

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Parallel Problematics? Chang Kyung-Sup's Logic of Compressed Modernity and Critical Human Geography

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1. Chang 2022, 186.
2. Ibid., emphasis added.

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The Logic of Compressed Modernity provides a panoramic overview of Chang Kyung-Sup's work as a pioneering, critical sociologist, and a subtle reframing of his contribution to the broader social sciences to draw out its global significance. In my contribution to this book symposium, I want to focus on how Chang's ideas concerning compressed modernity have developed in parallel to cognate ideas and complementary approaches within human geography. And yet, surprisingly, engagement between these two critical traditions has not been as extensive as their affinities might suggest. If I were forced to speculate, the reasons for the relatively mild encounter and interaction between them on their relatively parallel journeys perhaps stems from the privileging of an urban focus by the latter. This does not mean, however, that Chang's ideas lack a spatial focus or geographical relevance. Rather, I suggest that Chang's broad lexicon of compressed modernity may provide an opportunity for stronger, interdisciplinary engagement that deepens geographical inquiry and, vice versa, uses geographical research to enrich the spatial register of compressed modernity.

At its origin, the connection between Chang's approach and modern human geography runs deep. Chang's very understanding of compressed modernity has been inspired, in part, by the work of David Harvey, a foundational thinker within radical geography and historical geographical materialism. As Chang¹ observes, Harvey's concept of time-space compression provides something of a theory of 'global-scale compressed modernity' created by the frequent overaccumulation crises of modern capitalism and the various forms of accumulation by dispossession that have accompanied crises, leading, at times, to forms of modernization – or 'modernization' as Chang prefers – as imposition. Harvey often refers to this compression as the 'annihilation of space through time,' a shrinking of distance that has been created by the speeding up of the turnover time of capital through its attendant space-shrinking technologies and the creation of intensive and extensive flows and connections between places.

Chang², in many ways, deepens Harvey's insights by differentiating the global dynamics of capitalist crises and accumulation from the 'national, regional, organizational, familial and personal *condensation* of time and space' that accompany and are mutually intertwined with it. The keyword here is 'condensation' rather than 'compression,' for the latter has stronger, almost physical connotation of a scalar hierarchy in which the global merely presses down upon or shrinks the influence of national, regional, and local social formations. Whereas, 'condensa-

3. cf. Jessop 2007.

4. Doucette and Park 2020; Shin et al 2020.

5. e.g. Sonn and Shin 2020.

6. Lee et al 2018.

7. Doucette and Hae 2022.

tion' implies a more transformative element. I associate this term with Poulantzas's (1978) understanding of the state as a condensation of relationships among social forces: an understanding that influenced the broader strategic-relational approach to state and society with geography and sociology.³ Likewise, Chang's use of the term suggests a similarly relational understanding of compression as productive of and produced by a dynamic set of interactions across scale. Moreover, Chang extends the lexicon of compression and condensation to include a much fuller set relations compared to Harvey and others, including hybridity, syncrecity, competition, collision, disjointing, articulation, and compounding, among others. This rich vocabulary can enable a more granular socio-cultural and socio-political understanding of the spaces of modernity and modernization.

Chang's rich register also reminded me of existing critiques and revisions of Harvey's ideas in human geography that have sought to cast light on the variability of spatio-temporary effects of modern empire, capital accumulation, and Cold War relations. For instance, Chang seems to share many sentiments with the work of geographers such as the late Doreen Massey and others who note that while globalization may produce compression in some areas of social life, it can create 'extension' in others. Massey argues that instead of privileging a particular scale or unidirectional teleology what is needed instead is an attention to the diverse 'power geometries' created within capitalist and other co-articulated power relations. Chang shares a similar sentiment, I feel. Moreover, his broad lexicon shows how compressed modernity is not simply a problem for the periphery but is also reflexively and relationally intertwined with other countries or locations within the world system. By noting both the role of interconnection and multiple place-based articulations of modernity formed through relational encounters, Chang provides a more nuanced and interconnected approach that advances the debate on alternative modernities by resisting the temptation to 'close off' modernity within national containers or see compression as only a problem for the periphery. I found that the ways in which multiple modernities clash and interact, that Chang describes in Chapter 4, is particularly salient for understanding the complexity of Korea's recent socio-political transformations. In these regards, his work resonates with recent work by the inter-Asia cultural studies movement, although citation to such work remains limited in this edition.

In my opinion, especially when it comes to the unfolding of compressed modernity in South Korea, the parallel problematics and mutual complementarity between Chang's critical sociology and cognate research in human geography is perhaps best seen in relation to work on 'developmentalist urbanization' and 'urban developmentalism' in East Asia.⁴ Here, arguments about the compressed nature of the urban process and its multiple effects have figured prominently in the work of Korean geographers and urban scholars such as Choi Byung Doo, Cho Myoung-rae, and Park Bae-gyoon in a manner that resonates closely with Chang's insights. Some of this broader literature⁵ has examined urbanization as a site for 'developmental citizenship' (another concept associated with Chang's work) in the sense of urban state strategies oriented towards asset creation for middle classes to ensure loyalty and legitimacy for the various regimes. Other work by geographers has also picked upon similar problematics, for instance, by looking at the unique riskscape that have been produced by the compressed nature of urbanization⁶ and, reflexively, the state strategies that have sought to address it. Likewise, my own recent collaborative work⁷ has been preoccupied with the idea of a kind of 'postdevelopmentalist' form of urban citizenship and expertise oriented towards addressing the legacy of compressed urbanization

8. Song and Hae 2019.

9. Cho Han 2000.

10. e.g. Park 2021.

11. Choo 2016; Han 2018; Song 2014.

and its productivist orientation of social space. Finally, a similar concern also animates recent work in urban studies of Korea that tries to work upwards from the ‘site’ of the urban to develop a method that can examine the multiple power relations that shape and position our understandings of modernity.⁸ I could not help but read Chang’s ideas through an urban lens, and wondered what such a reading from the standpoint of the urban might do to spatialize his ideas in more detail.

While there is a mutual complementarity between work by geographers and Chang’s logics of compressed modernity, the former have perhaps not paid as much granular attention to the familial dimensions of the process in East Asia. Here, Chang’s focus on the mobilization of the family by the state, and the diversity of familial forms resonates more with work in the broader critical social sciences that is interested in the everyday contours of Korean developmentalism and neoliberalism than geography per se.⁹ The reason for this gap perhaps involves the difficulty of attending to the production of tradition within compressed modernity, a topic that often easily leads to an uncritical invocation of values-based forms of explanation such as Confucian or Asian values. In the later chapters, Chang masterfully skirts around this problem by showing how neotraditional ideas are mobilized as a response to compressed modernization rather than an explanation for it and develops a provocative theory of infrastructural familialism that I suspect could help to enrich ongoing critical geographical research on the reworking of urbanization in Korea, East Asia, and beyond.

At the same time, in thinking through Chang’s invocation of the family as infrastructure, I found that it could benefit from engagement with recent critical work on familial forms within Korean modernization¹⁰ and diverse practices of modern kin-making. Here too, I couldn’t help but think that there is perhaps room for looking further at the struggles of those outside of the boundaries of the national, heteronormative family and to those who lack without formal citizenship, remain single, or have sought alternative paths of cohabitation, which has been a productive area of research in recent years.¹¹ Don’t get me wrong, Chang makes some very salient comments about the variegated nature of familialism under compressed modernity, especially in regard to the reflexive cosmopolitanization and multiculturalization of families in Korea, but there is perhaps room for further engagement here with recent work in the broader field. At the same time, I can understand why this encounter with both geography and recent trends in Korean studies is somewhat restrained, given the book’s largely deductive presentation and attempt at synthesizing the various strands of what has been a highly productive research career. Nonetheless, this edition should facilitate future work that might merge and entangle the parallel problematics between Chang’s concepts and research within critical human geography and cognate fields. Whatever form this takes, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* provides an excellent point of departure from which to do so.

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