith, 2014). The *festivalisation* of public spaces, as Smith (2014) contends, is yet another means for different stakeholders to commodify public space while temporarily limiting the general public's access to the space. Promoting consumption in public spaces is not merely the result of profit-making and commercial exploitations, it is, more importantly, also a means to pacify public spaces and control its users (Atkinson, 2003; Zukin, 1995). Commercialisation of public space has become a key strategy for governments and their private partners to exert social control over the public and to regulate their behaviours in public spaces (Harvey, 2006). As a result, public space use and access are increasingly shaped by one's ability and willingness to consume.

Figure 5
Sky Garden in London, United Kingdom

Furthermore, as a result of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and subsequent terrorist attacks, there has been a growing trend of heightened security in public spaces across the globe. The securitisation of public space involves a wide variety

of measures that aim to minimise the risk of violent attacks and other social disturbances. Such measures include a growing presence of (increasingly militarised) police officers and private security guards, blockades and restrictions of access, as well as the proliferation of CCTV and security cameras (Kennelly & Watt, 2013). During the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests in Hong Kong, many protesters in Hong Kong became increasingly wary of the 'smart lamp posts' that were allegedly equipped with facial recognition security cameras as questions on the ethics of government surveillance in public space dominated much of the public discourse (Zalnieriute, 2021). In addition to state-controlled surveillance, public spaces are also increasingly shaped by what Zuboff refers to as *surveillance capitalists.* Tech companies such as Google have 'devoured and datafied the world's public spaces' by extracting and monetising personal data in public spaces and transforming the public spaces into objects 'for universal inspection and commercial expropriation' (Zuboff, 2020, p. 141). Furthermore, many new public spaces have also incorporated defensive architectural design features such as structures that discourage people from lingering or street furniture that doubles up as permanent blockades and barriers (Smith & Walters, 2018) (Figure 6). In some countries, zero-tolerance policing is adopted in public spaces not only for security reasons but to also banish rough-sleeping, loitering, graffiti writing, and other 'intolerable' acts that do not match the predefined behaviour expected of the public space users (Atkinson, 2003; Hannerz & Kimvall, 2020). In other words, the securitisation of public space is often used by governments and private developers as an important mechanism with which to restrict people's rights and freedoms to use public space by exploiting their fear.

Even though commercialisation and securitisation tend to be more apparent in public spaces that are privately owned or managed, governments and other public actors have also become increasingly involved in the exploitative practices of public space developments. The government-driven commodification of the Kwun Tong Promenade which I examined in Paper 2 is an example of a government exploiting the production of public spaces for economic and political gains. Moreover, while privatised public spaces are still very much evident in urban centres, recent public spaces have departed significantly from the traditional Privately-Owned Public Space (POPS) model of private ownership and public access – new constellations of public, state, and private enterprises have emerged in its place. According to Bodnar (2015, p. 2096), the 'triad of private management, public ownership and public access has become the new recipe and norm for public space regeneration'. Innovative partnership models between government actors and private developers such as the failed revitalisation plan of the TST waterfront discussed in Paper 1 are increasingly adopted to avoid public scrutiny, shift responsibility, and circumvent rules and regulations in the planning and management of public space developments. It is evident that public space developments have generally become more complex, and private developers are no longer the only driving force behind the exploitative practices concerning public space. Such increasing complexities are

captured and exemplified by the development and subsequent success of the High Line, which has played an important role in my conceptualisation of public space commodification.

Figure 6
The cannons outside the Emirates Stadium in London, which can withstand the impact of a lorry, are part of the stadium's anti-terror infrastructure

The High Line and the High Line Effect

The High Line in New York City in the United States is an award-winning public space situated on the West Side of Manhattan, New York (Figure 7). The linear park was created from an abandoned elevated railway track that runs from the Lower West Side, through the meatpacking district and Chelsea, and ends at Hudson Yards. Many consider the High Line a massive success, especially within the fields of architecture and design, where it has won multiple awards, and it is viewed by professionals in these fields as an icon and industry standard for adaptive reuse designs. In addition, the High Line has also been extremely successful in attracting vast numbers of tourists and visitors since its opening in 2009 – in 2016 alone, it

drew more than 7 million visitors, making it the top tourist attraction in New York City and one of the most visited public spaces in the world (Bliss, 2017). Even though public-space-related land speculation and urban development have existed in one form or another for a long time, the High Line marks a significant moment in the development of public space practices and is key to my conceptualisation of public space commodification. By illustrating and materialising the transformative potential of public space, the success of the High Line has wide-reaching implications on the ways in which public spaces are perceived, developed, and managed by different stakeholders. More importantly, it also highlights the complexity involved in contemporary public space developments and represents a 'successful' model that has since been replicated around the world.

Despite its apparent success, the sudden influx of visitors, especially foreign tourists, has had a damaging effect on the social and economic fabric of the area that had existed long before the High Line (Millington, 2015). As a result of the accelerated gentrification – a study shows that the price of residences closest to the High Line increased by 35% within just three years of the High Line opening (Jo Black & Richards, 2020) – many local residents were driven away by the increasingly unaffordable rents and living costs, while longstanding businesses such as the local diners, auto shops, and art galleries had to close down because of the loss of their existing client base. In their place are shops, restaurants, and hotels that cater for the millions of visitors and tourists, as well as the new residents and office workers who arrived in the neighbourhood along with the developments around the High Line. Situated in what used to be a relatively rundown part of Manhattan, the High Line is bookended by two social housing projects. However, as Reichl (2016) argues, the residents of the housing projects rarely visit the High Line due to the lack of access points to the elevated public space and the strict restriction of activities, which includes the prohibition of throwing objects and playing music. Despite being situated in one of the more racially diverse neighbourhoods of Manhattan, the High Line is in many ways a highly segregated public space that 'render[s] marginalised groups and their experiences invisible' (Reichl, 2016, p. 922).

Even though the preservation of the High Line was first conceived as a community grassroots project, the High Line has since adopted a complex and dynamic funding, ownership, and management structure that involves multiple levels of government, private developers and corporations, businesses, and individual members of the local community. It has departed from the traditional model of privatisation by utilising a creative financing and management structure that blurs the interests and responsibilities of different stakeholders. More importantly, although the High Line started as a non-profit and community-driven project, it has since been transformed and appropriated into a growth machine by both the government and its private partners (Lang & Rothenberg, 2016; Loughran, 2014). By designating the area as a special redevelopment zone and offering financial support and planning concessions
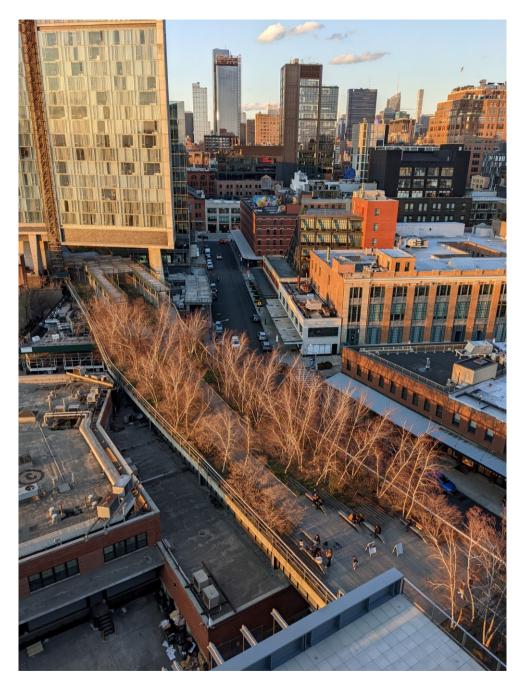
Figure 7
The High Line in New York City, United States

to developers, the government played an important role in the real estate and construction boom in the area. In return, the government has benefitted from the development spur around the High Line as it has generated millions of dollars in taxes, not to mention the revenues from the increased tourist and commercial activities. Meanwhile, other less high-profile public spaces in the city have been largely neglected and are struggling to cope with the budget cuts and increasing operation costs, resulting in further dilapidation and disuse (Millington, 2015). The commodification of the High Line has not only heightened segregation and accelerated gentrification in its surrounding neighbourhoods but also exacerbated the spatial injustice within the city, the state, and the country (Loughran, 2014). As evident in the case of the Kwun Tong Promenade, similar links between public space commodification and the production of spatial injustice can also be found in Hong Kong (Chan, 2023). The connection between public space commodification and the production of spatial injustice, which is crucial to understanding the socio-spatial implications of public space developments in different social, economic, and political contexts, will be further discussed and substantiated in Chapter 7.

The commodification of the High Line is, in many ways, driven as much by the government as it is by private interests. Once the government and its private partners saw the opportunity, they took the initiative to steer the project and appropriate it according to their wishes. Even though the stakeholders may have very different interests and needs, they all hinge upon the success of the High Line, not as a public space that serves the community but as a driver for urban growth and development (Lang & Rothenberg, 2016). To the government and its private partners, the inherent value of the High Line has nothing to do with it being a public space; its value and success by and large depend on how it can stimulate growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods by attracting investments to the various developments connected to the High Line. One of the founders of the High Line has expressed, in hindsight, his disappointment and regret for not doing enough for the local community in the development of the High Line (Bliss, 2017). He has since set out to advocate for a more inclusive planning and design process in other public space projects to prevent a similar gentrifying effect from taking place. This is indicative of how seemingly harmless public space projects with the best of intentions can be appropriated and exploited by capitalist forces.

The continued success of the High Line has captured the imagination of architects, planners, developers, and government officials around the world. Similar to the Bilbao Effect (Plaza, 1999), the *High Line Effect* not only characterises the transformative effect of the High Line, it also encapsulates the circulation and universalisation of the concept, design, and execution of the project (Lang & Rothenberg, 2016). The High Line is considered by designers, developers, and city officials as one of the best practice cases for public space development. Almost every major American city has built or is in the process of developing its own version of the High Line. Even cities as far away as Seoul and Sydney have

attempted to replicate the success of the High Line by creating similar linear public spaces in the city centre. Moreover, it is not only the idea of creating public spaces from disused urban infrastructure that is being exported, the expertise and the names associated with it are also highly sought after by cities and developers around the world. Since the completion of the High Line, its main designers have become synonymous with the *High Line Effect* and have been commissioned to complete similar projects in cities worldwide. James Corner, who led the design of the High Line, was hired as the lead designer of the Avenue of Stars in Hong Kong (Chan, 2020) and featured heavily in the promotional and marketing materials for the development. Internationally renowned and successful designers are not only hired to design public spaces around the world but are also increasingly highlighted in public space developments as part of a branding exercise by developers and governments to increase the exchange value of the public space.

In recent years, public space has occupied a more central place in urban developments as different actors have become more active in targeting public space developments with the intention of driving urban growth and replicating the *High Line Effect*. Using public space as a catalyst for urban regeneration and development has also proven to be a relatively low-risk high-reward strategy. On the one hand, not only is there generally less social and political resistance to public space developments, the creation and maintenance of a public space also tend to be less costly and complicated than in other urban developments such as museums, stadiums, and shopping malls. On the other hand, a well-executed public space like the High Line can potentially have a similarly substantial impact on the local area and lead to certain desired socio-spatial transformations. As a result, many public spaces are now developed as leverage for profit with the same intention to stimulate urban regeneration and private developments (Loughran, 2014). In fact, as Lang and Rothenberg (2016, p. 11) suggest, 'the notion that parks and public spaces can in many cases increase property values has become a guiding mantra' for various stakeholders.

Looking beyond the end of public space

Echoing Loughran's call for more critical attention to be paid to urban parks and green spaces (Loughran, 2018), this thesis argues that other public spaces also deserve to feature more prominently in the debates on neoliberal urbanism. As I have shown in this chapter, public space is an integral part of public and urban life that has not only deteriorated under the expansion of neoliberal capitalism but is also playing an increasingly central role in the urban growth machine. In fact, there have been many cases where the uneven development of neoliberal urbanism is centred not on the development of luxury apartments, shopping malls, or cultural centres but on the creation of new city parks and public squares. More importantly,

as the case of the High Line and the widespread nature of the *High Line Effect* demonstrate, public space developments around the world are increasingly complex and exploitative. It is therefore crucial to study public spaces through the same critical lens and to situate public space research within the same debates on neoliberal urbanism and critical urban theory.

In order to encapsulate all the complexities involved in the production of public space as well as the multi-scalar socio-spatial implications of exploitative public space developments, it is important to look beyond processes such as privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation. Unlike existing lines of inquiry, a broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification will enable more comprehensive investigation of how structural processes affect the production and development of contemporary public spaces. Instead of focusing on singular issues of ownership or management, commodification of public space shifts the subject of inquiry to a higher level by tracing the connection between the production of public space and the globalising political economy. A commodification lens on public space research represents a more holistic and integrated approach that not only encompasses the interplay of the different processes shaping contemporary public space practice but also explains why such processes occur in the first place. As cities around the world vie for their own High Line, this thesis maintains that it is now more important than ever to not only understand 'who is driving the production and development of public spaces', but also to ask the question 'what are these public spaces for?'. One way to do so, as I will explain in the following chapter, is by investigating the political economy of public space.

4 Critique of the Urban Political Economy

In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical frameworks and concepts that were utilised in this thesis. By establishing the centrality of the urban question in social theory, I will first situate my project within broader sociological debates, before highlighting why a political economy perspective is fundamental to both my understanding of the city and my conceptualisation of public space commodification. Largely informed by Marx's conception of concrete totality and dialectics, I contend that the city and urbanisation are inherently linked to various structural processes that constitute the capitalist mode of production. It is only through a political economy perspective that views the city as a totality, that we can begin to capture the processes, forces, and contradictions within it. By establishing the linkages between capitalist productive forces and the production of public space, my broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification constitutes an important part of my critique of the urban political economy.

Another theoretical framework employed in this thesis draws on Lefebvre's production of space and socio-spatial dialectics. Social relations and contradictions are therefore understood as fundamentally urban and spatial and need to be examined through a production lens. My empirical study of public space sheds light on the socio-spatial implications of public space commodification and highlights the connection between the social production of public space and broader societal issues. Moreover, as illustrated in my research on protest sites, the co-constitution of spatial organisation and social relations is key to maintaining the publicness of everyday spaces. Although Lefebvre's spatial triad model is not always applied explicitly, his conception of the socio-spatial dialectics is fundamental to my understanding and analysis of public space and is evident throughout this thesis in various ways.

The last analytical focus of this thesis is on the implementation of the right to the city. I set out to examine how the right to the city can be enacted and implemented in everyday spaces like shopping malls. To do so, I will rely on theories of everyday life as well as various conceptions and interpretations of the right to the city. Using an everyday-life lens to study the protest sites, I aim to explore how the production of everyday spaces has led to the enactment of the right to the city by the protesters in Hong Kong. Drawing on Lefebvre and his followers, my view on the city and

urbanisation is largely informed by, and firmly in line with, those who work within critical urban theory and Marxist urbanism, and I hope my work on public space will be able to contribute to these debates. It is crucial that the objective of this thesis lies not only in the advancement of urban debates and discussions but also in the implementation of the right to the city and the imagination of a future urban society.

Locating the urban in social theory

In the 1970s, Castells (1977) posited *the urban question* in an attempt to identify the specificity of the urban and answer the question of what *urban* is in urban sociology. Since then, a number of scholars have contributed to similar debates and discussions. Among many other things, the focus of the urban question has ranged from the sociology of consumption (Saunders, 1986), the relation between different social categories and urban space (Tonkiss, 2005), and the ontological question of being urban (Merrifield, 2014), to the question of scale (Brenner, 2000). As evidenced by the wide-ranging debates and growing number of works attempting to address the urban question, it is clear that the city and urbanisation are complex and broad subjects that do not have universally applicable definitions. For the purposes of this thesis, the urban question is simply understood as 'what is driving urbanisation and urban development'. However, it is important to stress that the urban question is as much a sociological one as it is a spatial one. Despite its obvious spatial implications, this thesis is an intervention that is rooted in the field of urban sociology. As Giddens (1981) argues, the city is a 'social thing' that needs to be theorised and analysed in its societal totality. It is against this backdrop that I set out to establish how the urban question is inherently social and sociological by returning to the roots of its sociological discipline.

Sociological study of the city can be traced back to the classical social theories first conceived in the mid to late 19th century and early 20th century when classical social theorists such as Marx, Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber arguably laid the foundations for urban sociology as a discipline through their investigation and analysis of various social phenomena. Even though cities and societies in general look very different now compared to their times, the classical theorists remain highly influential in the way we understand the workings of cities and urban life today. More importantly, the theories they established are just as relevant now as they were at that time, and they have continued to shape the discipline. However, a reading of their works suggests that the city, as a distinct entity and social formation, has never really been the focus and main subject of analysis in any of their studies and investigations. The city and urbanisation are instead often premised on analysis of the different social phenomena that the classical theorists were primarily interested in – class relations in the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1973, 1977), social bonds and community (Tönnies, 2002), morality under the growing

division of labour (Durkheim, 2014), social and mental effects of the money economy (Simmel, 1950, 2004), and the process of rationalisation (Weber, 1949, 1978). Nonetheless, despite often being subsumed under the discussions of various social processes and phenomena, the city remains hugely significant in the conception of the classical social theories.

The city is first and foremost a historic condition for social change. In particular, urbanisation has not only coincided with but also engendered the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. On the one hand, the existence of the city is symptomatic of the different social phenomena in question. The establishment of the medieval cities was, for instance, in part the result of the rationalisation process that Weber is interested in. Marx suggests that industrial capitalism and the social relations it entails have driven urbanisation in rural areas. On the other hand, the different social phenomena are also enabled, facilitated, and intensified by the city. The socio-spatial organisation of cities has given rise to specific sets of social relations that are distinct from those found in rural areas. Size, density, and living conditions are just some of the characteristics of the city that have altered social relations and facilitated the social phenomena discussed. In addition to social relations, urbanisation has also influenced and shaped economic structures and political organisations, as well as human psychology and mental life. Even though the classical social theorists have very different views on what constitutes a city or urban life, it is clear from their respective works that urbanisation and the development of cities as condensations of social processes are in various ways linked to some form of societal progress and advancement.

What we can learn from the classical social theorists' discussions on urban realities and transformations is twofold. Firstly, the development of cities played an important role in shedding light on the social problems studied by the classical social theorists. They have all directly or indirectly discussed how urbanisation and the different characteristics of cities have played a role in the advancement of society. Secondly, the city is constantly shaped by different aspects of social life, and it is therefore impossible to study the city on its own without connecting the urban question to the social relations that take shape in its milieu. Even in cases where cities are analysed as distinctive social formations, it is clear that they are invariably delimited by their relations to societal development and advancement. As such, although the urban question is not discussed extensively or explicitly in their works, what the classical social theorists have illustrated is that city and urbanisation are intrinsically linked to all social phenomena and are therefore an inseparable part of their social theories. According to Lefebvre (2016), the city is not only a place of encounters and exchange but also the medium, milieu, and means of social transformations. Such a view is also shared by Giddens (1981), who goes even further by noting that cities are central to the formation of classes and states. As such, while the urban question is fundamentally a sociological one, to capture and

understand all its processes, forces, and contradictions will require a political economy lens that views cities in their totality.

Marx and the capitalist city

To outline what the urban political economy entails, we must first examine how the urban question is conceived by Marx in his critique of the capitalist political economy. Even though it has been more than a century and a half since Marx developed some of his most influential works, a Marxist approach to understanding the workings of the city is just as relevant today as it was in the past, if not more so. However, not unlike the other classical social theorists mentioned above, in Marx's work, the urban question is seldom the focus of his analysis, and references to the city only appear as 'fragments' that are 'presented in terms of other, broader topics' (Lefebvre, 2016, p. XV). Instead of investigating the city and urbanisation, Marx's main focus is centred on class relations under different modes of production, and in particular the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie in capitalist society. What sets Marx apart from his contemporaries is his emphasis on totality – that everything is related to everything else – as well as dialectics and contradictions. Everything seems, as Marx contends, to be pregnant with its contrary. By analysing the contradictions within capitalism and the capitalist mode of production, Marx established how a critique of political economy should be carried out. In his now famous introduction to *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) outlines a method of analysis based on his conception of concrete totality. According to Marx, all analysis should start with what he calls an imagined concrete, often a chaotic conception of the whole that should then be narrowed down to the simplest concepts by means of abstraction, before returning to the original subject of inquiry as a 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' by reproducing it as the concrete in mind through a process of concentration and unification of the diverse (Marx, 1973, p. 100). By abstracting concrete concepts and drawing common conclusions, one should therefore be able to develop theories and general human laws not too dissimilar to those in natural sciences. Instead of microscopes and chemical reagents, however, Marx maintains that the analysis of economic forms relies on the power of abstraction.

The method of analysis Marx uses in his critique of the political economy is both dialectical and material. As Saunders (1986, p. 16) argues, the principle of dialectic dictates that 'any whole is comprised of a unity of contradictory parts', and it is therefore impossible to analyse any single aspect of the reality without studying it in relation to the totality of its social context. Moreover, as opposed to Hegel's dialectics that is based on idealism, Marx places a strong emphasis on the importance of the material world. He contends that the material world exists prior to our conceptions about it, and that any thoughts we have are simply reflections of

everything that surrounds us. As Marx, together with his close collaborator Engels, suggests in *The German Ideology*, 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' (Marx & Engels, 1947, p. 47). In other words, since our formulations of concepts and ideas conform to the living reality of the material world, we cannot theorise without reflecting upon real world conditions such as modes of production and class relations. Based on his conception of dialectical materialism, capitalism is understood as a concrete totality through the interplay between theory and observation, general laws and social specificities, concrete cases and abstract concepts.

According to Marx (1973), capital is the 'all-dominating economic power' of capitalist society as well as a 'necessary condition for all human production' (p. 258) and it must therefore be 'the starting-point as well as the finishing-point' of any critique of the political economy (p. 107). It is based on this theoretical premise that we understand how Marx's analysis of the city is subsumed under his investigations of class relations in different modes of production. In fact, Marx never considers the city as an independent object of analysis, but as one of the many historic conditions and presuppositions in which the development of capitalism has taken place. To put it simply, Marx's discussion of the city is premised on his critique of the political economy and the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, to understand how Marx views the city and the role it has on the advancement of society, one must first understand the relation between capital and urbanisation during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In other words, the urban question is both specific to and contingent upon capitalism and the capitalist mode of production.

Cities are largely analysed by Marx in relation to the countryside in terms of landed property and the labour market. This antithesis between urban and rural is seen by Marx as the expression of the division of labour in a capitalist society and needs to be abolished in the eradication of the capitalist mode of production. However, it must be noted that Marx does not see urbanisation as the cause of the polarisation of the classes, nor is capitalism an exclusively urban phenomenon. Capitalism, and by extension the class struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, extends well beyond the boundaries of the urban and the rural. In fact, as a result of 'the urbanisation of the rural', the contradiction between the countryside and urban areas is increasingly predominated by the struggles and conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It is through these class struggles that Marx and Engels begin to uncover the connection between the capitalist mode of production and urbanisation. In his empirical survey of the conditions of the working class in Manchester, Engels (2009) highlights how the city is characterised by the marginalisation and exclusion of the working class. The shutting out of the working class is a systematic and conscious attempt to conceal 'everything which might affront the eye and the nerves of the bourgeoisie' (Engels, 2009, p. 87). As a result, the working class of Manchester are confined to working quarters where 'all conceivable evils are

heaped upon the heads of the poor' (Engels, 2009, p. 129). This 'social murder' of the working class, as Engels calls it, has fostered the class consciousness of the workers. The cities, Engels argues, have become the 'birthplaces of labour movements' and are vital to the advancement of the working class. Similarly, Marx (1977) asserts in *Capital* that the heightened capital accumulation in cities has intensified the exploitation of the working class. In other words, Marx and Engels believe that the polarisation of classes and the exploitation of the proletariat occur the most in urban centres. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (2002, p. 224) famously put forward the argument that the establishment of large cities has 'rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life'. While it is clear that Marx and, to a lesser extent, Engels do not see urbanisation as the cause of the polarisation of the classes, nor is capitalism an exclusively urban phenomenon, the concentration of workers in cities not only exposes and exacerbates the evil of capitalism, it also gives the proletariat class its strength in its struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is therefore in the rapidly industrialising cities where Marx and Engels envisioned a class revolution would eventually take place and lead to the fall of capitalism. Despite not being discussed extensively or explicitly, it is evident in Marx's discussion on division of labour and class relations that the capitalist city plays an important role in his critique of the political economy. More importantly, the urban processes depicted in the capitalist city are still apparent and relevant today and are key to my understanding of the urban political economy.

Towards an urban political economy

It is in light of this conception of the capitalist city that a critique of the urban political economy must be formulated by connecting the urban problematic – the sets of problems and contradictions that urban reality involves – to the capitalist mode of production and the accumulation processes that it entails. Political economy, in the broadest sense, can be understood as the study of the 'economic reality together with its political implications' (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 60). By exposing the fallacy of a liberal utopian market economy, Marx's critique of political economy should be understood 'not only as a critique of ideas and discourses about capitalism, but as a critique of capitalism itself' (Brenner, 2009, p. 199). As Harvey (2018) contends, what Marx is trying to illustrate is not only the ways in which capitalism is analysed by other political economists but also how capitalism has resulted in polarisation and inequality between the working class and capitalists. In a similar vein, Lefebvre (2016, p. 91) suggests that the political economy is an invention by the bourgeoisie to serve as 'its ideological and scientific milieu', and a critique of political economy represents an attack on the bourgeoisie on its own terrain. By extension, urban political economy is also bourgeois at its core, and a

critique of urban political economy must be understood as both a critique of capitalist urbanism as well as a fundamental rejection of capitalism (Marcuse, 2009a). Such a critique should not only illuminate the processes of urbanisation but also expose the contradictions of urban space resulting from the influence of capitalist productive forces (Lefebvre, 2003).

As highlighted by Marx, the dialectical relationship between urban space and productive forces is particularly evident in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The city and urban organisation of social relations not only 'shattered' feudal relations but also enabled the subsequent establishment of industrial capitalism by facilitating the domination of capital over the working class (Lefebvre, 2016). The subordination of industrial productive forces to capital is in Lefebvre's (1991) view both economic and political, and it is space that facilitated the total integration of the economic and the political. The city, in particular, played a very important role in the transition by serving as the site of capital accumulation and political intervention (Lefebvre, 2016). It is this combination of economic and political centrality that made the city so crucial in the establishment and survival of capitalism. As the seat of both economic and political power, the city is not only fundamental in maintaining the capital class's domination over the means of production (Lefebvre, 2016) but also key to facilitating political struggles against the exploitation of the working class. As Marx and Engels illustrate, the centralisation of means of production and intensification of capital accumulation as a result of urbanisation have resulted in the worsening living and working conditions of the working class. Moreover, many proletarians are driven to the periphery of cities as a result of the 'improvements' made by the bourgeoisie and urban elites. In many ways, the uneven development of urban geographies highlighted by Marx and Engels is still very much evident today as class struggles under capitalism continue to shape urban space. Not only do the materiality and locality of cities provide a site and milieu for encounters and exchange, urban organisations are also politicising social relations and engendering urban social movements. As such, the city is both a 'great laboratory of social forces' (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 69) and a seat of vast conflicts and contradictions. It is the aim of this thesis to explore how such conflicts and contradictions are played out in the struggles concerning the production of public spaces in Hong Kong.

In addition to facilitating the initial subordination of productive forces to capital, the city also plays an important role in sustaining and ensuring the survival of capitalism by masking and concealing its contradictions. Urbanisation is particularly central to the development of landed properties and the expansion of the real estate market. While Lefebvre (2016) notes that landed properties have led to social decline by slowing growth and paralysing development, they also perform a very critical function in capitalist society and in maintaining capitalism. Exchange of land and its improvements has functioned as a secondary circuit of capital that takes place in parallel with the primary circuit. Whereas the primary circuit of capital largely

comprises the industrial production process and the movable products that it entails, the physical infrastructure and built environment form a secondary circuit of capital 'by virtue of the special way it responds to and dictates the paths of capital accumulation in general in space and time' (Harvey, 2018, p. 152). As capitalism continues to expand spatially through the submission of industrial production to urban (capitalist) productive forces, Lefebvre observes that the secondary circuit has grown and advanced further in comparison to the primary circuit. More importantly, the real estate market and the secondary circuit of capital tend to ensure the survival of capitalism in the face of an economic breakdown by taking over as the principal means of capital accumulation in times of industrial decline. As the intersection between the movable primary circuit of industrial production and the fixed secondary circuit of the real estate market, the city plays a particularly crucial role in sustaining capitalism by concealing the crises and glitches of the capitalist mode of production as well as smoothening the transition from one circuit of capital accumulation to another (Lefebvre, 2003). Conversely, capital's inherent tendency to circulate and expand is, as I will explain later, in turn vital to facilitating and driving urban development.

These dialectical relations between the city and the capitalist mode of production constitute a basis on which a critique of the urban political economy can be formulated. Harvey (1973, p. 231), for instance, suggests that capitalist urbanism can be examined in terms of 'the creation, appropriation and circulation of surplus value'. Traditionally, cities represent a geographical concentration of surpluses where capital and labour are bound to the urban centres. It is, as Lefebvre maintains 'in the realisation of surplus value that [the city] moves to centre stage' (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 122). As capital becomes increasingly globalised as a result of its inherent drive to create surpluses, the survival of capital becomes more dependent on what Harvey refers to as 'spatial fix' – the geographical expansion of capital to facilitate the circulation, absorption, and disposal of surplus values and labour forces. Similarly, Lefebvre (1976) contends that the reproduction of the relations and means of production rely on capital's ability to achieve continuous growth by producing and occupying new (urban) spaces.

As I noted in Chapter 3, cities, as sites of concentrated capital accumulation and exchange, have become what Logan and Molotch (2007) refer to as growth machines for capitalism. Focusing on the actors rather than the processes, they argue that cities are controlled by a coalition of state and private urban elites who adopt a number of different growth strategies with the aim of maximising profit and accumulating capital. Such growth strategies rely on not only the physical built environment of the cities but also the services, amenities, and people in them. Swyngedouw et al. (2002), for example, have examined how large-scale urban projects have become the primary means of stimulating economic growth in various cities. Lang and Rothenberg (2016), on the other hand, contend that public spaces such as the High Line are increasingly utilised to stimulate urban growth by the pro-

growth coalitions of governments and private interests. Green and sustainability projects, they argue, have become the new 'fix' for achieving urban growth. The all-encompassing nature of urban growth strategies has devastating implications on our cities as urban growth tends to be achieved at the expense of the general public (Logan & Molotch, 2007). As evidenced in the case of the Kwun Tong Promenade, the economic interests of a few actors are prioritised over the welfare of the majority in the government's attempt to stimulate growth in the former industrial centre of Kwun Tong (Chan, 2023). According to Logan and Molotch (2007, p. 35), using cities to stimulate and engender growth has resulted in two sets of 'truly urban conflict[s]', which appear in the form of the internal struggle between use and exchange values within a city, as well as the external battle of urban elites against one another. More importantly, the subordination of cities to exchange value and interurban conflicts have tremendous consequences on social relations. Cities are stratified based on how easily and successfully they can attract capital and investments, which tends to result in growing inequality among different individuals and groups. While such instances of inequality are not limited to the confines of the city, they are exacerbated by the spatial organisation and concentration of capital and capitalist activities in the city.

Political economy is, according to Lefebvre (1982, p. 15), simply 'the science of scarcity'. It is a study of how limited commodities are produced and distributed among people who hold unequal power and positions within a society. Harvey (1973) argues that, unlike other scarcities, the scarcity of land is socially determined based on the institution of private properties and facilitated by the monopoly of the land-owning class. An urban political economy perspective of analysis is therefore centred on the fact that the urban fabric – the land and the built environment – is viewed as a commodity. As Soja (2010, p. 44) argues, the domination of exchange value and economic logic has commodified 'every square inch of space in every market-economy'. Cities today, as well as the urban life that they entail, are both the 'site and object of capital accumulation in neoliberal political economy' (Fields, 2016, p. 144). Despite not necessarily being tradable assets on the real estate market, public spaces are also undergoing similar processes of commodification and should therefore be examined through a similar politico-economic lens. In Hong Kong, the scarcity of developable land is well documented as one of the reasons why living spaces, as well as public spaces, are at a premium. More significantly, the perceived lack of public spaces is exacerbated by the government's prioritisation of commercial developments and unequal distribution of public space (Tang, 2017). This scarcity and unequal distribution of public space in Hong Kong thus form the basis of my critique of the urban political economy. By examining the commodification of different public spaces in Hong Kong, I aim to uncover the different political and economic forces driving public space developments and illustrate the ways in which public spaces are exploited by both public and private actors for financial gains.

The production of urban space and everyday life

The production of urban space, as we have discussed, is key to the survival of capital and thus constitutes an important part of the urban political economy. More importantly, the socio-spatial dialectics also shed light on how publicness is maintained in public spaces (Degen, 2008) and how the right to the city can be demanded and enacted in everyday spaces (Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2002). It is therefore important to understand what Lefebvre's conception of space entails and how it is utilised in my study on public space. According to Lefebvre (1991, p. 26), 'social space is a social product'. While space is often seen as an abstract and intangible thing that is detached from concrete reality, Lefebvre argues that space is a concrete abstraction that has taken on its own reality and is not any less real than commodities and money. A central aspect of his conception is that space is not merely a container or setting where things and activities take place. Instead, Lefebvre sees space as a relation between the built environment, symbolic meanings, and everyday life, and it is shaped by various power relations and social structures. Space is fundamental to our understanding of the world, and it is pertinent to shift our focus of interest 'from things in space to the actual production of space' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 37). In order to uncover the 'contradictions associated with that space' as well as the 'conflicts imminent in that production' (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 148), it is important to embrace the complexity and multiplicity of space, and how social relations are embedded and incorporated in social space. According to Lefebvre, social space, which is distinct from socialised space, consists of a triadic interrelationship that comprises three distinct concepts of space: spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space. The spatial triad conceived by Lefebvre corresponds to the 'perceived', 'conceived', and 'lived' relations that can be more broadly adopted beyond the realm of spatial analysis.

Spatial practice refers to the dialectical relationship between the practices of daily life and the physical transformation of the built environment. On the one hand, the materiality of spatial practice provides the structure for various activities and relations by embracing 'production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). On the other hand, spatial practice can also be revealed in the form of socio-economic processes that shape the material space. Through such dialectical interactions, the spatial practice of a society 'secretes' – that is, slowly produces and appropriates – the space of that society. According to Lefebvre, an example of this close, and often paradoxical, association of 'daily reality' and 'urban reality' can be found in the relation between our daily routine and the infrastructure and networks that connect places of work, leisure, and private life. As Lefebvre argues, spatial practice concerns both the activities that are shaped and driven by the built environment, as well as the physical space that is being produced in the process. Put simply, spatial practice refers to the material relations and physical interactions that not only take

place in the urban environment but also shape it in the process (Leary, 2009). Lefebvre likens spatial practice to perceived space, which can be deciphered and analysed empirically through everyday reality. In many ways, spatial practice is the space where the socio-spatial implications of public space commodification are the most profound. The domination of exchange value over use value is not only materialised in the design and planning of the public space but also shapes how the space is being used. In other words, users' experiences and perceptions of public space are largely altered by its materiality, which is appropriated by the processes driving public space commodification. To Lefebvre, spatial practice is central to a society as it maintains a sense of continuity and cohesion, enabling the society to function by giving structure to everyday life.

Representation of space, as Lefebvre contends, is a conceptualised space. It is the dominant space of the society and represents its mode of production. Associated with conceived space, representations of space are often 'tied to the relations of production and the order which those relations impose' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Representations of space are usually conceived by planners, architects, engineers, and other experts, and can be found in policy documents, technical drawings, and scientific representations. They represent the manifestation of the experts' mental constructs of social space, which tend to utilise systematic codifications, and are greatly shaped by theoretical ideologies based on the dominant mode of production. It could be argued that representations of space are, in many ways, the means and tools for the dominant mode of production – capitalism, in today's society – to exert power, control, and influence over the social production of space. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 42) argues, representations of space 'have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space', and their impact is not only symbolic or imaginary but also practical and material – often in the form of constructions and architectural projects. The domination of representations of space is particularly prominent in the case of the Kwun Tong Promenade. The role of the government and its supporters in dictating the production of the waterfront public space was not only evident in the planning and development stages – as the analysis of the planning and policy documents revealed – but also in its continuous production through management and other physical improvements. Moreover, it is also in representations of space that we can uncover the intentions and motivations behind the commodification of public space. As Schmid (2012) contends, representation of space indicates how the city is defined and depicted by the urban elites under the domination of the capitalist mode of production – and it is only through this dominant conception of the city that we can begin to perceive urban space.

Representational space, or spaces of representation, is the space of everyday life. It is the space of users and inhabitants and is lived 'through its associated images and symbols' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Not only is representational space informed by history, it is also a lived space of imagination, emotions, and artistic interpretations that is dynamic and alive. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) maintains, representational

space embodies 'complex symbolisms […] linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life'. In other words, representational space refers to the physical space itself and to a mixed space that exemplifies the lived experience of the people through their practices in everyday life. As such, representational space can be understood as a space of symbolic meaning that signifies the urban experience of its inhabitants. Even though representational space is often subordinated to the dominant mode of production and its representation of space, Lefebvre (1991, p. 39) sees it as the space 'which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate'. Not only can representational space be appropriated by its users through their everyday practices, it is also 'the site of possible emergent spatial revolutions' where an alternative counter-space can be imagined (Shields, 1999, p. 165). This is the realm in which the protesters begin to stake their claim to the right to the city by imagining an alternative space within the everyday spaces of shopping malls. However, without materialising such demands and imaginations beyond the realm of representational space, they tend to remain merely as 'symbolic works' that will eventually lose impetus and subside (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42). As such, for any spatial revolutions to be realised, it is crucial to imagine a counter-space within the representational space and to also change and appropriate the realms of spatial practice and representation of space. The short-lived nature of the protests in shopping malls thus points to the fact that the protesters imagined a counter representational space and appropriated its spatial practice but failed to fundamentally change how the shopping malls are conceived by the dominant productive forces.

According to Lefebvre (1991, p. 46), the three aspects of the spatial triad are not only interconnected but also operate together by contributing 'in different ways to the production of space according to their qualities and attributes, according to the society or mode of production in question'. Such interconnectedness and interdependence do not, however, necessarily guarantee the cohesiveness and stability of the whole as certain historically and socially specific spatialisations tend to upset its balance by subordinating particular aspects of the spatial triad within the production of space. Urbanisation under capitalism, for instance, is dominated by its representations of space and tends to produce commodified spaces of exchange value, while the lived spaces of users and use value are largely neglected. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 336) argues, capitalism is only capable of producing a capitalist space, and under capitalism, 'the entirety of space must be endowed with exchange value'. All urban space is thus subordinated to what he refers to as the 'commodity world', which no longer only encompasses the goods and things produced, circulated, and consumed, but it also governs and dominates urban space in its totality. As such, the capitalist society is 'haunted' by an appropriated space that is dominated by exchange value, and it is only through the political use of urban space that use value can be reinstated. Just as capitalist productive forces have produced a capitalist space, Lefebvre (1991, p. 54) asserts that 'a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential'. In other words, any social

transformation cannot be 'truly revolutionary in character' without the production of a corresponding space.

Even though the spatial triad may appear to be abstract, symbolic, and difficult to grasp, Lefebvre contends that the production of space is in fact no less concrete than the production of any other commodity. According to Lefebvre (1991, p. 40), the triadic conceptualisation of space should not be treated as merely an abstract model, and the concept 'loses all force […] if it cannot grasp the concrete'. Using this spatial triad to 'grasp the concrete' of the city, we begin to see how urban space is both produced by and subordinated to capitalist productive forces. The production of urban space, as Purcell (2002, p. 102) argues, entails 'much more than just planning the material space of the city; it involves producing and reproducing all aspects of urban life'. To understand the production of urban space, Schmid (2012, p. 52) suggests a 'three-dimensional production process' that comprises the production of material, knowledge, and meaning. In addition to being a material and physical space that can be empirically observed (urban practice) and a lived and practical experience (the urban experience), urban space is also dependent on the idea, conception, and representation that define and demarcate it (the definition of the urban). It is therefore only through the social production lens that we begin to understand the dialectical relations between space, social relations, and embodied meanings. As Low (2000, p. 239) argues, understanding the social production of public space 'provides insights into how these meanings are encoded on and interpreted in the designated landscape'. More significantly, as I will discuss later, the production of public space is also representative of the means through which the right to the city is demanded and enacted (Mitchell, 2003). Socio-spatial dialectics is fundamental to my understanding of both the production of public space by capitalist productive forces and the imagination and realisation of a counter, alternative, and emancipatory urban centrality. It is with this appreciation of socio-spatial dialectics that this thesis aims to examine how protesters in Hong Kong create, claim, and appropriate urban spaces in their political struggles.

According to Lefebvre, urban space is not only imbued with its own order and problems but is itself a contradiction that can only be exposed and illustrated through a critique of urbanist ideologies and practices. The 'logic and formal properties' of the urban, Lefebvre suggests, will lead 'to a dialectical analysis of its contradictions' (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 39). To him, such a critique can only take shape in the practices of everyday life. Lefebvre's critique of everyday life is largely centred on the concept of alienation (Lefebvre, 1971, 2014), which Marx uses to describe the separation of labour from the means of production in a capitalist society. Although Marx's conception of alienation is an economic one, Lefebvre regards alienation as a broader concept that can be applied to different aspects of society. The critique of everyday life, as Lefebvre (2003, p. 139) maintains, 'has no clearly circumscribed domain' and does not fall into any predefined categories. As such, a critique of everyday life represents critical thought that 'transgresses the

boundaries separating the specialized sciences of human reality' (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 140). Since urbanisation has taken over industrialisation as the predominant process that shapes our society, everyday life has become essentially urban, and a critique of everyday life is thus a critique of practices that are typical to the urban phenomenon. Lefebvre suggests that formulating a radical and political strategy against capitalism would require the transformation of everyday life in urban society by solving urban questions and centring the urban problematic within politics. Moreover, Lefebvre (1971, p. 14) argues that everyday life is 'the inevitable starting point for the realisation of the possible', and it is only in the realm of everyday life where radical politics and revolutions can be manifested.

Drawing on Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, I suggest that it is in the everyday spaces where the right to the city can be demanded and enacted. The protesters' political use of shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong, as I illustrate in Paper 4, constituted moments of resistance that punctured and subverted the everyday routine. The shopping malls, which are traditionally associated with spatial practices centred on leisure and consumption (Shields, 1992), became arenas where protesters attempted to situate revolutionary ruptures within the 'broader time frame of transforming everyday life' (Kipfer, 2002, p. 133). In many ways, the protesters' actions – sit-ins, displays of protest art, rallies, etc. – inside the shopping malls can be understood as what de Certeau (1984) refers to as *spatial tactics*, which are not dissimilar to graffiti writers' use of everyday urban spaces. Spatial tactics, according to de Certeau (1984, p. 29), 'do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it'. In fact, spatial tactics are characterised by their 'non-space' and can only play on the space of the other by using, manipulating, and diverting it. De Certeau (1984, p. xix) stresses that a tactic can only 'insinuate itself into the other's place fragmentarily, without taking over its entirety'. As Tonkiss (2005, p. 145) contends, although spatial tactics 'may open up sites of distraction and dissent, they remain after all subject to the strategies of state and capital in the ordering of urban space'. Despite their temporary nature, the protests in shopping malls eventually resulted in a sustained transformation of everyday life by way of a widespread adoption of tactical consumption. Although it was not the alienation-ending revolution that Lefebvre has envisioned, the protests are still indicative of the emancipatory potential of everyday spaces and everyday life.

The right to the city and critical urban theory

According to Lefebvre (1996, p. 158), the right to the city is 'like a cry and a demand' – it is, as Marcuse (2009a, p. 190) contends, at the same time a 'cry out of necessity' as well as 'a demand for something more'. Not only is the right to the city 'an exigent demand by those deprived of basic material and existing legal rights', it is also 'an aspiration for the future by those discontented with life' (Marcuse, 2009,

p. 190). As Marcuse (2009) suggests, we should not be concerned with anyone's claims to the right to the city. Instead, we should only focus on the people who are marginalised, alienated, and excluded in the process of urbanisation and how their right to the city can be enacted. Similarly, it is clear that not everyone's claim to the right to the city will constitute an alternative urban society based on *oeuvre* and use value. In fact, as Harvey (2008, p. 31) points out, the right to the city has increasingly fallen into 'the hands of private or quasi-private interests', who are using the right to the city to 'shape cities more and more after their own desires'. As such, the right to the city can also be understood as a demand for democratisation of the means of production. While the revolution Lefebvre envisions is urban (as opposed to industrial) by nature, it is still fundamentally a political and class affair centred on exercising control over production. As Lefebvre (1996, p. 154) maintains, the urban strategy towards an alternative urban society 'cannot but depend on the presence and action of the working class, the only one able to put an end to a segregation directed essentially against it'. By recognising and enacting its right to the city, the working class, as a class, is crucial to any urban revolution. While the working class may not be able to build a new urban society unaided, Lefebvre (1996, p. 154) is adamant that 'without it nothing is possible'. Class relations and class struggles remain central to the urban problematic – urbanism, as Lefebvre contends, is fundamentally class urbanism.

Lefebvre's critique of the capitalist city when he conceptualised the right to the city is just as applicable today as it was in the 1960s, if not more so. Unlike the capitalist city that is defined by exchange value and products, Lefebvre (1996) contends that the traditional city is an *oeuvre* and its use is characterised as *la fête*. In other words, it is both a work of art that is representative of use value and an unproductive celebration of pleasure and enjoyment. To inhabit a city, as Lefebvre argues, is to participate in social life through the use of urban space. However, as a result of the expansion of capitalism and the domination of economic logic, the use value of the city has been destroyed, and the urban reality is subordinated to a world of commodities. The traditional city, which was seen as the last barrier preventing the total domination of exchange value, has been overcome and swept away by the never-ending expansion of commodities and capitalist productive forces. Lefebvre (1996, p. 148) notes that being rid of its use value, the 'city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically'. Instead, it has become merely 'an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 148). In other words, the city has been transformed into a commodity, a space that prioritises exchange value, and a place for the accumulation of capital where even pleasure and enjoyment hinge upon consumption and exchange. As Lefebvre contends, the traditional city of *oeuvre* and *la fête* has been replaced by a capitalist city that is not only a site for consumption but is also being consumed itself.

As Lefebvre (2003) suggests, it is only in this milieu of the end of the existing traditional city that the right to city can be demanded and enacted. However, while some of the traditional city's characteristics and qualities are deemed desirable, the right to the city does not call for a return to the traditional city. In fact, Lefebvre (1996, p. 148) maintains that we cannot 'envisage the reconstitution of the old city, only the construction of a new one on new foundations […] in another society'. The right to the city thus refers to the right to a future city and a new desired way of living, which is no longer delimited by the traditional city but is characteristic of a new, globalising urban society. Furthermore, the right to the city should also be conceived as more than just a right to visit the centre or access urban resources. As Harvey (2008, p. 23) argues, at the core of the right to the city is the 'right to change ourselves by changing the city'. In other words, it represents the right to participation and appropriation, not only regarding the design, planning, and construction of the new city, but also regarding the way we reinvent ourselves and our livelihoods. More importantly, the right to the city is not a singular right for an individual but rather a multitude of rights for the collective. As Lefebvre (1996, p. 173) contends, the right to the city 'manifests itself as a superior form of rights' that comprises a number of different rights including 'the right to freedom, to individualisation in socialisation, to habitat and to inhabit'. Furthermore, since the transformation of the city 'inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation' (Harvey, 2008, p. 23), it is imperative that the right to the city is demanded and enacted as a common and collective right.

It has been more than 50 years since Lefebvre first proposed the right to the city in his book *Le Droit à la ville* in 1968. Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the right to the city – what it is and what it entails – still remains very relevant in today's globalising society. While the right to the city has engendered important critical debates within urban studies, the practical implications of the right to the city can also be found in different contexts across the world. Various versions and interpretations of the right to the city have been adopted by activist groups, city and national governments, and even the United Nations. The conceptualisation and enactment of the right to the city have formed the centre of various political movements as well as the rallying cry of the suppressed (Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009a). The issue of the right to the city is also increasingly connected to struggles for social and spatial justice as the uneven development of urban geographies continues to marginalise and displace underprivileged users and inhabitants of the city (Fainstein, 2009; Iveson, 2011; Soja, 2010). The wide-ranging adoption of the right to the city in different political and social contexts is not only representative of the growing problems and contradictions that urbanisation and other urban processes entail but also of the urgency required to act. However, as uses of the right to the city continue to proliferate, some scholars caution that the concept risks being oversimplified, depoliticised, or even co-opted and appropriated by the bourgeoisie and global elites (Harvey, 2012; Mayer, 2009; Shields, 2013). As such, it is in my opinion that

Lefebvre's original intention of conceptualising the right to the city as a revolutionary call must remain at the centre of the concept for it to be in any way meaningful. The pursuit and implementation of the right to the city, as Marcuse (2009a) argues, constitute the main concern and the 'ultimate purpose' of critical urban theory.

As Tabb and Sawers (1978, p. 18) contend, a Marxist approach to urban studies should start 'by asking why cities exist in the form they do, what their evolution has been, and what the tendencies embodied in contemporary production forms are'. While such questions are key to shedding light on the dialectical relations between the urban and capitalist productive forces, it is just as crucial that a critique of the urban political economy is conceived as a 'fundamental rejection of the prevailing capitalist system' (Marcuse, 2009a, p. 194). Urban political economy is thus central to a critical urban theory that 'involves the critique of ideology and the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities' (Brenner, 2009, p. 198). More importantly, in addition to being a means to understand and explain the 'politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space' (Brenner, 2009, p. 198), critical urban theory must also have practical implications. By informing the 'strategic perspective' of different actors, Brenner suggests that critical urban theory can play an important role in the 'sustained engagement with contemporary worldwide patterns of capitalist urbanisation and their far-reaching consequences for social, political, economic and human/nature relations' (Brenner, 2009, p. 206). In fact, it could be argued that it is in the realm of practices where critical urban theory can be best formulated and utilised as a political and revolutionary strategy against the predominant capitalist mode of production. Not only does critical urban theory need to expose the contradictions of capitalist relations in urban processes, it must also 'demonstrate the need for a politicised response' that addresses the root causes of deprivation and discontent in cities (Marcuse, 2009a, p. 194). Furthermore, just as the demand for a renewed urban life through the appropriation and transformation of urban society is central to the right to the city, critical urban theory must go beyond illuminating the contradictions of capitalist urbanism by pointing to alternative ways of organising social capacities and urban resources.

It is in this theoretical milieu of critical urban theory that I attempt to conceptualise the commodification of public space based on a critique of capitalist urban political economy. As Giddens (1981, p. 149) argues, 'capitalist urbanism is based upon the commodification of space'. The commodification of urban land, according to Giddens (1981, p. 153), has resulted in the '"created space" that is the day-to-day habitat of the majority of the population in the developed capitalist societies'. Similarly, Lefebvre and others contend that the city, along with urban life, has become a commodity that is centred on exchange value (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991). As Schmid (2012) notes, commodification of the urban generally refers to the process 'by which urban space is exploited' (p. 55), and urban life is transformed

as it is 'implicated in the economic process of valorisation' (p. 56). As a result of the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and the intensification of inter-urban competition, commodification of urban space has not only been exacerbated in the last few decades but has also become more far-reaching and indiscriminate. While the commodification of housing and the expansion of the real estate market have captured plenty of critical attention both within and outside of academia, I am most concerned with the commodification of urban public space, as well as its socio-spatial implications.

By retracing the development of commodification as a concept and going back to its conceptual origins, in this thesis I set out to explore how the concept can be broadened and applied to the development of public spaces in Hong Kong. More significantly, I also seek to discuss how the resistance against public space commodification is central to the political struggles that have taken place in Hong Kong. It is my intention that the conceptualisation of public space commodification will both contribute to future urban and public space research and have practical and concrete consequences through the implementation of the right to the city.

5 Studying the Public Spaces of Insurgent Hong Kong

This research on public space is intrinsically linked to Hong Kong and its political economy. It was conducted in a milieu of political instability and social turmoil. The research process was, in different ways, shaped by the various events that had taken place in Hong Kong since 2019, including the Anti-ELAB movement, the outbreak of COVID-19, and the enactment of the National Security Law. These developments not only resulted in transformations of public spaces but also affected how people acted and interacted in public. In this chapter, I will present the manner in which the data in this thesis was collected and analysed during these uncertain times and discuss how my theoretical standpoints, as well as the ever-changing situation of Hong Kong, have informed the methodologies adopted. To do so, I will first outline the research process and substantiate how it can be best described as a research journey. I will then discuss the methodological approaches adopted throughout this study and how they relate to theory. Then, I will present specific data collection processes, as well as the procedures and thinking involved in analysing different data, before finally discussing my ethical considerations.

A research journey

One of the challenges of writing a compilation thesis on a topic as broad as public space is to make sure that I end up with a set of papers that are largely cohesive and relevant. While such an endeavour requires a lot of planning, it would be false to suggest that everything has gone according to the plans I had in the beginning. Instead, there were many twists and turns that ultimately shaped my thesis into the way it is presented here. In many ways, this research process is more akin to a journey that took me to some unexpected places. When I started my PhD in 2018, my plan was to examine and understand how processes of commodification have impacted public spaces. Hong Kong was chosen as the field site not only because of my knowledge and understanding of the city – its social, political, and economic organisation, as well as its planning system and development process – but also because of the fact that urban processes tend to be heightened and intensified in Hong Kong as a result of its density and pressure to develop (Cuthbert, 1985; Tang

et al., 2019; Tonkiss, 2014). In many ways, Hong Kong seemed like a natural place to start.

As a lifelong urban dweller, I have long been interested in different public spaces in the city. Growing up in Hong Kong, I spent most of my free time in public spaces – sports facilities, playgrounds, and parks were some of the places I frequented most during my childhood. Public space has always been an important part of the urban fabric in Hong Kong because living spaces in the city are at a premium. High living costs also mean that spending time in the park is considerably more accessible and affordable than going to restaurants and bars. Despite the increasingly unbearable heat and torrential rains, public space remains an important part of Hong Kongers' everyday life. As I spent more time in different public spaces, I became particularly interested in what makes some public spaces more enjoyable and popular than others.

This journey of studying public space began in 2016 when I joined Hong Kong Public Space Initiative (HKPSI), a non-profit organisation that aims to 'enhance Hong Kong people's understanding of public space' through research, education, and community programmes. As a member of HKPSI, I visited and studied different public spaces in Hong Kong. It was through these visits and studies that I began to uncover some of the processes that are driving the planning and design of public spaces in Hong Kong. In preparation for my PhD project, I initially examined 12 public spaces across the city. Out of the 12 public spaces, I selected three very different public spaces as the point of departure of my research: the Kerry Hotel, the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront, and the Kwun Tong Promenade. The three public spaces were chosen because they have similar locations along the waterfront in largely mixed-use neighbourhoods. More importantly, despite having very different development, ownership, and management structures, these three waterfront public spaces all lacked publicness in some way and to some degree. As I contend in Paper 1, despite some fundamental differences, the three public spaces are all influenced by similar commodification processes. The variation and wide-ranging socio-spatial impacts formed the basis of my conceptualisation of public space commodification. Among the three public spaces surveyed in Paper 1, the Kwun Tong Promenade stood out from the rest. Whereas commodification of the other two public spaces was largely driven by private interests, the Kwun Tong Promenade was planned, designed, and managed by the government. In contrast to the common notion that public equals good in public space practices, the commodification of the publicly owned and managed waterfront public space as well as its socio-spatial impacts were particularly interesting. As such, the Kwun Tong Promenade was chosen as a critical case in Paper 2 to examine how government-driven commodification of public space was manifested and linked to the multi-scalar production of spatial injustice. The findings on the Promenade also contributed to my conceptualisation of public space commodification and how it is impacted by the increasingly authoritarian nature of governance in Hong Kong.

I was still in the process of collecting data for my study on the Kwun Tong Promenade when the Anti-ELAB protests broke out in the late spring of 2019. As demonstrations and rallies became increasingly commonplace, and struggles over public space use continued to intensify, I started asking myself what a non-commodified public space would be like. The public space that repeatedly came to mind was, in fact, not technically a public space. Examining Umbrella Square as an ideal typical public space, I suggest in Paper 3 that openness and porosity are key conditions of a vibrant and diverse public space. Despite the lack of any concrete political progress, the Umbrella Movement had left a lasting impact on the ways in which protesters organise politically and on how they appropriate the public realm. Moreover, the transformation of the protest site can also inform the ways we design, plan, and manage public spaces, especially during a time when public spaces are increasingly commodified.

As the protests continued to escalate, I was paying close attention to what was happening from afar. By the end of the summer, the police and government had virtually banned all demonstrations on the streets, and it was rather clear that the tightening control of public space use and freedom of expression was not a temporary measure. The protesters' struggle over public spaces, as well as other urban spaces, became even more crucial to their claim to the right to the city. As mass demonstrations and rallies were banned on the streets, protesters resorted to subverting and appropriating everyday spaces all over Hong Kong. The protesters' tactics were in stark contrast to the Umbrella Movement, and I was particularly drawn to the protesters' use of shopping malls as protest sites. Shopping malls have long been seen as pseudo public spaces that have contributed to the decline of publicness in our cities, and it is my intention to examine how the tensions between public and private have played out differently under a police state and authoritarian regime in Paper 4.

In addition to the Anti-ELAB protests, my research was also greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong. Although the challenges posed by COVID-19 were not unique to this research, it was particularly difficult to conduct fieldwork in Hong Kong because of the 'Zero Covid' policy and strict restrictions that the Hong Kong government had imposed since the first outbreak of the virus. In addition to local social distancing measures, strict travel restrictions and quarantine requirements were also in place until the end of 2022. When I visited Hong Kong in the autumn of 2021, I had to spend two weeks in quarantine in a hotel room. Although I did not mind being in solitude and was able to work throughout my time in quarantine, spending two weeks confined to a hotel room made me appreciate the importance of public space and public space research even more.

Another major challenge I faced was the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in the summer of 2020. Although freedom of expression had been increasingly suppressed in Hong Kong ever since the Anti-ELAB protests broke

out, the implementation of the all-encompassing National Security Law represented a level of authoritarian control and police state previously unseen in Hong Kong (Davis, 2020). The National Security Law also had a profound and concrete impact on the way I could conduct fieldwork and collect data. When I went back to Hong Kong in the autumn of 2021, I could feel that there was a sense of tension, uneasiness, and anxiousness in the air. The fear of being arrested and jailed for a long time had induced behavioural changes that I had never witnessed before. The fact that there was not a clear red line of what can or cannot be said and done had resulted in varying degrees of self-censorship among Hong Kongers. Even on the internet, people were afraid and apprehensive of expressing their opinions or discussing any sensitive topics.

The rapidly changing situation in Hong Kong over the past few years made it almost impossible to plan and perform any fieldwork. It was particularly challenging to be so far away when the protests were happening in Hong Kong. Keeping track of everything that was taking place in Hong Kong and being flexible with my research design became increasingly crucial throughout my PhD. Instead of being overcommitted to certain predetermined methods or data sources, I was, for the most part, able to adapt my research to the ever-changing social and political situation in Hong Kong. Although detours and deviations were made from my original research plan, there was nevertheless a natural and logical progression as I shifted my research focus from the banal and everyday public spaces to the contentious protest sites. I was able to relate findings from my research on public space commodification to the later studies on protest sites. While my research started off as a study on commodification of public space, over the course of my PhD it became increasingly a story about Hong Kong as I uncovered processes and complexities specific to the rapidly deteriorating city. In many ways, this thesis will forever be linked to the people, events, and spaces that have shaped Hong Kong in recent years.

Methodological approaches

As discussed, while all the papers are broadly centred on public spaces in Hong Kong, this research journey has led me to very different research objects. On the one hand, my investigation of public space commodification has led me to the three waterfront public spaces as well as the redevelopment of the Kwun Tong industrial district. On the other hand, to examine the formation of publics and implementation of the right to the city, I analysed both Umbrella Square and the shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB movement. Although each research object requires its own set of methods and data, they were all guided by an ethnographic approach to spatial study. While ethnography can be interpreted in many ways and is used to study a wide variety of things, it can be broadly defined as 'social research based on close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space'

(Wacquant, 2003, p. 5). Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 3) suggest that ethnography is carried out 'in the field' and it 'usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time'. The challenge for the ethnographer, as Anderson (2022, p. 3) contends, is to understand and comprehend the local culture and knowledge that govern and underpin a community's 'shared understandings' by observing and listening to people. In addition, being 'in the field' also allows the researcher to experience other senses (Pink, 2009; Tutenges, 2022). The euphoric feeling when the student leaders returned to Umbrella Square after their meeting with Hong Kong authorities, the sense of solidarity among protesters singing inside shopping malls, or even the lingering smell of tear gas were all sensations that were part of the overall spatial experience. While one can debate what qualifies as being 'in the field for an extended period of time' and thus question whether the research undertaken in this thesis constitutes an ethnography (as a reviewer of one of my papers did), I maintain that this research was guided by ethnographic thinking and principles. In particular, I drew inspiration from works of urban and spatial ethnography such as those by Degen (2008), Mathews (2011), Hall (2012), and Kim (2015), as well as public space studies by Staeheli and Mitchell (2008), Loughran (2014), and others. This research is, for all intents and purposes, an ethnographic study of public space that entails a multitude of methods and data sources.

As Low (2017b, p. 1) suggests, the ethnographic study of space is 'critical to understanding the everyday lives of people whose homes and homelands are disrupted by globalisation, uneven development, violence and social inequality'. By applying ethnographic methodologies and thinking to spatial studies, I seek to uncover not only the processes and forces behind public space commodification but also how it has affected different users by building on 'the "everyday urbanism" sensibility of looking with a fresh eye at places and people in the city who are often overlooked' (Kim, 2015, p. 8). An ethnographic study of urban space like this can, as Hall (2012, p. 14) contends, reveal 'not only the global-local or dominant-subaltern relationships, but the unanticipated (and often inconsistent) expressions of human frailty and ingenuity, and how these intersect with the economic forces and political frameworks of our time'. Such forces and relationships are not only at work in the contestations of protest sites but are also evident in the mundane everyday use of public space. The Kwun Tong Promenade, as I illustrate in Paper 2, is a case in point where the broader political and economic forces intersect with the everyday life of local residents (Chan, 2023).

While there are many different approaches to ethnographic studies of space (Low, 2017b), my focus for this research is on the social production of public space. As outlined in the previous chapter, Lefebvre contends that social space is a social product that consists of spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space (Lefebvre, 1991). Using Lefebvre's conception of social space as a point of departure, the social production lens 'illuminates how a space or

place comes into existence and opens up questions about the political, economic and historical motives of its planning and development' (Low, 2017b, p. 34). Moreover, as Leary (2009, p. 196) outlines in his study on Manchester, Lefebvre's triadic model of social space is 'flexible enough to be applied to a range of planning issues'. This is also why we have seen a proliferation of urban research utilising the social production approach (Allen & Pryke, 1994; Degen, 2008; Fyfe, 1996; Leary, 2009; Ng, 2014). However, as Ng et al. (2010, p. 415) remind us, it is crucial to 'go beyond a mechanical application of Lefebvre's concepts to the local contexts and highlight the importance of heightened sensitivities'. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 40) contends, his concept 'loses all force [...] if it cannot grasp the concrete', and it is the aim of this thesis to 'grasp the concrete' by linking the materiality of spatial practices to the political and economic forces behind the production of public space.

The study of commodification of public space, in particular, called for a politico-economic perspective that can both uncover the structural forces driving the development of public spaces and establish the linkages between the globalising political economy and the socio-spatial impacts of public space commodification. As Dikeç (2007, p. 5) explains in his work on urban policy, political economy approaches can 'highlight processes of neoliberalisation' by relating urban policy 'to the larger restructurings of the state'. Contextualising and situating the cases within the local, regional, and global political economy here was therefore key to my study on public space commodification. Understanding how the planning and development of public space relate to the local economy and broader political situation, as I illustrate in Papers 1 and 2, is crucial to uncovering the different forces driving public space commodification in Hong Kong. Moreover, it is also important to maintain a multi-scalar approach to such an ethnographic study of public space (Kim, 2015; Leary, 2009). The multi-scalar view of the city, as Soja (2009, p. 32) suggests, 'is key to understanding the scope and interpretive power of a critical spatial perspective'. Instead of simply looking at the public space itself, it was crucial in my research to examine the impact of public space commodification across neighbourhoods and even cities. Commodification of public space, as I argue throughout this thesis, is linked to broader urban processes such as the production of spatial injustice and can only be captured through a multi-scalar lens. As Kim (2015, p. 29) contends, it is imperative for any spatial ethnography to connect 'microcosms of small spaces and intimate interactions to urbanisation as a global process of change'.

The socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square was largely undertaken using an ethnohistorical approach to social production of space. Examining the historical development of the built environment can not only provide 'a basic understanding of the evolution of architectural and spatial form' (Low, 2017b, p. 37) but, more importantly, it can also reveal the 'ideology behind particular forms of public space and how these ideologies might [...] produce certain forms of spatial behaviour' (Degen, 2008, p. 25). Despite only lasting for less than three months, the Umbrella

Movement was well documented not only in the mass media but also by participants using a wide variety of media including images, videos, maps, and other artworks. Being a participant in the Umbrella Movement and having frequented Umbrella Square on an almost daily basis, I was able to draw on my own personal experience as well as images and videos that I had taken, which were particularly important to studying the protest site retrospectively. In addition to the first-hand material I collected, I also made use of a wide range of ethnohistorical documents and secondary sources. The extensive documentation surrounding the protest, the protesters, and the protest site meant that I was able to chart and examine the social production and development of Umbrella Square over the course of the 79 days. Unlike my study on Umbrella Square, which I undertook after the protests, the Anti-ELAB protests were still ongoing when I started conducting research on the shopping malls. Since I could not, for logistical and practical reasons, 'be there' on the ground in the early parts of the Anti-ELAB protests, I resorted to following the developments live in real time through various social media and live streaming platforms. Despite being thousands of kilometres away, being able to participate online provided important insights into the dynamics and organisation of the protests, and the 'temporal co-presence' of taking part in real time has also given new meaning to conducting research remotely (Gray, 2016, p. 505). As Gray (2016) suggests, 'being then', is in some cases, even more important than 'being there'. Although I eventually managed to go back to Hong Kong to do fieldwork, my research on shopping malls as protest sites was largely conducted using digital and remote ethnographic methodologies for a number of reasons that will be outlined later in the chapter.

Contrary to the common notion that proximity is everything in ethnography, conducting ethnographic research online and remotely is not necessarily inferior to other ethnographic approaches (Gray, 2016; Hine, 2015, 2017; Postill, 2017). Digital ethnography, or ethnography for the internet, as Hine (2015, p. 2) puts it, requires the same 'commitment to some fundamental principles of ethnography as a distinctive mode of knowledge production'. Following certain social events, especially those that entail some form of risk and danger, from afar can also be 'liberating and even preferable to being present in body' (Gray, 2016, p. 503). More importantly, in the case of the Anti-ELAB protests, the internet was how everyone – protesters, supporters, and the general public – followed the protests. As the protests became increasingly scattered across Hong Kong, multiple demonstrations and rallies took place in various locations across the city at the same time. Even the protesters on the ground had to rely on the internet to not only communicate with each other but also keep track of what was happening elsewhere. I was, as Gray did in her study on the protests in Russia, following it 'as everyone else did'.

As it has been widely documented, online forums and chat groups constituted the main means of communication for the protesters, and it was on these platforms where protests were organised beforehand and reviewed afterwards (Erni & Zhang,

2022; Lee et al., 2019; Liang & Lee, 2021). Such discussions online were particularly key to understanding how the protesters perceived and used different spaces as protest sites. While it is possible to conduct sound research entirely online, I agree with Gray (2016) that digital and remote ethnography is more effective when complemented with embodied knowledge of the sites and contexts. Being able to triangulate and combine online data with on-the-ground observations was particularly advantageous for my study on shopping malls. When I reviewed and analysed live stream footage and discussion threads, I was able to follow the events and discussions by not only locating exactly where different things were happening but also visualising those specific sites and their surroundings. When the police entered New Town Plaza, chasing after the protesters, there was a lot of confusion and discussion online about where exactly the police came from. Having first-hand experience of the complex spatial organisation of New Town Plaza and its connections to surrounding shopping centres allowed me to understand and follow such debates. It was clear that the embodied experience and knowledge of the different protest sites that I gained from my visits were crucial to understanding and analysing what was happening.

The internet, Hine (2015, 2017) argues, is increasingly embedded in everyday life, and the boundary between online and offline is increasingly blurred. As such, she argues that digital ethnography should not treat the internet as a delimited field but as an extension of the everyday socio-spatial organisation. Ethnography for the internet thus necessitates a 'multi-modal' approach that incorporates both online and offline forms of data collection. The digital and remote ethnographic methodologies utilised in this research, should therefore be understood as an extension of the ethnographic study of space that I adopted in the earlier part of my research rather than a distinct set of methodologies.

Data collection process

An ethnographic approach to studying the social production of public space calls for a 'layered set of methodologies that crosscut time and space' (Low, 2017b, p. 48). As Low suggests, uncovering the different aspects and processes of social production of public space requires layering and building up data generated from different methodologies. Several different methods and data sources are thus needed to answer specific questions in relation to the socio-spatial dialectics for each individual study in this thesis. Paper 1 and Paper 2 are both empirical papers centred on the social production of space. Using an ethnographic approach to spatial study, the main sources of data for these papers include observations, documents, and interviews. The socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square in Paper 3 is based on my own experience and documentation of the protest, as well as other secondary sources. In Paper 4, I largely relied on digital and remote ethnographic methods in

combination with participant observations. In essence, despite some overlaps, each paper has utilised a different combination of data sources and materials, which will be discussed below.

Documents

One of the most important sources of data used across all the empirical studies was documents. In general, documents are useful because they provide important contextual and background information and can also be used to corroborate or challenge other data. They constitute what Dikeç (2007, p. 6) refers to as 'sensible evidences', which both inform and establish the spatial order, as well as help making sense of it in a particular way. In this study, documents were particularly important because they provided crucial information on not only the processes behind the production of public spaces such as how decisions were made or who was involved, but also how the different narratives surrounding these public spaces had changed over time.

In total, I reviewed over 70 documents in this thesis. These documents can be broadly divided into three categories: official planning documents, meeting notes and minutes of Legislative and District Councils, as well as publications by private developers and other non-governmental bodies. Out of the three categories, the absolute majority of the documents reviewed were related to the development, planning, and design of specific public spaces, most of which were produced by various governmental departments and public agencies such as the Planning Department, Land Registry, Development Bureau, etc. The documents included feasibility studies, public consultation reports, outline zoning plans, land leases, and various design and management guidelines. These documents correspond to the representations of space in Lefebvre's triadic model for the production of space, and they represent the dominant narrative of social space. In addition to charting how different public spaces were conceived and providing technical and historical information such as planning and lease conditions, these documents also describe what Jacob and Hellström (2010) call the 'planning discourse', which involves 'implicit value commitments that are observable in their representations of public space and implicated in the results of public-space planning' (p. 657). In other words, it is in these representations of space where we can begin to uncover the government's perception of and motivation behind the urban development and public space projects examined. The planning documents were mostly accessible on various government websites, although specific land documents such as land leases had to be ordered through the Land Registry. In addition, I had also obtained physical copies of various documents such as conceptual and development plans by the Energising Kowloon East Office during my fieldwork in Hong Kong.

Another important source of documents comprised meeting notes and minutes of various public organisations and advisory bodies such as the Legislative Council,

specific local District Councils, the Town Planning Board, and the Harbourfront Commission. As Loughran (2014) and Frederiksen (2015) demonstrate in their respective studies, these public meetings were a vital part of the social production of public spaces, where important decisions regarding their planning and management were made, explained, and justified. It was also in these meetings where various stakeholders, including those from the civil society, could formally voice their opinions on different issues. The meetings of the Task Force on Kai Tak Harbourfront Development of the Harbourfront Commission, for example, provided important details on the development and management of the Kwun Tong Promenade. More importantly, these meetings also shed light on the multi-level bureaucracy, as well as the tensions involved in not only major development decisions but also minor and banal everyday issues. Records of these meetings were all publicly accessible online, and while the meetings were conducted in both English and Cantonese, most of the meeting notes and minutes were available in English. However, in some cases such as the smaller committee meetings of Kwun Tong District Council, meeting notes were not written or published, and only audio recordings of these meetings were available. For these meetings, I listened to the recordings and transcribed (and translated) the discussions that are relevant to the commodification of public spaces. Although these meeting notes, minutes, and recordings cannot replicate the details one can obtain by attending and observing the meetings in person, they nonetheless provide important insights into how such decision-making processes take shape and play out.

The last major source of documents consisted of various publications published by private developers and property management companies. As the influence of private interests in public space developments continues to grow, it is increasingly important to establish the perspectives of private developers and property management companies in the social production of public space (Smithsimon, 2008). Public statements, PR and promotional materials, as well as various financial reports were used in this study to help us understand the 'institutional narratives' of these private actors (Loughran, 2014). These publications provided insights into the thinking and decision-making process of the private developers as well as the way in which the developers wanted to present themselves in the public eye. The consecutive public statements published by SHKP in the aftermath of the incidents in New Town Plaza were a case in point. While the statements did not reveal much about what had actually happened or the developer's stance on the protests in general, they pointed to the fact that public opinion remained largely important to the businesses of shopping malls, and it was crucial for SHKP to react and limit any further damage.

In addition to the documents listed above, I also reviewed a number of non-professional and non-official publications drawn up by individuals and groups such as political parties and trade unions for my study on Umbrella Square. These documents, which included maps, leaflets, fanzines, and newsletters, were mostly

distributed in small numbers on site during the protests. They are, as Veg (2016, p. 676) contends, 'the expression of claims formulated by participants', and should be understood within the political, social, and spatial context of the Umbrella Movement. Despite not being widely circulated, these publications provided insights into the organisation of the movement as well as the management of the protest site.

Observations

Although documents provided vital information on the planning and development process, as well as shedding light on the dominant narrative of public space, they did not necessarily illustrate how various driving forces are manifested socially and spatially. As Degen contends, in order to understand the socio-spatial co-constitution of public space, it is important to also examine spatial practices. Spatial practice, or perceived space, according to Lefebvre (1991, p. 38), is 'revealed through the deciphering of its space'. In other words, spatial practices can be directly observed and empirically analysed. As such, Kim (2015, p. 15) suggests that participant observations, as well as conversations with people, are key to 'developing an understanding of local spatial social relations'. Throughout this research, I conducted participant observations on different public spaces and protest sites to examine, among other things, the socio-spatial impacts of public space commodification and how public life is manifested in these spaces. In addition to the preliminary site visits that I had undertaken prior to my PhD, I conducted fieldwork in Hong Kong on three separate occasions in 2018, 2019, and 2021, for a total of around five months. During this fieldwork, I carried out participant observations in a wide range of public spaces across Hong Kong. In addition to the three public spaces studied in Papers 1 and 2, I also visited a number of local everyday public spaces in Kwun Tong. These local public spaces ranged from children's playgrounds, parks and podium roofs of public housing estates to resting areas. Due to their proximity to the housing estates, these local public spaces are where local residents spend their time and thus constitute an important part of their everyday life.

In addition, it was also important to take into consideration the temporal aspect of my observations. During my visits to Hong Kong, I tried to spend time in the public spaces during different times and days of the week. This was particularly crucial for the Kwun Tong Promenade; because of its location, the number of people as well as the activities undertaken in the Promenade varied considerably. While it tended to be relatively quiet during the week, the Promenade was popular among nearby workers during lunch hours and after work. In total, I visited the Kwun Tong Promenade 25 times over two periods. Except for a couple of occasions when I was part of a group, I conducted most of the participant observations on my own. As a local public space user from Hong Kong, I was largely able to blend in and observe

covertly. The duration of my observations varied from half an hour to two hours depending on the size of the public space and the activities taking place. During my participant observations, I also interacted with people I met, mostly other public space users but also staff and workers, by trying to engage in conversations with them. As Kim (2015) suggests in her study on ethnographic study on sidewalks in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, talking to people is an important part of participating in their spatial practices. While these interactions only entailed casual conversations and never resulted in any interviews, they provided valuable information on things that could not necessarily be observed such as where the people came from, how often they visited the public space, and what they thought about it. It was also through these interactions that I gained the trust of different users, which allowed me to not only observe and listen more closely but also participate actively in their discussions and activities. Being close to the research subjects, as Kim (2015, p. 87) argues, is important because 'observing people from afar leaves the researcher more susceptible to misinterpreting what is happening or to missing important factors'.

The main focus of my observations was on the publicness of these spaces – who the users were, what activities were undertaken, and how the public spaces were being managed. Evaluating the publicness of a public space, Degen (2008, p. 194) contends, can help us understand 'the relationship between the built environment and the social life'. I was particularly interested in the interactions between different users as well as those between the users and other actors such as security guards, cleaners, and maintenance staff. By studying such interactions, I was able to uncover any underlying tensions among different user groups. In addition, I also paid special attention to the spatiality and materiality – furniture, planters, ground cover, and other objects – of the public spaces. As Molotch (2011) argues, objects can not only 'facilitate interaction with research subjects when doing fieldwork or conducting interviews' (p. 74), they can also be used in a way to 'elicit cultural information' (p. 76). One object that stood out in my study in Kwun Tong was a broken picnic table and seat that was taped to the ground in a local park (Figure 8). This particular piece of furniture became a topic of many conversations I had with local residents as well as a point of reference in my interviews with local community leaders. The furniture was representative of the lack of resources and commitment from the government to improve local public spaces in Kwun Tong.

Another important focus of my research on the Kwun Tong Promenade was its accessibility – in particular, how difficult it was for local residents of Kwun Tong to access the waterfront public space. As I suggest in Chapter 3, the publicness of public spaces is largely dependent on its accessibility. While access to the Promenade was not formally restricted, the difficulty involved and time it took to get there limited its accessibility for the local residents. As such, I often started and ended my fieldwork in Kwun Tong Town Centre, where most residential buildings are located, and walked to the Promenade. Doing so at various times of the week gave me a good sense of what the residents experienced on their visits to the

waterfront public space. During these walks, I took note of not only the distance and time but also other aspects such as traffic, lighting conditions, and the overall comfort level of the walk. The inaccessible nature of the Promenade was exemplified by how uncomfortable, difficult, and even dangerous these walks could be, especially during the morning and afternoon rush hours.

Figure 8
A broken table and seat taped onto the ground in a local park in Kwun Tong

During my visit to Hong Kong in the autumn of 2019, I conducted observations of four protest events that took place in three different shopping malls. These events, which were organised and promoted by protesters on various social media platforms, involved singing, chanting, and other activities such as displaying a variety of protest artworks and slogans. As Adler et al. (1986, p. 364) suggest, it is important to find the right balance 'between involvement and detachment' when conducting participant observations. While I generally agree with the epistemological perspective that participant observations 'must be ultimately grounded in human subjectivity' (Adler et al., 1986, p. 366), it was important in such scenarios to not become too involved in the action while I was conducting observations so that I could maintain a clearer overall picture of what was taking

place instead of being overly absorbed by particular individuals or actions. This often meant that I would observe either in the periphery or from a floor or two above where the action occurred. Regardless of where I positioned myself, I found it quite difficult to take field notes while observing in these situations as I had to always maintain a certain level of mobility and vigilance. In some cases, I was able to take notes on my phone, but I mostly had to wait until I got home before I could write up any field notes. I was particularly interested in not only how the different activities were shaped by the spatial organisation of the shopping malls but also the social interactions between protesters, mall employees, and shopkeepers. I revisited the three shopping malls in 2021 and conducted observations to understand how the management and spatial organisation of the shopping malls had changed since the end of the protests.

As mentioned above, I tried to write field notes whenever the circumstances allowed. However, in some cases, it was very difficult to describe and document everything that was taking place in words sufficiently quickly. On such occasions, I took photos and videos on my phone. Documenting space with still and moving images has had a long tradition in public space research. Whyte's (1980) influential study on public space use in New York was conducted using time-lapse cameras to document people's behaviour. Other scholars such as Degen (2008), Smithsimon (2008), and Kim (2015) have also utilised photography as part of a wider set of data collection methods. Although not necessarily used to identify and record specific people or actions, photographs and videos are useful in revealing the general spatial organisation and atmosphere of the space as well as giving material context to people and actions. Moreover, the photos and videos I took during the observations were used to refresh my memory when I had to write field notes retrospectively. More importantly, they also broadened my vision and captured details that I had missed when I was in the field. I also used images I had taken during the Umbrella Movement to track and analyse the changes and evolution of Umbrella Square over the course of the protest in my socio-spatial analysis of Umbrella Square.

Interviews

To complement the documents and observations, I conducted a total of 11 interviews with various stakeholders and actors in relation to the three public spaces I examined in Papers 1 and 2. The goal of these interviews was to understand the different roles and perspectives of various stakeholders in the social production of space and to shed light on the residents' lived experience of how public space commodification impacted public space use. In this study, these stakeholders and actors included private developers, architects, planners, politicians, community leaders, local residents, and other users of the public spaces. Eight of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location suggested by the interviewees. These semi-structured interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours. With the consent of

the participants, all but one of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, while I was able to take notes for the other one. The remaining interviews were conducted on the phone and via email.

Instead of a random sample, I utilised purposeful sampling to select information-rich cases that would be useful to my study (Patton, 2002). In other words, the interviewees were identified and chosen based on the specific knowledge and insights that they possessed. As Hammersley and Atkinson contend, in order to identify such participants, I had to draw on my own 'assumptions about the social distribution of knowledge and about the motives of those in different roles' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 106). Such decisions were largely undertaken based on the contextual information that I had already collected as well as my prior knowledge of the sites. The practitioners I interviewed, for example, were chosen for their specific role in the production of the respective public spaces after identifying their names in my document analysis. Moreover, instead of reaching out to many residents, I decided to interview local community leaders who had been serving in the local areas for a long time. They had extensive knowledge of the local areas and a clear understanding of what their local constituents thought and needed. Out of nine local community leaders I reached out to, three were willing to speak with me. Importantly, I managed to interview representatives from both pro-government and pan-democratic camps, ensuring that different sides of the story were told. As with almost everything in Hong Kong, politicians and supporters from either camp tend to have very different views on public space development and management. For instance, the construction of the music fountain on the Kwun Tong Promenade, as I discussed in Paper 2, was supported by pro-government politicians and criticised by the pan-democratic camp. It was therefore vital for me to include views from both sides on various issues discussed.

While the interviews were all centred on public space practices, the interviews covered very different aspects of the public space depending on the role of the interviewees. The interviews with practitioners and government officials were, for example, mostly centred on the 'planning discourse' and 'practitioner narratives' of public spaces (Jacob & Hellström, 2010). In a way, the interviews with practitioners and government officials were used to validate the findings I had from my document reviews and observations. On the other hand, the interviews with community leaders and other users of the public spaces were focused on their 'lived experiences' of public space, which, according to Degen (2008, p. 25), is 'the most comprehensive assessment of publicness' as it can capture 'the dynamic and often contradictory spatial relations that are an important element in the production of space'. Throughout these interviews, my focus was on how the developments surrounding the public space were perceived and how publicness was impacted by public space commodification. Even though the interviews were guided by my conception of public space commodification, I never explicitly talked about the process to my interviewees. Instead, the interviews were largely centred on specific aspects of

public space developments and practices based on some of the findings from my observations and review of documents. To put it simply, I mostly used these interviews to corroborate the information with the other data, and to fill in any gaps and pieces that were missing from the puzzle. One example of such a missing piece was the voice of the local creative community. Members of this community were not really mentioned in any official documents regarding the Kai Tak Development and the planning of the Promenade. It was also almost impossible to observe them in Kwun Tong as the majority of them had already moved away from the area. In fact, one would hardly notice their existence if it wasn't for some news and popular reports. While some members of the community still had a presence online, it was quite difficult to identify them without any local and situated knowledge. In many ways, it was particularly important to be able to interview members of this community so that their story, which constituted an important part of the development of the Kwun Tong Promenade, could be uncovered.

Digital data

Another main source of data that I utilised in this thesis was the internet. As discussed earlier, digital and remote ethnography constituted a major part of my research, especially in the latter stages of the research when my fieldwork was hindered by both the enactment of the National Security Law and the Covid restrictions. I used the internet in various ways in my empirical studies. For my research on the Kwun Tong Promenade, the internet was largely used to collect contextual information. I mostly surveyed specific Facebook groups and pages dedicated to the Kwun Tong area by searching for and reviewing posts pertaining to the Kwun Tong Promenade and other public spaces. Most of the people involved in them were locals to the area, and the discussions were largely centred on developments in Kwun Tong. While I was fully aware that the users of these groups and pages did not represent the views of all local residents of Kwun Tong, these groups and pages nonetheless provided valuable insights into some of the tensions that the urban redevelopment had brought to the area and shed light on how various developments were perceived by the local residents. For example, one of the most commented posts on the 'D18-Kwun Tong' Facebook page was about the construction of the music fountain on the Kwun Tong Promenade, and out of the over 80 comments on the post, a majority of them were critical of the project. Although the strong online reaction to the music fountain did not necessarily reflect public opinion completely, it was indicative of how the controversial project was a hotly debated and discussed topic in Kwun Tong – a fact that was also reflected in findings gathered from other data sources.

As I mentioned above, the internet played an important part in the protests as it provided a mostly reliable and safe means of communication. The main platform used by protesters was LIHKG, a reddit-like forum where anonymous users can

discuss a wide range of topics (Erni & Zhang, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Liang & Lee, 2021; McLauglin & Cheung, 2020). The posts and comments could be upvoted and downvoted (thumbs up and down) by all users, while posts were, by default, sorted by how recently the last comment was published. As such, the more comments on a post, the longer the post would remain 'visible' to most people (assuming most users do not scroll past the first few pages). LIHKG is, as Erni and Zhang (2022, p. 369) contend, a 'chaotic but coalescing […] space for hammering out a spectrum of individuated and collective understanding of digital citizenship'. During the Anti-ELAB protests, LIHKG was mostly used by netizens for three main purposes: reporting, organising, and voicing their opinions. The forum was described as an 'idea generator' where most of the actions during the protests were formulated and planned (McLauglin & Cheung, 2020). For my study on shopping malls, I searched for posts that contained the names of the three shopping malls – New Town Plaza, Pacific Place, and MOSTown – in Chinese, and reviewed those with five or more pages of comments (over 100 comments).[9] In total, I reviewed over 100 different posts – over 50 on New Town Plaza, around 30 on Pacific Place and 20 on MOSTown. These posts not only provided descriptions and commentaries on specific events but also shed light on the protesters' contrasting views of the three shopping malls, most of which were based on their lived experiences protesting in the different shopping malls. In addition to LIHKG, protesters also used other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram to disseminate information such as details of rallies as well as real time locations of police. However, unlike LIHKG, these social media platforms did not necessarily facilitate any in-depth discussions and were therefore less useful to my study.

Besides various social media and online forums, I also utilised live stream video footage posted on the internet that was taken by mostly independent online news websites such as Stand News and Hong Kong Free Press. Unlike traditional news reports, these videos were mostly filmed on a phone or handycam by the reporters themselves. As a result, the reporters were a lot more mobile and could easily get in amongst the action during various protests. Moreover, there was normally more than one such live stream for each specific event or activity, thus providing different angles and perspectives of the protests. For the most part, these live stream videos would run for the entire duration of the event, even when there was a lull in activity. The unedited and unadulterated pieces of footage were particularly valuable in revealing the everyday nature of the protests. More importantly, they also provided an insider perspective of what was taking place on the ground during the protests. Following these live streams also entailed a social aspect, as depending on the platform that these live streams were hosted on, viewers were able to comment and discuss in real time what was happening. During some of the bigger events, tens of

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[9] This threshold was chosen for two reasons: to capture posts that were the most popular and discussed, and to limit the sample size to something more manageable for the purposes of this study.

thousands of people watched online and took part in the discussions. I follow Postill (2017, p. 67) who argues that as more people 'take up telematic media such as webcams, live streaming, or live tweeting, "being there" from afar is becoming an ever more integral part of daily life'. In addition to watching these pieces of video footage in real-time, I also went through them retrospectively when I could take a closer look in detail as well as pause when necessary. In total, I reviewed over 30 hours of footage, most of which was taken within the three shopping malls and their surrounding areas. I took notes of any significant events and paid special attention to how the different spaces were used by the protesters.

Since the enactment of the National Security Law, a number of independent news outlets as well as the only main pro-democratic Chinese newspaper had shut down, along with a number of political parties and civil organisations. As a result, gathering data on the protests retrospectively was in many ways a race against time. In most cases, I was able to archive relevant reports and live stream video footage, from the internet before they were taken down. When Stand News, one of the biggest and most popular independent online news websites, announced its closure after its headquarters were raided by the police on 29 December 2021, I had to immediately back up all relevant materials before they were wiped from the internet permanently few days later. Although there were a number of individuals and groups working on archiving materials about the protests, very few of such archives were publicly accessible when I was gathering data, and I therefore mostly relied on my own archival materials. In addition to the websites and newspapers that were shut down, most of the Telegram channels that were active during the protests had also been shut down with very little warning. There had been reports that multiple Telegram channel administrators were arrested and charged under the National Security Law, although it was not known which channels they were responsible for. Unfortunately, most of the content of these Telegram channels was deleted before I was able to record and document it.

Secondary sources

The last source of data was what can be broadly characterised as secondary sources. Examples of these sources include news reports, academic research, and research conducted by NGOs and think tanks. News reports not only provided descriptive accounts of various events, they were also good indicators of public opinion. Archived news reports were also useful in keeping track and establishing a timeline of all the historical events surrounding the cases. This was particularly important when studying the protests as there were so many things happening each day. More importantly, news reports from reliable sources were also used to verify any 'news' or rumours that had been spreading on social media. As freedom of press became increasingly restricted, different rumours and conspiracies began to proliferate and

spread amongst protesters. It was therefore crucial to verify any accounts of events found online against reliable and credible sources of information.

Research undertaken by both academics and other civil organisations helped contextualise the cases and highlight any tensions that exist within them. Previous academic research, especially work by local researchers, provided important background information on the urban development of Hong Kong. In addition to academic research, there was also an increasing amount of attention being paid to public spaces and urban development in general amongst private think tanks, consultancies, and NGOs. Reports by Civic Exchange and Hong Kong Public Space Initiative (HKPSI) were particularly useful in outlining some of the problems with public space developments in Hong Kong. While not necessarily critical of the government, these independent reports provided a different narrative to the official line of the government, which not only helps to establish a more complete picture of public space developments in Hong Kong, but also illuminates issues pertaining to public space commodification that were not addressed in the official narrative. The Kwun Tong Promenade, for instance, was largely deemed by the government and other public actors as a successful public space project that has attracted visitors to the area and stimulated the local economy. However, a HKPSI study revealed that the waterfront public space was largely underused and unpopular among local residents. These opposing narratives exemplified the tensions and incompatibility of use values and exchange values in the commodification of public space.

Analytical and theoretical focus

Despite the inherent explorative nature of ethnographic studies, I share Wacquant's (2002, p. 1523) view that 'there is no such thing as ethnography that is not guided by theory'. According to Wacquant (2002), ethnography and theory not only go hand in hand, but ethnographic accounts can in fact be bolstered by a strong theoretical grounding. Instead of pretending to discover theory in the field, I began my fieldwork with a firm commitment to theoretical perspectives and ideas outlined in previous chapters. Prior to entering the field, I formulated a sensitising concept of public space commodification based on previous research and existing theories. Having a sensitising concept, in Blumer's (1954, p. 7) terms, was particularly useful in the early stages of my fieldwork as it 'provided a general sense of reference and guidelines in approaching empirical instances'. This initial conception of public space commodification helped me to determine, among other things, what data I was looking for, where to find it, and how to go about it. As I conducted my fieldwork and data collection, I continued to develop my conception of public space commodification into a more definitive concept. Analysis was therefore not a

distinct stage but an iterative process in which theory was consciously implicated and integrated in every step of the research process (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008; Wacquant, 2002).

The analytical focus of my study on commodification of public space was to identify the motives and intentions behind public space developments and how they were manifested at different levels and linked to broader urban processes. My studies on Umbrella Square and shopping malls, on the other hand, were focused on the spatial practices of the protesters – how they produced and used different protest sites and how the spatial organisation of the sites impacted their actions. Although the focus of my analysis has shifted throughout the research, the way in which I went about analysing the data was consistent with my analytical thinking. Largely inspired by Desmond's (2014) idea of relational ethnography, I maintain that the analytical focus of my ethnographic study of public spaces was centred on processes and relations behind the social production of space rather than a delimited physical space. When focusing on production of space and commodification as a process that manifests itself in the public spaces and neighbourhoods of Hong Kong, thinking relationally was particularly useful in unpacking the complex connections among different stakeholders and users of the public space. Relational thinking was also important in maintaining a multi-scalar view on the socio-spatial impacts of public space commodification. While it would be wrong to suggest that what I did was relational ethnography, my construction of the public space as an ethnographic object has led me to what Desmond refers to as 'relational epistemology'.

One of the challenges in conducting an ethnographic study is the sheer amount and wide variety of data that needs to be organised, interpreted, and pieced together. The process of method triangulation is therefore particularly important to the analysis of this research. Triangulation is more than just combining different data. It is, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 184) contend, a way to 'relate different sorts of data in such a way as to counteract various possible threats to the validity of our analysis'. As one can imagine, triangulating data from so many different sources and media required not only clear analytical thinking but also good organisational skills. One of the first steps I took was to transform everything into text. Interview recordings were transcribed and translated simultaneously. By transcribing and translating all the interviews into English, it was easier for me to compare and contrast different materials. In addition, I also typed up notes on various images and videos, as well as translating any secondary sources or documents in Chinese into English. All textual materials were manually coded multiple times according to different cases and themes until they became analytically useful. As Gibbs (2007, p. 4) suggests, in addition to being a means of organising the data, coding also adds 'interpretation and theory to the data'. Based on the coded data, new documents were created as I grouped various texts together based on specific cases and themes.

As Oakley contends, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which 'language is value-laden and embedded with cultural, ideological and political overtones'

when analysing textual documents (Oakley, 2009, p. 301). In addition to taking such embedded values and overtones into account, interviews and documents were also 'analysed not only in terms of what was said, but also in terms of what was left unsaid and suggested' (Degen, 2008, p. 12). When analysing different data, I paid special attention to what and who was missing in different narratives on the production of public space. This is particularly important when analysing official documents of the government and other public actors, whose representations of space are dominant in the social production of the Kwun Tong Promenade. In a document from a market sounding exercise, the Energising Kowloon East Office (EKEO) stated that it 'aims to utilise unused spaces under the Kwun Tong Bypass and construct suitable facilities for creativity, arts and cultural use' (EKEO, 2013). By describing the spaces under the Kwun Tong Bypass as 'unused' – even though members of the local creative community had been using them for years – the government not only disregarded the existence of the local creative community but also ignored the publicness and vibrancy of the existing space in its narrative of the social production of the Kwun Tong Promenade. Furthermore, the context in which the data was generated should also be taken into account. For example, the interviews with politicians and local community leaders were conducted during the local elections campaign, which might have influenced their willingness to speak about certain issues.

Finally, it is also important to consider the role researchers play in conducting research and producing knowledge. I follow the epistemological perspective that we, as social researchers, 'are part of the social world' we study. Conducting research, as Hammersley and Atkinson suggest, is an 'active process', and we need to not only reflect upon our role in and influence on the research but also recognise how the knowledge we produce could impact the social world. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the data and materials presented in this thesis were, in some ways, not collected but actively made through selective observation, note-taking, coding, and other processes that were guided by my theoretical grounding. Instead of pretending to be completely neutral and impartial, I recognised that my participation in the different settings under study, as well as my role in conducting analysis, had continuously shaped my research and informed my findings. Such reflexivity and sensitivity were followed throughout the research process.

Ethical considerations

Although the everyday and banal nature of public space practices lent itself to a less contentious topic, all ethnographic studies entail varying degrees of ethical questions and dilemmas that need be considered on an ethically informed ground. It was with this in mind that I sought to maintain a high level of ethical conduct throughout my research. Ethical considerations were taken in all stages of the

research, but ethical questions and dilemmas were particularly apparent when conducting interviews and participant observations. When conducting interviews for my research on public space commodification, informed consent was obtained from all the interviewees regardless of the medium in which the interviews were conducted. For the face-to-face and phone interviews, I always asked for permission to record the interviews, which was granted by all but one of the interviewees. As discussed, amidst the politically charged climate in Hong Kong, it was my intention to focus the interviews on the social production of public spaces. While the politics behind public space commodification constituted an important part of the interviews, no sensitive personal information was obtained or processed. Moreover, when the material from the interviews was presented, all the interviewees were anonymised, and any details that might reveal their identities were not included in the material presented. As Hall (2012) suggests, questions of consent and anonymity are not only pertinent to ethical issues, but they also have substantive implications. Anonymity is therefore particularly vital to my research because not only does it give the research its integrity, it also offers the researcher the opportunity to 'more easily expose illicit or unpleasant realities' (Hall, 2012, p. 26).

As a result of the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, I made the conscious decision to not conduct any interviews for my research on Umbrella Square and the shopping malls. Despite having established contacts with participants and other relevant actors in both protest movements, I did not proceed with pursuing on-the-record interviews with them. Given the enormity of the situation in Hong Kong at that time, just asking if my informants would be willing to go on the record would not only raise questions but also put them in a relatively difficult position. Without knowing exactly what constituted a threat to national security and faced with a seemingly ever-moving red line, it was impossible to determine what topics of discussion can or cannot be included in any interviews. Having carefully assessed the legal risks and considered the potential repercussions for the safety and wellbeing of both my informants and myself (as well as implications on my research), I decided to err on the side of caution and pursue alternative sources of data instead. Although interviewing key participants might have provided more colourful depictions of what had taken place in the protests, I maintain that the methods and data sources outlined in this chapter were valid and sufficient for the purposes of this study, and that the consistency of findings from a varied set of data provided a high level of confidence in the conclusions drawn.

As I discussed, participant observations in public spaces and shopping malls were conducted covertly. Not only was it impossible to obtain informed consent and notify every public space user of my presence as a researcher, it was also impossible to do so without altering or affecting their behaviours. While the 'impossibility of always doing overt fieldwork' can sometimes be negated by passing information from person to person in, for example, a concert (Hannerz, 2013, p. 91), it is not as relevant in a public space setting where people do not necessarily know each other

or belong to the same group. As I did not intend on obtaining or processing any identifiable details of individual users of the public space, I contend that informed consent was both irrelevant and undesirable in the situations I encountered. However, I always attempted to clarify my identity and intentions when, on a couple of occasions, my presence was questioned by others or when I was engaged in conversations that were more substantial than 'small talk'. All in all, since the focus of my research, even when examining the protest sites, was centred on the social production of public spaces rather than the political leanings of the individuals, the risks of putting anyone in danger were kept to a minimum as no sensitive personal data was handled in the research process. More importantly, as the situation in Hong Kong was ever changing throughout the research process, I not only constantly reflected upon various ethical considerations but also regularly sought advice from my supervisors as well as other researchers to ensure a high level of ethical conduct was maintained at all times.

6 Overview of Papers

Paper 1:
Public space as commodity

This paper studies how commodification of public space has taken shape in Hong Kong, a global city where public spaces have always been an afterthought and a box-checking exercise in the planning process (Chan, 2020). By examining the social production of three waterfront public spaces across the city – the Landscape Deck at the Kerry Hotel, the Tsim Sha Tsui (TST) waterfront, and the Kwun Tong Promenade – the paper serves as an introduction and an overview of how private developers and the government of Hong Kong have sought to leverage different public spaces for broader urban political-economic development. Using document reviews and participant observations, I set out to chart the funding, planning, design, and operation of the three public spaces and how they have impacted the behaviours of different public space users.

The Landscape Deck is a privately owned and managed public space that is part of a luxury hotel in Hung Hom, Kowloon. While it provided much needed open space for the local residents, the hotel management has discouraged public use by restricting access and limiting activities on the public space. The Landscape Deck is an archetypal Privately-Owned Public Space (POPS) in Hong Kong, and its existence is largely the result of the developer's drive to maximise development and profit. The TST waterfront promenade is a popular tourist attraction. It was set to be revitalised through a public-private partnership, which would give a private developer operation rights without public tender via its non-profit arm. Instead of going through with the plan, the developer renovated a section of the waterfront and marketed it as part of a 'New Cultural Frontier'. The TST waterfront development is not only indicative of innovative public space funding and management models but also exemplifies the importance of public space in commercial developments. The Kwun Tong Promenade is a government-developed waterfront public space located in a former industrial centre that is undergoing rapid transformations. With its dedicated parking for cars and coaches, as well as a planned music fountain, the development of the Promenade is conceived as a driver for development rather than a public space that serves the local residents.

This paper suggests that even though commodification of public space has taken on very varied forms in Hong Kong, the public spaces in question all display certain characteristics and features that can be attributed to the decline of publicness and inclusivity in public space. Regardless of who ends up owning or managing the public space, or whether commercial activities are being encouraged, the three public spaces studied were all exploited as a means for financial and political returns. This paper thus argues that commodification of public space both transcends and encompasses other public space processes such as privatisation and commercialisation, and it is essential to study how this process is manifested in different urban contexts. The commodification angle can provide an important critical lens through which to understand contemporary public space practices by linking together, and answering, these questions: what are the driving forces behind the production of public space are, how they are encoded in the built environment, and what are the different socio-spatial consequences?

Paper 2:
Government-driven commodification of public space

This paper builds on the empirical and conceptual findings of Paper 1 but goes deeper into the socio-spatial implications of public space commodification (Chan, 2023). Focusing on the empirical case of the Kwun Tong Promenade, this paper aims to contribute to the critical debates on public space and spatial justice by arguing that commodification, whether through private or public means, is a decisive force in recent public space developments and is inherently linked to the production of spatial injustice. This paper contends that the Kwun Tong Promenade, which is fully developed, funded, and managed by the government, is an example of government-driven commodification of public space. Using an ethnographic and mixed-methods approach that includes document analysis, participant observations, and in-depth interviews, this paper seeks to shed light on the commodification of the Kwun Tong Promenade by examining the government's motivations behind the development of the waterfront public space, as well as the multi-scalar socio-spatial implications.

In addition to the initial planning and development processes of the Promenade, this paper also examines its ongoing commodification through the lens of the creative community that used to be active in Kwun Tong's industrial area and the existing local residents of Kwun Tong – two user groups that have been marginalised in the redevelopment of the area. The local creative community had been active in the waterfront public space when the government established the Energising Kowloon East Office (EKEO) – the strategic planning and branding agency for the redevelopment of the greater Kowloon East area – on the Kwun Tong Promenade.

By only promoting cultures and lifestyles that were in line with the government's overall vision for Kwun Tong, EKEO played an important role in driving the local creative community away from the waterfront public space. Furthermore, the government's insistence to build a music fountain on the Promenade was indicative of how it views the waterfront public space as driver for development. By turning the Promenade into a spectacle and a tourist attraction, it is clear that exchange value took precedence over use value in not only the planning, design, and development of the waterfront public space but also in its continued operation and management. More importantly, the music fountain not only occupied valuable open space on the waterfront promenade but also took up resources that could have been used to improve the living conditions of local residents.

It is clear from the findings that the Kwun Tong Promenade was developed and managed by the government primarily as a means to attract investment and drive growth in the area, and, as a result, the voices and needs of the local communities were largely neglected in the process. While the Kwun Tong Promenade was not the sole trigger for all the socio-spatial transformations that have taken place in Kwun Tong, the findings of this paper suggest that the commodification of the waterfront public space has led to the acceleration of gentrification and the displacement of marginalised members of the local community as well as exacerbating and reproducing spatial injustice across the aging and poverty-stricken district. By examining the commodification of the Kwun Tong Promenade and highlighting its link to the production of spatial injustice, this paper calls for more critical attention to be paid to the development and exploitation of government-driven and publicly owned public spaces around the world.

Paper 3:
Openness and porosity

Paper 3 is a book chapter accepted to an anthology that explores various aspects of urban creativity. Using Sennett's conception of open and closed systems, the chapter examines the social and spatial organisation of Umbrella Square – the main protest site of the 2014 Umbrella Movement where tens of thousands of people gathered and occupied a stretch of an eight-lane highway in the centre of Hong Kong. Although the tent city only lasted for 74 days, Umbrella Square was one of the most vibrant and dynamic urban spaces in the city during a time when most of the public spaces were stagnant, homogenous, and commercialised as a result of increasing privatisation as well as over-regulation by the government. Using mainly ethnohistorical data and participant observations, this chapter outlines the transformation of Umbrella Square and examines how its socio-spatial conditions enabled public life to flourish.

According to Sennett, the ideal public realm is characterised by its openness and porosity. As opposed to the static, over-determined closed system that is in harmonious equilibrium, an open system is centred on incomplete form and constant evolution. A public realm is, therefore, as much a place as it is a process. In contrast to the other prominent protest sites, Umbrella Square was established on a highway and had no prior political or social significance. By adapting their sleeping arrangements, creating various artworks, and building barricades and other furniture, the protesters actively transformed the protest site into a place with identity and meaning. Moreover, without hard boundaries and strict demarcation between public and private spaces, porosity was maintained across Umbrella Square. People were able to not only filter in and out of Umbrella Square as they wished but could also engage in and disengage from different activities and discussions that were always happening on the protest site. In addition to its materiality and physical attributes, Umbrella Square also owed its existence to the assembly of protesters, whose presence gave shape to what Arendt refers to as the space of appearance. In many ways, it was this dialectical relationship between the material and spatial characteristics of Umbrella Square and the space of appearance between the protesters that gave the Umbrella Movement its vitality and longevity.

Despite only lasting two and a half months, Umbrella Square was an ideal-typical public space. The constant appropriation and transformation had given Umbrella Square its openness and porosity that are lacking in many other public spaces in Hong Kong. Moreover, the protest site not only provided urbanists important lessons in public space planning and design, it also offered new insights and inspiration on how bottom-up, insurgent uses of urban (public) spaces can be crucial to Hong Kongers' claim to the right to the city. As public spaces are increasingly commodified and restricted in Hong Kong, the production and transformation of different urban spaces have become even more vital to not only the political struggles in Hong Kong but also to the everyday resistance against oppression and commodification processes.

Paper 4:
Take back our city

Paper 4 concerns the transformations of shopping malls in Hong Kong during the Anti-ELAB protests. Even though commodification has taken multiple distinct forms across the urban fabric, not many built environments are more representative of the proliferation of exchange values than shopping malls. Despite being privately owned and managed, commercialised, and highly securitised, shopping malls have increasingly replaced traditional public spaces as the main sites of recreation and social interactions for most urban dwellers. The proliferation of shopping malls as

semi-public and public spaces is especially prevalent in Hong Kong, where they have long been an integral part of the urban fabric and the everyday life of Hong Kongers. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to highlight the transformation of shopping malls in the 2019 protest movement. Based on information gathered through media reports, planning and policy documents, various online sources, and on-site ethnographic observations, this paper examines the role of shopping malls in the urban development of Hong Kong, their function as public space during the protest movement, and the aftermath and implications of using shopping malls as protest sites.

As the Anti-ELAB protests became decentralised and filtered throughout the city, shopping malls functioned as places for gathering and temporary refuge from the clashes on the streets and often became sites of protest and battlegrounds between riot police and protesters. One shopping mall that was highly contested was New Town Plaza in Sha Tin, New Territories. After police had clashed with protesters inside the shopping mall one night, many residents were critical of the shopping mall management for failing to safeguard their wellbeing and letting the police into the mall. The anger towards the developer and management of the mall led to several protests inside New Town Plaza in the following days. In addition to organising sit-ins and plastering the walls with protest messages, protesters also targeted the management office and mall employees, as well as disrupting the operations of shops with ties to China.

The protesters' disdain towards New Town Plaza and its management was in stark contrast with their attitudes towards two other shopping malls where staff were seen protecting and assisting protesters on various occasions. Even though all developers eventually had to fall in line to support the government and the protests in shopping malls were temporary in nature, they have transformed the everyday life of many Hong Kongers – not only in terms of their views towards different developers and corporations but also their consumption habits. By transforming the shopping malls of Hong Kong from ultimate symbols of consumerism and consumption into spaces of political and civic activities, the appropriation of shopping malls not only represented an important first step of reclaiming the right to the city but also exemplified how such struggles and resistance against increasingly authoritarian regimes need to be extended beyond traditional protest sites and into different everyday spaces.

7 Concluding Discussions

The point of departure of this thesis is that public space has become the *last urban frontier* for capitalist expansion. The production, development, and management of public space are increasingly subordinated to economic logic and exchange value. Public spaces are, in other words, affected by the same commodification processes that have governed different facets of urban development for many years. Cities play a particularly essential role in the world of commodities as they are defined by a double character of both 'place of consumption and consumption of place' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179). Under the expansion of capitalism, cities are no longer lived and understood practically, as 'use values of a majority are sacrificed for the exchange gains of the few' (Logan & Molotch, 2007, p. 98). As Logan and Molotch contend, cities have become growth machines operated by a coalition of government officials, developers, and realtors with the main objective of maximising profit. Buildings and infrastructures are being transformed into development tools that play an important role in their growth strategies. In many ways, urban development is not only 'shaped by its connection to the commodity system' (Logan & Molotch, 2007, p. 112) but is also absorbed into the commodity system. While the entirety of urban life is increasingly dictated by capitalist logic and economic rationale, commodification has taken on very different forms across the urban fabric. Housing, for instance, is commodified when its 'function as real estate takes precedence over its usefulness as a place to live' (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 17). The real estate market, instead of the living needs of the people, has become the main driving force of the housing sector. I have illustrated in this thesis that public spaces such as the Kwun Tong Promenade, despite their public nature, are increasingly dominated by similar processes of commodification. It is, therefore, crucial to study public spaces through the same critical lens and to situate public space research within the same debates. As capital continues to commodify every square inch of the city, urban public spaces such as those studied in this thesis may represent the last urban frontier under the domination of neoliberal urbanism.

The idea that public spaces are conceived as a means for accumulating and circulating capital is neither new nor unique. In fact, there has been a long tradition of land speculation and urban development surrounding the production of urban public spaces, where governments and developers have exploited public spaces in various ways for financial returns. One of the earliest examples can be dated back to the early 1800s, when the planning of Birkenhead Park, which was considered to

be the first publicly funded park in the UK, was first envisaged (Lee & Tucker, 2010). In anticipation of a potential increase in property and land values, private developers and industrialists bought large parcels of land surrounding the planned park prior to its construction and realised substantial profits after it opened to the public in 1847. The success of Birkenhead Park inspired and ultimately resulted in the creation of Central Park in Manhattan, New York, which also led to a similar boom in the surrounding real estate. More significantly, the rise in property values not only profited private developers, it also generated much needed tax revenue for the city (Lang & Rothenberg, 2016). While such boosts in the real estate market and the subsequent financial windfalls they entailed were not necessarily the main objective of these early public space projects, they are nonetheless indicative of the transformative effects public spaces can potentially have on their surroundings, and they laid the foundation for what we now conceive as public space commodification.

Since the mid-20th century, commodification of public space has been increasingly linked to privatisation as a result of the rolling back of public investment by governments. Bland, overregulated, and commercialised public spaces have become commonplace across North American city centres as a result of the introduction of Incentive Zoning and the establishment of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in the 1960s (Low, 2017a; Madden, 2010; Smithsimon, 2008). Private developers and businesses have taken on the responsibility of developing and managing public spaces in exchange for development and commercial opportunities. The emergence of corporate-funded city parks like Millennium Park in Chicago is further evidence of the increasing effort 'by city governments and elite private interests to leverage parks for profit' (Loughran, 2014, p. 49). Unlike the Bonus Plazas and the BIDs, these new public-private partnerships and funding models tend to be exploited by private and corporate donors in the guise of philanthropy and charity. Not only do these sponsors have the right to name our public spaces, they often play an influential role in determining their use and design. Through various sponsorship programmes and the sales of naming rights, city parks and public spaces have become both a means to attract private funding and an important arena for corporate branding and marketing. The involvement of private interests in the development and management of public spaces – regardless of the role and capacity – has highlighted the exchange value of public spaces and is key to the proliferation of public space commodification.

While commodification of public space is traditionally driven by private and commercial interests (Kohn, 2004), the cases examined in this thesis, as well as recent research on public spaces around the world, suggest that public space commodification has taken on variegated forms in different political and economic contexts. As discussed in Chapter 3, high-profile public spaces like the High Line not only demonstrate how carefully designed public spaces can stimulate urban development (Loughran, 2014; Millington, 2015), they also exemplify the increasingly complex structures that have replaced the traditional Privately-Owned

Public Space (POPS) development model of private ownership and public access (Bodnar, 2015). In addition, recent political economic transformations and rapid urban growth have also resulted in diverging and complex forms of public space ownership and management in Asian and Eastern European cities (Chitrakar et al., 2022; Pojani & Maci, 2015; Springer, 2009; Stanilov, 2007; Thomas, 2002). Regardless of ownership and management, public spaces have not only become more central to urban developments, they are also increasingly driven by exchange value and economic logic. The three public spaces examined in Paper 1 are illustrative of how seemingly different public space developments are in fact governed by similar processes of commodification (Chan, 2020). As such, a broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification that looks beyond ownership, management, or commercial use of public space as indicators of exploitation is vital to understanding the socio-spatial implications of different public space developments.

Rethinking commodification of public space

Any attempt to rethink public space commodification will require a better understanding of what the process of commodification entails and how it is specifically applicable to public space. Marx's conception of commodity and commodity fetishism may represent the logical starting point for such an undertaking. Marx plays a hugely important role in setting the foundations for the conception of commodification by detailing what a commodity is, how commodity is produced and exchanged, the difference between exchange value and use value, and the social impact of commodity fetishism. To Marx (1977, p. 953), the commodity represents the point of departure in his critique of the political economy as it is 'both the constant elementary premiss [sic] of capital and also the immediate result of the capitalist process of production'. In pure Marxian terms, commodities must have a dual nature or a double form, 'because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value' (Marx, 1977, p. 138). In other words, commodities are any objects that have both a use value, which is associated with the usefulness of the object, and an exchange value, which refers to the object's exchangeability in relation to other commodities. Marx describes the use value of an object as its 'natural and plain' form while the exchange value is a 'form of appearance' that has nothing to do with its physical or material properties. Although a product can be useful without being a commodity, he contends that 'nothing can be value without being an object of utility' (Marx, 1977, p. 131). To put it simply, a commodity refers to anything that is produced by its owners and intended for exchange instead of solely for their own utilisation or consumption.

According to Marx (1977, p. 179), all commodities are 'non-use-values for their owners, and use-values for their non-owners'. Since commodities have no direct use

for their owners, they must change hands and be 'transferred to the other person […] through the medium of exchange' (Marx, 1977, p. 131) in order to realise their values in monetary terms. It is this movement and transformation of commodity forms that sustain the circulation of capital. Commodification, in this case, can thus be understood as the process that takes place when a product 'become[s] translated into a moment of exchange' (Giddens, 1981, p. 116) and is largely dependent on the quantifiable expression of money as a medium of circulation. In addition to being centred on commodity exchange, commodification is also closely linked to commodity production through what Marx refers to as commodity fetishism. According to Marx, one social consequence of the expansion of capitalism and the generalisation of commodities is that the exchange value of commodities tends to obscure various social relations that are fundamental to our existence as a society. Not only is labour detached from the work and objects that are being produced, there is also a disconnection between the consumption of goods and their value. Objects, as commodities, are no longer valued as products of human labour but are mere expressions of quantifiable and relative exchange values. In other words, we no longer relate to each other as producers and consumers of the objects in a capitalist society. Such social relations are instead disguised as pure economic values and relationships between things. Commodity fetishism is inseparable from any product in the capitalist mode of production as it 'attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities' (Marx, 1977, p. 165).

Whereas the orthodox Marxian approach to commodification is largely centred on commodity production and exchange, the concept needs to be reconceptualised and broadened to encapsulate the commodification of landed properties due to their permanence and fictitious nature as commodities. Even though land has long been considered by various scholars as a commodity, it is often viewed with a unique lens that differentiates it from other products of industrial production. As Polanyi (2001) argues, land is a 'fictitious commodity' because land is a part of nature, and nature is not produced for sale in the market like other commodities. Instead, land is made into commodities through the expansion of economic logic and market mechanisms. Similarly, Harvey (1973) argues that land is not an ordinary commodity because land itself is a primary means of production and thus has its own meaning of exchange value and use value. Unlike other commodities, land and anything that is built on it is fixed to its location, thus giving monopoly privileges to whoever can determine its use. As a result, landowners can often utilise their monopoly privileges in pursuit of profit by extracting rent. Moreover, the longevity of the built environment, as well as the relative infrequency of land changing hands, provide capitalists with the opportunity to accumulate capital. Despite not being produced as a product for sale, land becomes commodified through 'the subordination of space that had been put on the market for capital investment' (Harvey, 2018, p. 136). By facilitating the accumulation of capital and realisation of surplus value as spatial fixes, landed properties, as well as the real estate market, constitute a crucial part of the secondary circuit of capital.

Like other landed properties, public space is also characterised by its permanence and relative infrequency of exchange. However, the fictitious nature of public space as a commodity is in many ways compounded by its unique public character. Even though the commodification of public space is similarly centred on the prioritisation of exchange value over use value, it takes on a very different form to other landed properties. Since public space cannot, in principle, be leased or sold freely in the real-estate market, public space does not function as a profitable investment or tradable asset for capital accumulation in the same way a luxury apartment can. Moreover, unlike other real estate and landed properties, the exchange value of public space is seldom manifested as rents. As evident in the case of the Kwun Tong Promenade, the exchange value of public space largely lies in its ability to attract investments and raise nearby land values and real estate prices (Chan, 2023). The surplus value of public space is therefore realised not through the use or exchange of the public space itself but in the surrounding developments. More importantly, the consumption and use of a public space are not dependent on its ownership. In other words, while the owner of a public space can regulate its use by, for example, determining its rules and regulations as well as hours of operation, anyone can technically gain access to, consume, and use a public space without owning or paying for it. Ownership in public spaces thus does not entail the same monopoly privileges as other private properties. As such, public spaces rarely function as spatial fixes in the same manner as other landed properties. Despite being inherently different from traditional commodities and other landed properties, it is clear from cases examined in this thesis, as well as from previous research, that public spaces are increasingly dominated by exchange value and economic logic and have become an integral part of capitalist urban development.

In order to understand how commodification takes shape in relation to public spaces, there are three things that we should consider when rethinking the concept. First of all, since the use of public space does not hinge upon its ownership, commodification of public space should also take into account perception and motivation instead of solely focusing on changes of ownership. Such a 'less purist' view of commodity and commodification is also shared by Appadurai (1986, p. 6), who argues that, in the broadest sense, a commodity can be anything 'intended for exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange'. In other words, it is the intention of the owner that is crucial to his conception of commodity and should similarly form the point of departure of a broadened conceptualisation of commodification. Instead of focusing on ownership and actual exchange, lines of inquiry into public space commodification should be centred on what is driving public space developments and how the surplus value is captured and realised. Secondly, commodification should always be viewed as a continuous and fluid process rather than an instantaneous transformation. As Appadurai (1986, p. 13) suggests, commodity is a situation of anything 'in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature'. Rather than being one kind of a thing or another, commodity is a state that the thing can move in and out

of over its social life. In other words, commodification does not result in something being instantaneously transformed into a commodity but is instead a continuous process that results in the domination of exchange value over use value. Thirdly, commodification should operate on a continuum instead of as a binary process. In his study of labour power and the welfare state, Esping-Andersen (1990, p. 37) argues that de-commodification of labour refers to 'the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation'. The key here is that de-commodification, and by extension commodification, is an issue of level and degree, and not 'an issue of all or nothing' (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 37). Importantly, such non-binary conceptualisation allows for the comparison between the different levels and degrees of commodification and is fundamental to broadening the concept beyond commodity exchange and production.

In the broadest sense, commodification refers to the 'general process by which the economic value of a thing comes to dominate its other uses' (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 2017). It is, as Forrest and Williams (1984, p. 1164) argue, a multifaceted and complex process that cannot be simply characterised as the 'commodified production of previously non-commodified goods or services'. More importantly, commodification is a distinct process from both commodity production and commodity exchange. Largely informed by Appadurai's view on the commodity situation and Esping-Andersen's non-binary approach to de-commodification, commodification is conceptualised as the process in which anything is rendered a commodity through the domination of economic logic and exchange value. Instead of production and exchange, it is a matter of perception, intention, and motivation. In other words, anything can be commodified without necessarily being a commodity. This fundamental distinction between something being commodified and something becoming a commodity is key to the conceptualisation of commodification, especially in relation to public space, which rarely manifests itself as a tradable commodity in the market. In addition, the commodification of public space should be understood as a process of changing phases, and that there are different levels or degrees of commodification. As such, a public space can be more, or less, commodified not only in relation to another public space but also in relation to various phases of its own development and existence. The addition of the music fountain, as well as the different cultural and commercial programmes on the Kwun Tong Promenade, are illustrative of how a public space can be continually commodified after its construction and opening (Chan, 2023). Finally, since the surplus value of public space is often realised in its surrounding developments, public space commodification and the contradictions it entails need to be understood as part of the broader processes of capitalist urban development. It is therefore crucial to take a multi-scalar view when studying the commodification of public space.

A broadened conceptualisation of public space commodification that incorporates a temporal aspect and operates on a continuum will enable us to better understand the structural processes behind privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation. Unlike existing lines of inquiry, a political economy perspective on the commodification of public space will enable more comprehensive investigation of how structural processes affect the production and development of contemporary public spaces. Instead of fixating on certain characteristics of public spaces that are linked to privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation, commodification of public space shifts the subject of inquiry to a higher level by tracing the connection between the production and development of public space and the globalising political economy. The commodification of public space represents a more holistic and integrated approach that not only encompasses the interplay of the different processes transforming contemporary public space practice but also explains why such processes occur in the first place. Studying the commodification of public space can both expand existing inquiries and open up further opportunities for public space research, especially in relation to public space developments that are driven by governments and other public actors. Public space commodification is conceptualised here to take on multiple distinct forms based on the underlying principle that the usefulness of public space is no longer the main driving force of public space development, and the commodification lens can therefore be applied to a wide range of public space studies. Conceptualising commodification in such a manner will facilitate a better understanding of how public spaces are being exploited as a means of exchange in different contexts. More importantly, it will also help to unpack the complexity of public space commodification and capture its socio-spatial implications.

Socio-spatial implications of public space commodification

Commodification of public space, as illustrated in this thesis and elsewhere, has manifested itself very differently in various social, geographical, and historical contexts. Regardless of the nature of the stakeholders and what their motives are, the essence of commodification of public space is the prioritisation of exchange value over use value in the production and development of public space. The departure from traditional notions of use value means that the value of public spaces is no longer characterised by how they can engender social interaction or provide a physical setting where people can express themselves. As evident in the different cases examined in this thesis, rather than an end that serves to provide a well-functioning, inclusive, and accessible space for the universal public, public space has become a means for different stakeholders to achieve their own objectives. Moreover, public space commodification is, in many ways, as much about

narratives and practices as it is about the public space itself. In some cases, the decision to build or refurbish a public space is enough to engender speculation and stimulate property values, regardless of how, or even when, it will materialise. However, this does not mean that public space commodification does not have any material impact – not only is the domination of exchange value in public space developments often encoded in its design and use, it can also play an important role in the socio-spatial organisation of its surroundings.

As evident in the cases examined in this thesis, commodification of public space can have profound implications on broader processes of uneven development. In Paper 2, I begin to substantiate the link between public space commodification and the production of spatial injustice. However, to fully understand this correlation, it is crucial to formulate a theory of spatial justice in relation to public space commodification. To do so, we need to first unpack the concept of social justice and consider what a spatial approach to justice entails and how it can add to existing theories of justice. Most recent conceptualisations of social justice can be traced back to Rawls' theory of social justice, which mostly concerns 'the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties' (Rawls, 1971, p. 7). In other words, his liberal notion of social justice is based on the equal distribution of what he calls social primary goods, which include both tangible and intangible things such as rights, liberties, wealth, and income. In contrast to Rawls' emphasis on distributive justice, Harvey (1973) argues that the key to formulating a universal notion of social justice lies in the structural mechanisms that determine production. As Harvey (1973, p. 110) suggests, 'programmes which seek to alter distribution without altering the capitalist market structure […] are doomed to failure'. In a similar vein, Young (1990, p. 8) contends that 'it is a mistake to reduce social justice to distribution' as such a focus would obscure 'other issues of institutional organisation'. A fair decision-making process is, according to Young, just as important as equal distribution in her formulation of social justice. However, instead of aiming for universality, Young contends that social justice needs to explicitly acknowledge and attend to social group differences, and social justice can only be understood from the standpoint of the oppressed and dominated. Social justice, she argues, 'requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression' (Young, 1990, p. 47). Drawing on Young, Harvey (1996, p. 362) later acknowledges that although universality cannot be avoided, it 'must be construed in dialectical relation with particularity'. In other words, social justice needs to be defined from the standpoint of the oppressed by 'relating the universal and particular at different scales' (Harvey, 1996, p. 362). In many ways, it is this relational thinking that forms the basis of my understanding of social justice and conceptualisation of spatial justice in relation to public space commodification.

Since its conception in the 1970s, spatial justice has been a highly contested and at times problematic concept (Madanipour et al., 2022). Instead of seeing the need to

develop a theory of spatial justice, some scholars regard spatial justice as simply a 'consequence' of social justice (Marcuse, 2009c), and it is sometimes understood as 'shorthand for the phrase "social justice in space"' (Pirie, 1983, p. 471). As Marcuse (2009b, p. 92) contends, spatial justice planning, albeit necessary, is not sufficient as 'it does not address the structural causes of injustice'. Although spatial remedies can negate the spatial aspects of injustices, he argues that 'much broader changes in relations of power and allocation of resources and opportunities must be addressed if the social injustices […] are to be redressed' (Marcuse, 2009c, p. 5). Spatiality, on the other hand, is central to Soja's (2010) theory of spatial justice. Social justice and injustice, according to Soja, are fundamentally and inherently spatial. While spatial justice cannot replace other forms of justice, he contends that 'there is always a relevant spatial dimension to justice' (Soja, 2009, p. 2). One example of how spatial remedies can negate social injustice is found in Fainstein's conception of the *Just City*. As urban development and planning became increasingly market oriented, Fainstein (2009, 2010) conceptualised the Just City as a pushback against neoliberal capitalist ideals in city planning. The Just City, according to Fainstein (2010, p. 3), is a 'city in which public investment and regulation would produce equitable outcomes rather than support those already well off'. Equity and justice, she argues, should form the guiding principles for both city planning and public policies. Although spatial remedies and interventions do not necessarily redress all unjust structures and processes, it is crucial to at least acknowledge and consider the spatiality of various forms of justice. It is only with this sensitivity and attention to the spatial aspects of justice and injustice that we can begin to understand the justice implications of public space commodification.

There are a number of considerations that need to be taken into account when formulating a theory of spatial justice in relation to public space commodification. First of all, it is crucial to look beyond a simple, liberal, distributive approach to justice. Although just distribution of public space and equal rights to access public spaces are vital to the search for spatial justice, it is inadequate to simply look at them as sole determinants of just public space. As evident in the public spaces examined in this thesis, it is pertinent to maintain a multi-scalar view of spatial justice in order to fully encapsulate the wider socio-spatial implications of public space commodification. As Soja argues, a multi-scalar view is 'pivotal in the development of a spatial theory of justice and injustice'. The Kwun Tong Promenade studied in Paper 2 is illustrative of how public space commodification can operate at multiple levels and impact spatial justice on different scales. Despite being technically accessible and open to public, the commodification of the waterfront public space has heightened spatial injustice within the poor and aging district. The domination of exchange value and the prioritisation of public spaces with higher exchange value like the Promenade have resulted in the neglect of local everyday public spaces. While not necessarily restricting anyone's right to access to public space, commodification of public space often leads to an unjust distribution of resources in public space developments within a neighbourhood or even across

cities. Moreover, as public spaces become increasingly central to urban redevelopments, commodification of public space has resulted in the exacerbation of gentrification and displacement. As evident on the Kwun Tong Promenade, when considering the justice implications of public space commodification, it is important to also take into account those who are displaced and no longer present. Instead of solely focusing on how the processes play out in the public space itself and how they have impacted its use, a multi-scalar and relational view is essential to capture the socio-spatial impacts of public space commodification.

In addition to examining the distributive implications of public spaces, any discussion on justice issues pertaining to public spaces should also take into account the processes behind public space production and development (Low, 2013). As Madanipour et al. (2022) contend, the dichotomy between distributive justice and procedural justice can be mediated by a relational theory of spatial justice that combines both aspects of justice. They argue that spatial justice, conceptualised in such a manner, represents the 'search for a just process that aims at a just outcome' (Madanipour et al., 2022, p. 812). In other words, it is not sufficient to simply look at the public space itself as an end-product or outcome, but we should also consider whether the planning and development process is just, for instance, who is involved in the decision-making process, whose voices are heard, etc. This thesis contends that a commodification angle that examines the driving forces behind public space developments can expose the detachment of use value from the variegated forms of exchange values in the planning and development process. The lack of public involvement in the design and planning of the Kwun Tong Promenade, as I argue in Paper 2, is indicative of how the domination of exchange value is evident throughout the planning and development of public spaces. Another aspect of justice to consider when evaluating the impact of public space commodification is what Low calls interactional justice (Low, 2013). Interactional justice, Low suggests, refers to the 'quality of interpersonal interaction' in the public space. Whereas Low is mostly concerned with whether all people can interact equally in a safe and free manner, I argue that interactional justice is also pertinent to what social interactions and activities people are allowed to have in the public space. These social interactions and activities constitute an important part of the social production of public space. It is clear from the cases studied that the domination of exchange value and economic logic in public space production and management has profound implications on the quality of interactions one can have in a public space. Ethnic minorities not feeling that they belong to a touristic waterfront promenade or local artists and musicians not being allowed to perform music freely in a public open space are both instances of interactional injustice resulting from public space commodification. In sum, when studying the justice implications of public space commodification, it is crucial to not only take a multi-scalar view but also consider different aspects of spatial justice.

Finally, it must be stressed that the problem with commodification of public space does not lie in the ability of public spaces to transform neighbourhoods and cities. Public space will always have the potential to boost its surroundings; just as there will always be a risk of any public space being appropriated, exploited, and commodified. In many ways, these discussions fail to grasp the essence of conceptualising commodification of public space, which is not to determine whether a public space is commodified or not, but to understand what is driving the process and how it has impacted both the use of the public space and the socio-spatial organisation of its surroundings. While a transformative public space can also be inclusive and accessible, what sets the commodification of public space apart is the subordination of use value and neglect of its users in its production and development. As illustrated in this thesis, the domination of exchange value and economic logic in public space developments not only affects the publicness and inclusivity of the public space itself but also exacerbates broader processes of spatial injustice and uneven development. As such, the impact of public space commodification, and its connection to spatial justice, can only be fully appreciated and understood from the standpoint of the oppressed and marginalised. Instead of trying to simply determine whether a public space is commodified or not, the focus of the discussion should be centred on how the use value of public space is subordinated to its exchange value, why commodification has taken place, and what it has meant for the people impacted by it. In other words, the key to a productive investigation into commodification of public space is to capture the transformation by identifying both the driving forces behind the process as well as its socio-spatial impact. Having a proper understanding of both commodification and spatial justice, as well as the relationship between them, will shed new light on the importance of public space struggles in creating a just city.

Authoritarian neoliberalism and the right to the city

Hong Kong has for many years been, in the words of Friedman, 'the modern exemplar of free markets and limited government' (Friedman & Friedman, 1980, p. 34). In addition to being a frontier between China and the West, its status and reputation as a global city and international financial centre are largely predicated on its free-market mechanism and low tax rate. For many years, business interests and market forces have been the main driving force of the development of Hong Kong. The business elites not only have great influence on both the legislature and executive branches of governance in Hong Kong (Chan & Pun, 2020), but many also have direct connections with Chinese central authorities. Many important government policies like the 'Individual Visit Scheme' as well as various urban development and infrastructural projects have been largely driven by business interests and market forces. Even the planning, development, and management of

public spaces, as I illustrate in this thesis, are increasingly driven by business interests and economic logic. The prioritisation of businesses, as well as the city's international reputation and competitiveness, is exemplified by the government's reluctance to end the Umbrella Movement by force in 2014. One of the considerations for the government when it decided against clearing out Umbrella Square and the other protest sites sooner, was that a violent confrontation with protesters would potentially damage Hong Kong's image as an international financial centre (Martínez, 2019). As Martínez (2019, p. 113) suggests, the main priorities for the government as well as central authorities back then were to 'keep economic growth moving and business interests safe'.

However, as China continues to tighten its control over Hong Kong, the neoliberalism of Hong Kong is increasingly tinted with shades of China's centralised state-party model of authoritarianism. In many ways, the neoliberalism of Hong Kong is now more akin to what is generally described as *authoritarian neoliberalism* (Bruff, 2014; Davis, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Tansel, 2017). As Bruff (2014, p. 116) contends, authoritarian neoliberalism is characterised by not only the growing imbrication of the state and the market but also a move away from consensus building and concessions to 'explicit exclusion and marginalisation of subordinate social groups'. Despite displaying similar characteristics, what is taking place in Hong Kong should not be seen as only an 'authoritarian fix' for 'the wider crisis of capitalism and more specific legitimation crisis of capitalist states' (Bruff, 2014, p. 124), but rather a part of China's long-term project of political integration (Ong, 2004). From this point of view, the authoritarian turn of Hong Kong was perhaps not unexpected. As Skeldon predicted back in 1997 – the year of the Handover – the future of Hong Kong 'will depend upon how China interacts with the international and regional communities of nation' (Skeldon, 1997, p. 271). Politics, not economics, will ultimately determine Hong Kong's status as a global city and international financial centre (Chiu & Lui, 2009).

According to Friedman, the neoliberal project of Hong Kong has always been a 'test case of what can be achieved through the combination of economic, social, and civic freedoms, short of political freedom and full voting rights' (Peck, 2021, p. 200). The establishment of the SAR, as Ong (2004, p. 85) similarly suggests, provides Hong Kong with the opportunity 'to experiment with different degrees of political freedom that test socialist worries over national security'. Even though Hong Kong has largely flourished as a global city and international financial centre during the early years of Chinese rule, it is clear from recent events that the amount of political freedom that China is willing to grant Hong Kongers, as well as its tolerance for dissent and civic action, has greatly diminished in the past few years. Despite vocal concerns from both the local business community and international financial players (Chan & Pun, 2020), the government had been insistent on pushing ahead with the Extradition Law Amendment Bill that would see the rule of law, which the free-market economy of Hong Kong is founded upon, threatened. Moreover, the violent

and forceful crackdown on protesters during the Anti-ELAB protests also suggests that the government is less concerned about the city's international image. Instead, the main priority of the Hong Kong government, as well as China, is political stability and national security. This is further exemplified by the introduction of the National Security Law and the adoption of and firm adherence to the 'Zero Covid strategy' during the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have profound implications on the competitiveness of Hong Kong as an international financial centre and have resulted in an exodus of foreign companies and business elites.

Although urban development in Hong Kong has always been characterised as both market-oriented and top-down (Ng, 2002), political considerations have become more influential in urban development as planning and decision-making processes have grown increasingly centralised in recent years. To a certain extent, urban development in Hong Kong has become more similar to urban transformations taking place in China, which as Zhou et al. (2019, p. 37) argue, 'has been primarily a party-state rather than a capitalist class project'. Developers and capitalists in China are, in other words, subservient to the state. Similarly, the authoritarian turn in Hong Kong has seen businesses, developers, and corporations in Hong Kong losing their influence and power. As evident in the aftermath of the protests in shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB movement, developers had to quickly fall in line and support the government in its attempt to crack down on protesters even though it might hurt their businesses and commercial interests. In addition, the increasingly authoritarian nature of Hong Kong's neoliberal urbanism has also facilitated and exacerbated the commodification of public space. As Di Giovanni (2017, p. 123) suggests, the 'increasingly centralised decision-making structure' that is characteristic of authoritarian neoliberalism 'dramatically hastens the pace of capital circulation'. In Hong Kong, democratic and consensus-building processes have been replaced by top-down executive decisions as opposing voices against planning and development decisions are increasingly silenced and ignored. A case in point is the addition of the music fountain on the Kwun Tong Promenade. When the idea was first raised back in 2013, there was strong opposition from local residents, community leaders, and pan-democratic lawmakers. The strong resistance to the project was reflected in the amount of time it took to get through all the different funding, planning, and design stages. In the end, the project was forced through by the government who disregarded all the opposing voices as well as a formal objection from the District Council (Chan, 2023). Since the enactment of the National Security Law, virtually all opposition politicians have been banished from both the LegCo and District Councils, making the process of obtaining approval and funding for similar urban (re)development projects even smoother and the circulation of capital even faster.

Meanwhile, the authoritarian turn of Hong Kong has also had a profound impact on public space use. Hong Kong was for many years a 'city of protest' (Dapiran, 2017). Prior to the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019, political protests were a regular

occurrence in Hong Kong. In addition to the semi-annual mass demonstrations on New Year's Day and 1 July, as well as the Tiananmen Square Massacre vigil on 4 June, Hong Kongers have staged protests against a wide variety of issues including education reforms, parallel trading,[10] mega-projects, urban renewal, etc. Obtaining permission for such demonstrations, even when it meant closing some of the busiest roads or most popular city parks in the city, had largely been a formality. From this point of view, Hong Kongers had enjoyed a relatively high level of freedom of expression – whether these demonstrations and protests would come to anything is, of course, a different story. However, since the latter stages of the Anti-ELAB movement, the government and police have virtually banned all demonstrations. Moreover, the establishment of the all-encompassing National Security Law has seen further erosion of political freedoms and freedom of expression as virtually any form of protest and dissent can be interpreted as a threat to national security and is therefore outlawed.

While it is clear from the cases presented in this thesis that commodification of public space tends to result in a decline in publicness and inclusivity, it could be argued that the increasing public space repression in Hong Kong is in turn conducive to the public space commodification process. Through various constitutional and legislative adaptations, as well as heightened security and surveillance, the government has eliminated all 'undesirables' from public spaces and limited use of the spaces so that they are only for leisure, recreational, and commercial purposes. Since developers, corporations, and businesses prefer 'domesticated' public spaces to unmediated and uncontrolled ones, the eradication of political and civic activities in all public spaces makes public space development even more conducive to attracting investment and stimulating development. As Springer (2009, p. 155) suggests, the stability of the neoliberal order is enforced by 'ensuring market discipline and dominance through a variety of regulatory, surveillance, and policing mechanisms whereby neoliberal reforms are instituted and "locked in"'. In addition to directly driving public space commodification as exemplified in the case of the Kwun Tong Promenade, the government's tightening control of public space has also played an important role in the commodification of public space in Hong Kong.

As formal public spaces became increasingly restricted and commodified in Hong Kong, Hong Kongers turned to unlikely places of the city to stake their claim to the right to the city by forcing 'open spaces of the city to protest and contention' (Harvey & Potter, 2009, p. 49). During the Umbrella Movement in 2014, protesters had to literally create their own town square on a highway. Umbrella Square was, as I illustrated in Paper 3, an ideal-typical public space that is centred on openness and porosity – two characteristics that are lacking in other public spaces in Hong

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[10] Parallel trading refers to the phenomenon of Chinese parallel traders buying goods from Hong Kong and reselling them at a profit in mainland China. Parallel trading often causes shortages of household goods in certain districts of Hong Kong.

Kong largely as a result of commodification processes. Unlike most other protest sites of the Occupy Movement, Umbrella Square had no prior political or cultural significance; it was given its meaning by protesters through their struggle over the production of space and the right to the city. As Harvey (2008, p. 23) argues, the right to the city should not be understood as simply a right to access but as 'a right to change ourselves by changing the city'. Through improvisation and appropriation, the protesters created an unmediated public space where they could not only freely express themselves but also participate in the 'decisions that produce urban space' (Purcell, 2002, p. 103). Although Umbrella Square only lasted two and a half months, the protest site became an important arena where the right to the city was 'struggled over, […] implemented and represented' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 235). More importantly, it also exemplified how an unmediated public space can engender political encounters and social interactions in a city where the production and management of public space are increasingly centred on neoliberal and authoritarian ideals.

While protesters were able to create and occupy Umbrella Square in 2014, the heavy-handed and violent nature of the police crackdown on protesters during the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019 meant that Hong Kongers resorted to voicing and expressing their dissent in various shopping malls across the city. As I argue in Paper 4, the protests in shopping malls are not only illustrative of the importance of production of space in Hong Kongers' struggle over their right to the city but also of how consumption and everyday life are tightly intertwined in Hong Kong. In a city that is greatly shaped by commodity exchange, shopping malls have always played a key role in the urban development of Hong Kong. Despite being privately owned and primarily built for consumption, many shopping malls in Hong Kong have also functioned as sites for recreation and social interactions. For many Hong Kongers, shopping malls constitute an important part of everyday life. Shopping malls are, in other words, everyday spaces where the repetitiveness and banality of everyday life are played out. Although everyday life is key to the reproduction of the dominant neoliberal order, Lefebvre suggests that it is also in the realm of everyday life where the real revolution can take place (Lefebvre, 1971, 2014; Schmid, 2012). In many ways, the protests in shopping malls represented not only the de-commodification of the privately-owned and highly commodified pseudo-public spaces but also a puncture in repetitive and banal everyday life, as well as resistance against the dominating authoritarian neoliberal order.

Even though the circumstances in which the protests in shopping malls took place were extraordinary and exceptional, the spaces that shaped them were firmly rooted in the realm of everyday life. More importantly, as a result of the increasingly authoritarian regime in Hong Kong, repression of public space is becoming normalised, and resistance against the dominant authoritarian and neoliberal order – regardless of the form it takes – is increasingly part of the everyday life of Hong Kongers. Although the protests in shopping malls did not result in any permanent

spatial transformations, they engendered changes to the everyday life of Hong Kongers, not least in terms of their views on different private corporations and businesses but, more importantly, also their consumption habits. As Lefebvre argues, 'to change the world, we must change life' (Elden, 2004, p. 118). The protests in shopping malls suggest that it is in everyday spaces, rather than formal public spaces, where such changes can begin to take place in Hong Kong.

Conclusion and outlook

To conclude, I will return to where this thesis started. As I noted in the introduction, the dual meaning of the last urban frontier describes both the setting and the object of this study. Public spaces are frontiers because they are one of the few sites in the city that have not yet been fully commodified. In this sense, public spaces can be viewed as the last urban frontier for capital expansion. Moreover, because of its public nature, there are also forces of de-commodification at work in the social production of public space. As a result, public spaces are constantly being contested and fought over. This thesis argues that these contestations over public space can be best captured by a broadened conceptualisation of commodification in relation to public space. By rethinking the concept of public space commodification, this thesis aims to develop a theoretical framework to advance our understanding of the increasingly complex and exploitative public space developments in different social and political contexts. Looking at public space commodification from a political economy angle can both uncover the driving forces behind public space developments and encapsulate their multi-scalar socio-spatial implications. More importantly, understanding the linkages between public space commodification and spatial injustice properly will shed new light on how public space struggles can contribute to the creation of a more just and better city.

Secondly, the last urban frontier also describes Hong Kong, a city that is not only steeped in neoliberal ideals but has also experienced substantial deterioration in terms of democratic rights and freedoms in recent years. In addition to being the global frontier that lies between China and the West, Hong Kong has also become a site where market forces and state political interests are increasingly at odds due to China's forceful attempts at political integration. The increasingly authoritarian nature of urban development in Hong Kong has also resulted in the dual processes of state repression and commodification in public space production, and has driven Hong Kongers away from formal public spaces. Even though a realistic, or indeed pessimistic, take on the *last urban frontier* may suggest an inevitable and eventual complete domination of market forces and authoritarian control, the findings of this thesis point to a sense of optimism and hope in the manner in which Hong Kongers reacted and adapted to the growing oppression of the Chinese imperial regime. Despite the increasingly commodified and restricted nature of public space, Hong

Kongers managed to create their own political space – albeit temporarily – on some of the unlikeliest sites of the city. The transformation of Umbrella Square and the appropriation of shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protests are indicative of the agency and creativity of Hong Kongers. While formal public spaces can no longer function as sites for political and civic actions, the insurgent uses of everyday spaces not only exemplified the people's ability to adapt to the increasingly harsh political and economic situation but also resulted in concrete changes in everyday life. Through the transformation of everyday life, Hong Kongers illustrated how the right to the city can be claimed and struggled over in different everyday spaces across the city.

While this study is firmly situated in a specific and unique historical moment in Hong Kong, there are various aspects that can point to future research in different social and political contexts. As public spaces become increasingly central to capitalist urban development around the world, how forces of commodification and de-commodification play out in public spaces will be crucial in understanding the exploitation of public space in future urban developments. A broadened approach to commodification of public space will not only serve as an important analytical tool and conceptual framework for future public space research but will also be key in determining what good and just public space developments entail. A commodification angle on future public space studies will complement existing lines of inquiry such as privatisation, commercialisation, and securitisation by shedding light on the structural forces behind these processes and connecting them to the globalising political economy. It will also be of interest to scholars studying other urban processes such as gentrification and urban regeneration in cases where public space developments are involved.

Furthermore, it could be argued that investigations into public space commodification will also be useful for practitioners and officials taking part in the production and development of public space. The domination of exchange value over use value in public space is often encoded and manifested in the planning and design of public space developments, and it is therefore particularly important for planners, architects, and others to be aware of how the exploitative intentions behind public space developments can be materialised through the execution of their work and to challenge them by facilitating and promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and publicness. More importantly, rethinking the concept of public space commodification can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the production of public space as well as its broader justice implications. Since public spaces are generally considered by members of the public as something positive, it is essential for them to understand the multi-scalar impacts of public space commodification and recognise how certain public space developments can lead to undesirable consequences such as gentrification, displacement, and heightened spatial injustice.

Another line of future inquiry can be centred on the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism and its impact on urban life and the built environment. As authoritarian tendencies become increasingly common across Western democracies, this research on public space transformations in Hong Kong can shed light on the various contradictions and complexities that urban development under an authoritarian and neoliberal regime entails. While I have begun to substantiate the connection between the repressive state and commodification of public space in this thesis, further investigation of the interplay between market forces and state political interests regarding urban transformations will be productive and useful in understanding the socio-spatial implications of different urban developments, especially when democratic planning and decision-making processes are increasingly under threat. Furthermore, as this study was conducted while the deterioration of public space in Hong Kong was very much unfolding in real time, the long-term implications of the authoritarian turn on public space commodification are yet to be fully uncovered. How the combination of repressive forces and neoliberal processes in urban development will impact the city and urban life in the long term will need to be studied with a longitudinal approach. Finally, as authoritarian neoliberalism becomes increasingly widespread, the role of everyday life and everyday spaces in the struggle for the right to the city and spatial justice should also be re-evaluated. The case of Hong Kong suggests that the production and transformation of everyday spaces, in addition to struggles over formal public spaces, will be increasingly key to future resistance against the dominant authoritarian and neoliberal order. How such transformations can take place – and what other forms they may take – would constitute an important and insightful topic for future study.

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