

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

A tale of two cities: Revisiting compressed modernity(ies) and their logic(s)

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Chang Kyung-Sup's *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*¹ opens with the book cover seemingly coming alive, right from the first science fiction attempts from the beginning of the twentieth century to describe the city and people of the future. At once anonymous but familiar, phantasmagorical but realistic, dark but illuminated by thousands of electric lights, and lonely but densely populated, such a dystopian portrayal of a (post)modern metropolis and a (half)man peeking out of the soon-to-be-museum slums can exist anywhere—a non-place. About a hundred years separates the two cities, inspired by both science and fiction and envisioned on the book's cover with a chronic sense of bitterness, loss, and alienation.

In a tiny window in front of a distant skyline of buildings, we see a person whom Chang would probably identify as “an ordinary Korean/East Asian adult” who was “born in a traditional culture, raised in a modernizing/industrializing era, and surviving into a postmodern/postindustrial era” (p. 28)²—a “miracle” survivor and an insider/outsider in terms of both time and place. As Chang suggests, a city, a man, and the built-in hierarchy among them have become an integral part, imposed upon or chosen, of staged compressed modernity manifested in its live museums (p. 26), enclaves (p. 46), and multiplex theatres (p. 85). Yet despite the supposedly clear associations among the city, the man, and their location in Korea/East Asia, the book's back cover simply credits Reuters for the photo, which could belong to any (post)modern metropolis across the world.

Such dislocation might explain the popularity of the compressed modernity approach – *might any modernity have to be compressed by its very definition, differing only in its compression degree of pace and power? While being born of a South Korean context, has the theoretical concept become a true cosmopolitanism itself?* The book provides a Janus-faced answer that is, from one perspective, modernity that, according to Chang, “reads Western or American” (p. xiii), has migrated from the Western center(s) to the East Asian margin(s) in a compressed and condensed way, as a distorted mirroring and mimicry of a “proper” original differentiating between “real” progress and work-in-progress toward the title of an advanced nation. As Chang Ha-Joon³ famously stated, despite their continuous attempts at catching up, non-Western countries chronically lag in their climb up the ladder that has already been kicked away by Western nations.

At the same time, Chang Kyung-Sup's achievement lies in creating a theoretical concept based on a South Korean context, while deterritorializing it on a global scale: another Korean miracle to celebrate. Instead of either/or being compressed, compression and its endless shades has become a spectrum across which to define modernity at large. By looking at and conversing with Western

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1. Chang Kyung-Sup: *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*. Cambridge, UK; Polity Press, 2022.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers refer to Chang 2022, see note 1.

3. Chang, Ha-Joon (2002).

theoreticians' modernities (usually plural, rather than singular) and their logic(s) in the first part of the book titled "Compressed Modernity in Perspective"—such as Shmuel Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities," Ulrich Beck's "second modernity" and "reflexive modernization," and Göran Therborn's "entangled modernities"—Chang's compressed modernity joins this fascinating conversation, transcending East/West boundaries in the effort of cosmopolitan and postmodern theory making.

To explain compressed modernity and other critical modernity terms' popularity and explanatory power, one should return to the idea and ideology of social evolution that underpins the hegemonic definition of modernity in terms of progress, enlightenment, and science. All assume linearity: moving away from backwardness, darkness, and marginality toward economic, cultural, and social development. Unsurprisingly, in the linear modernity logic (usually singular, rather than plural), a "miraculous" transformation, especially an economic one, becomes an obsessive goal in itself, with its promises of and prophecies for a better future. Together with the modernity theoreticians, Chang's compressed modernity provides a refreshing challenge to the linearity assumption—or, at least, to the non-Western variations of modernity as Chang differentiates between its development as "evolutionary engendered" in the West and "simulatively constructed" in the rest of the world (p. 30). In this sense, unlike the linearity-as-binary between an unworthy past and a worthy future, the compressed modernity has revealed the endless spectrum of grades and encounters between past and future on every possible level of interaction, from the world unit to a man peeking out of a window in the dark, lonely, and even scary (post)modern metropolis. The physics-inspired linearity is well confronted here with other physics-inspired phenomena of compression and condensation.

Since the translation and transition from physics to social sciences is never easy, the term "compressed modernity" and its measurement, as well as our ability to differentiate between different types and degrees of compression, remains shrouded in darkness. At times it even seems to take on the scapegoat role for all South Korean misfortunes or the dark side of its miracle. Compressed modernity adjoins here with *han* or "sorrow"—the Korean national feeling based on chronic bitterness and the tragic history of Japanese colonization, the Cold War, and dictatorship—while its essentialism is harshly criticized as a (post)colonial stereotype.⁴

Further, by engaging in some regional comparison with East Asian countries, in the second part of the book titled "Structural Properties of Compressed Modernity," Chang foregrounds the Koreanness of compressed modernity, focusing on its uniqueness and extremeness. This includes neo-traditionalism, conglomerate familism, xenophobic multiculturalism, rural cosmopolitanism, and globalization without global spirit (p. 100), all of which further compress easily "disposable" citizens (p. 158). These oxymoron-like manifestations of compressed modernity have assuredly become an integral part of both South Korea's national project and problem, yet their applicability to other contexts, both Western and non-Western, asks for further research.

In its final chapter titled "After Compressed Modernity" the book symbolically returns to its dystopian cover by enlightening the dark picture of the South Korean past, present, and future, with its endless catching up, futile development, and meaningless modernization. After almost a century, the two cities of science and fiction have finally caught up with one another, and the book provides an insightful time travel of their path to convergence. It makes us more aware of

4. Kim and So (2017).

5. Freud (1930).

the modernization project's "side effects" if it is swallowed too swiftly and in large amounts, yet we are left without practical solutions or suggestions. The "modernity pill" seems to become addictive in its miracle effect while lacking an option to turn back. Beyond science fiction's warnings, it had been already prophesied a century ago in Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*,⁵ which described men fulfilling their fairy-tale wish to become God-like by science and technology, even at the price of their own suffering and unhappiness.

6. Lyan (2023).

To conclude, by illuminating the "modernity for the sake of modernity" effort, Chang succeeds in finding logic in such compressed encounters between the pre-modern Korean "past" and the Western (post)modern future. I label their ironies, dissonance, and even nonsense elsewhere as *ex-periphery*—a former developing economy that continues to be involved in the transition from developing to developed status.⁶ Besides being simultaneously "ex" and "periphery," to expand the future theoretical prospects for compressed modernities and their rather multiple logics, I suggest a rebalancing of their spatiotemporal location at being simultaneously one of the most identifying terms of South Korean modernity, while belonging to the rest of the world, both national and cosmopolitan.

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Irina Lyan is an Assistant Professor and the Head of the Korean Studies Program at the Department of Asian Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is a sociologist who explores South Korea's national images, imagery, and imagination, and their impact on its economic miracle, also known as the "Miracle on the River Han," and its cultural miracle, also known as "the Korean Wave" or Hallyu. Irina is the recipient of prestigious scholarships and awards, including the Principles of Cultural Dynamics' fellowship at the Freie Universität Berlin, the World Association of Hallyu Studies' paper award, and a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Oxford. Her academic papers have appeared both in leading critical management studies journals such as *Organization*, *Culture and Organization*, and *Critical Perspectives on International Business*; and cultural and media studies outlets such as *International Journal of Communication*, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, and *Kritika Kultura*.