

Yue Chim Richard Wong (2015). *Hong Kong Land for Hong Kong People: Fixing the Failures of Our Housing Policy*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 232 pp., US\$58 (hardback), ISBN 978-9-88820-865-4

The book discusses the centrality of housing in Hong Kong's political economy. It attributes the roots of housing inequalities and social injustice to the inefficient and market-hostile housing, land use and planning system. This forms the basis of Wong's political proposal for more aggressive public housing privatisation. It is an eye-opening book not because of the essay style of presentation, nor for the explicit advocacy for homeownership and possessive individualism as the panacea to social inequalities and housing unaffordability. It is eye-opening because this book violates every rule for a rigorous research. Due to such serious flaws, this book failed completely in presenting a logical, coherent and convincing argument.

The book is divided into five parts and twenty-nine articles in total. Part I comprises three articles and presents the key arguments of this book. It starts with a reprinted newspaper article from 1997 before China took over Hong Kong. In this, Wong first wrote empathetically about the suffering of families divided by the border between Hong Kong and mainland China and then immediately warned that hostile migration policies would further widen the gap between the propertied class and the property-less class owing to the pressure of inflation. He dismissed the argument that the inflows of migrants would become the burden of social welfare by showing the capacity of Hong Kong society in receiving large inflows of migrants in history on the one hand, and calling for changing the ways in which social welfare is conceived on the other. He claimed that "it is a mistake to believe that individual problems are always and everywhere a public responsibility" (p. 6). This belief underlies his analysis in the second article of housing policies and their effects upon social inequalities since the squatter clearance in the 1950s, where successive state interventions in housing supply and rent control are believed to be a key source of inequalities. Upon the same belief, he proposes that the solution lies in building a homeowner society for a number of reasons but quite importantly, it allows the owners to have a direct stake in a property-driven society.

Part II to Part IV tackle different policies that affect housing accessibility and affordability. Part II closely identifies with market fundamentalism and economic imperialism. Entitled as 'People, Public Housing and Serfdom', this section consists of eleven articles and provides a detailed account of the problems of the public housing policies. According to Wong, these include constrained physical and social mobility (pp. 29-30, p. 76), incomplete ownership (p. 31), housing shortage and inaccessibility (pp. 45-46), intergenerational inequality (p. 78) and family dysfunctions (pp. 101-104). A most interesting discussion in this section is that public rental housing provision contributes to the high divorce rate in Hong Kong because single parents are treated preferentially under current policies (pp. 103-104). This is worrying for Wong because, according to the evidence from the US and the Europe, "broken families descend into poverty and hold out less hope for their children's future" and children of single

parent families are “losing their ability to become economically productive individuals capable of leading meaningful happy lives” (p. 104). Privatisation of public housing to sitting tenants at affordable rates and developing a secondary public housing market is believed to redistribute wealth, promote upward mobility, hedge against economic risks as well as bring about physical and political freedom.

Part III examines the impacts of the linked exchange rate, the pre-sale arrangements, and the Application List System upon housing affordability. Fully convinced of the magic power of the market, Wong defended the linked exchange rate with US dollars instead of Chinese RMB in stabilising Hong Kong’s political economy because it adopts a “free-market mechanism to balance payments in international transactions” and does not “require any form of government intervention” (p. 116). After this, he dedicated two articles to defending the necessity of speculation in the housing market. His main contention is that speculative activities improve economic efficiency (p. 132) and spread the risks (p. 134) in property development. They are also desirable to property buyers because the intermediaries of speculators counter the dominance of property developers in the housing market (pp. 139-140). The final article of Part III examined the Application List System, a crisis management tool of the Hong Kong government to prevent cheap land sales. Here, Wong drew upon the work of his colleagues by first acknowledging and insisting on the merit of opening up to market influences (p. 145, 148) and then pointing out the flawed policy design for causing low transparency and discouraging competition. The solution is thus to increase competition by pitting at least two developers against each other in the application and auction process, making cheap land sale less likely.

This article naturally leads to his discussion of land use policies in Part IV. Wong maintained that high land price is foremost caused by regulatory prohibition (p. 153), or regulation tax. This include costs of assembling land, compensating previous users, getting permissions, and bureaucratic inertia (p. 154). This not only contradicts his earlier preference for bringing in more competition to the Application List System in order to keep up the land price but also his sympathy towards the precarity of the dispossessed indigenous and non-indigenous residents. Drawing upon the experiences of Peru and Singapore, Wong argued that property ownership can address the injustice of land dispossession and boost socio-political stability. The remainder of this part takes up the population policy again. Citing Jane Jacobs, Wong firmly argued for mixed use and diversity to encourage interactions, creativity and belonging (p. 181). This builds up to his critique of the migration policy in Hong Kong that is biased against people who can produce and innovate (p. 181). On this matter, he first entertained the view that migrants who arrived in Hong Kong after the 1970s were primary suspects of welfare dependency and sources of urban poverty. But he later insisted that some of those who arrived for family reunion contributed to the family life of their spouses who were Hong Kong residents, and that they could become Hong Kong’s assets in the future should the government invest in improving their quality for accumulation (p. 186). He thus supported

a more generous policy towards family reunion applicants as well as those migrants with “high levels of human capital attainment” (p. 187).

In the concluding part, Wong puts forward very explicit proposals for privatising public housing stock by lowering land premiums to be paid back to the state and developing a secondary market for public housing. This is only one building block of his plan for a homeownership society. With concrete suggestions for reducing costs in land development, land dispossession, and relaxed planning control, the agenda is to achieve ideally full homeownership, or at least 84% through public housing privatisation alone (p. 213).

The book may be of interest to public housing tenants or activists, policy makers and economists that support market fundamentalism or are sympathetic to the conditions of public housing tenants. It addresses the grievances of tenants through relatively accessible and sometimes emotional writing. However, the book is quite a challenging read for academic audiences. By this, I am not referring to many contentious claims that Wong has made – to name a few, broken families in public housing estates (p. 75), children as assets or property (p. 102) and the rationalisation and naturalisation of urban poverty (p. 184). Critiquing them reflects differences in our political and academic backgrounds and warrants a full-length paper. Therefore, I limit my assessment to the ways in which the book develops the arguments in its own logic. Unfortunately, it fails completely to meet academic standards. First, for any empirically driven study, the rigor of the analysis to a large extent depends on the methods. The book completely omits any discussion of methods. This makes some description of the lived experiences in public housing estates very questionable. Worse still, Wong only pointed out the sources of data when using statistics in tables. This may not necessarily be a problem if the rest is argumentative. But it does raise legitimate questions for many unsubstantiated descriptions and claims (p. 74, 81, 128). Second, with a large body of literature on housing in Hong Kong or on the Singapore model, it surprises me that there is very scant intellectual dialogue with existing scholarship. There is no attempt to engage with theories in political economy or sociology. It then creates confusion as to whether the book is intended as an academic product at all or simply serves as a policy proposal. Third, concerns of scope aside, analysis of the book also appears to be partial and lacks of depth. It escapes from the contentious yet important question as to who counts as ‘Hong Kong people’ and whose right counts despite the book’s provocative title. Another example is his discussion of the Asian Financial Crisis which completely ignores the role played by mainland China in stabilising the regional economy (pp. 127-128).

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