

ARTICLE

## Public Humanities at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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### Abstract

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is launching a pioneering BA program in Public Humanities, combining two existing units—Cultural Studies and Cultural Management—to form a socially relevant undergraduate education that promotes community-building, critical and creative skills, and humanities values. Hong Kong’s public sphere has been shrinking, necessitating a deeper reflection and conceptualization of the public within its historical and cultural contexts. The term “public” in Hong Kong has diverse meanings and overlaps with private and communal aspects, influenced by Chinese cultural history and colonial experiences. Despite the decline of civil society, various public activities, such as markets, performances, and talks, continue to foster local culture and community engagement in Hong Kong. The program emphasizes collaboration, participatory arts, and media technology to foster civic agency and public engagement, encouraging students to work with diverse community stakeholders. The program promotes care and connection as guiding principles for community-building, aiming to cultivate responsible citizens and rebuild trust through open communication and meaningful civic participation.

**Keywords:** cultural studies; Hong Kong

In 2024, faculty members from Cultural Studies and Cultural Management at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) accepted the university’s invitation to merge and form a new BA program, which we decided to name Public Humanities. Public Humanities has primarily been recognized in the West as graduate-level training and as a category within funding schemes. Our program, focused specifically on undergraduate education, will therefore be the first of its kind globally. We have decided to build upon our existing strengths and pedagogical approaches—namely critical theory and cultural criticism on one hand, and arts and cultural management on the other—while simultaneously responding to a pressing concern that is both specific to our city and resonant globally: How can we provide socially relevant undergraduate education that commits to community-building, promotes critical and creative skills, and at the same time protects and cultivates humanities values? While the merger may have initially been driven by our university’s neoliberal management concerns, we have chosen to take up this challenge by encouraging dialogue and mutual support between the public and the humanities. In this short essay, we explore the meanings, problematics, and entanglements of “public” and “humanities” that underpin our pedagogical rationale.

## Public in context

Hong Kong's public sphere is rapidly shrinking, and its once vigorous civil society has also declined dramatically over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> Instead of lamenting the setback, we believe that it is now high time to undertake a more thorough conceptualization of the public in this city—one that might also resonate with people in other parts of the world facing comparable challenges. We contend that any conceptualization of the public must be situated within concrete historical and cultural contexts.

The notions of “public sphere” and “civil society” are decidedly Western and infused with Enlightenment values; although this is an Asian city, these concepts have been crucial to the development of political consciousness here during both colonial and post-colonial periods. This was largely due to the colonial government's allowance of certain degrees of press freedom and its tolerance of public protest and collective action beginning in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Hong Kong's civil society developed vigorously after the 1997 handover, propelled by Hong Kong people's persistent democratic aspirations, which were tacitly endorsed—albeit from a distance—by the new sovereign state. Beijing's recent decision to dismantle some of these activities and structures, such as drastically reducing the democratic components of the Legislative Council and District Councils in response to the city-wide unrest of 2019, constituted a direct blow to the democratic path that Hong Kong had taken.<sup>3</sup>

However, there remain many resources in the city and around the world from which we can learn as we build and rebuild our public. A historicist and geopolitical mindset is very important. Concepts such as Benedict Anderson's “imagined communities” or Jürgen Habermas's “public sphere” are applicable to Hong Kong only to a certain extent, as the city's historical trajectory differs significantly from that of a modern nation.<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong—colonial, cosmopolitan, and Chinese at once—cultivates ways of living rooted in its historical experiences while constantly remaining open to new values and ideologies.

Although Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997, historically it has been a colonial city. Hong Kong's coloniality was specifically tied to its position in global trade, and many local residents served as facilitators and intermediaries for trade and services.<sup>5</sup> Government institutions and normative practices were designed primarily to facilitate capitalism and colonialism, while the broader public remained predominantly native-based yet was shaped heavily by a colonial mentality, exemplified by adherence to the rule of law and the capitalist order. While colonial experiences differ greatly across the world, the colonial subject always inhabits and negotiates multiple worlds. Colonialism encouraged native people to reproduce dominant power structures, to shelter behind them while simultaneously inhabiting their native lifeworld.<sup>6</sup> There is a deep cultural memory of this colonial negotiation still living in Hong Kong, which might continue to exert influence on the populace in the uncertain times ahead.

At the same time, Hong Kong has been caught between competing modernities, and its public has always been divided and contested, particularly between (neo)liberalism and

<sup>1</sup> Ortman 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ma 2007, 164–66, 180.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Lee 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson 2006/2016; Habermas 1962/1989.

<sup>5</sup> Law 2009, 79–102.

<sup>6</sup> Fanon 1952/1967; Taussig 1993.

nationalism. This tension has led to many internal disputes, yet it has also prevented the formation of a unified and dogmatic public. Despite the new political environment, Hong Kong is still a rather pluralistic society. Moreover, Hong Kong is an Asian cosmopolitan city, strongly connected to the region and the world. Its public is shaped as much by residents as by sojourners, influenced by diasporic communities as well as global media.<sup>7</sup> Its fluidity and plasticity has fostered a receptive and resilient public.

Further complicating the Hong Kong public is the Chinese cultural and conceptual history of the term “public,” usually translated as *gōnggòng* 公共 in Sinophone societies worldwide. The first character, *gōng* 公, could historically mean a duke or patriarchal leadership in ancient China, or the common possession of a clan—a site where public and private overlap.<sup>8</sup> When combined with different characters, the term can also acquire various meanings in different contexts, such as universal or common truth (*gōnglǐ* 公理), justice (*gōngyì* 公義), fairness (*gōngdào* 公道), equality (*gōngpíng* 公平), and business company (*gōngsī* 公司), a term originating from the mining workers’ communities in Southeast Asia and the Transpacific.<sup>9</sup> The second character, *gòng* 共, means common. In other words, instead of narrowing *gōnggòng* to merely an idealistic public sphere where autonomous citizens gather and exchange opinions, we should recognize it as a complex arena always already invested with different voices, powers, and ideas. The public could be full of power inequality, related to gender, class, and ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> How we continue to nurture a public culture in Hong Kong, and other parts of the world, with egalitarian values would benefit from a more flexible and critical understanding of the public, particularly concerning the internal stratification within the public as well as the dynamics among the different micro-publics. We want to teach students how to theorize the contested gendered/racialized collective that is always stratifying and discriminating, while still appreciating the emergence of some public consciousness.

At a time when civil society seems to have been wiped out in Hong Kong, vegetable markets, busking performances, reading groups, public talks on cultural preservation, and entertainment and sports fan meetings are happening all over city, through which the urbanites can support local agricultural products, create cultural expressions and memories, and enjoy conviviality with each other. These public spaces are invested with common knowledge, cultural sensibilities, and affective bonds, and the actual activities taking place in these spaces are neither abstract nor symbolic – they are material and grounded. Our program, emerging from the aforementioned historical contexts in which diverse forms of the public developed at the intersections of coloniality, cosmopolitanism, and vernacularity, will pay the most attention to the local culture cultivated in these spaces.

### Teaching Public Humanities in Hong Kong

The BA program in Public Humanities at CUHK is unique as the first BA program in Public Humanities globally. Our goal extends beyond training elites; we aim to accommodate a wide range of undergraduate students who will embark on various career trajectories after graduation. We want them to participate in weaving the social fabric and cultural connections that would develop and maintain the well-being of the city. We also strive to imbue our students with qualities of integrity and responsibility by engaging with the broader public.

<sup>7</sup> Cheng 2021; Siu and Ku 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Chen 2004, 2023; Huang 2013; Mizoguchi 1995/2011.

<sup>9</sup> Hann 2021; Wang 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Rofel 2007; Veg 2019; Wagner 1995; Yang 1999.

The two existing programs at CUHK—Cultural Studies and Cultural Management—aim to cultivate students’ critical, creative, and management skills, which remain central to the new program. The concerns of Cultural Studies continue to be at the core of our teaching philosophy, and we emphasize local engagement and resistance to bureaucratic mindsets.<sup>11</sup> By adding the dimension of the public, we hope to further highlight the complexity and singularity of the public and the diversity of the many micro-publics. The program is anchored in the understanding that “the public” is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, and we resist reductive interpretations of the public as a static entity. Instead, we view the public as an evolving concept, form, and process of togetherness, characterized by both its possibilities and limitations.

In developing the program, we ask what the humanities can do beyond what they are.<sup>12</sup> Facing new challenges brought about by a changing world, the program, well-aware of our limitations, emphasizes collaboration in an increasingly multimedia and interconnected world.<sup>13</sup> We facilitate collaboration primarily through innovative pedagogical methods in *participatory arts* and *media technology*. For instance, socially engaged art practices can foster civic agency, whether through top-down initiatives, such as government-sponsored creativity, or bottom-up grassroots movements, and they bring the transformative potential of art to build public awareness, dialogue, and action.<sup>14</sup> Digital Humanities projects, which utilize digital tools and platforms to make humanities research accessible and interactive, allow for new modes of storytelling, data visualization, and audience participation.<sup>15</sup> To work on their projects, students are encouraged to collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders, including community workers, independent researchers, artists, writers, curators, media cultural workers, social designers, and other professionals, along with community organizations, social enterprises, and policy advocates, to help preserve cultural heritage, amplify marginalized voices, and address local and global challenges.

These methods reflect the program’s broader commitment to fostering public values, especially *care* and *connection*, which serve as guiding principles for building a public life that is irreducible to instrumentality and profitability.<sup>16</sup>

Care is essential for community-building. In an era when the public’s will and voice are often overshadowed by commercial discourses, technological surveillance, and the actions of governing authorities, the program emphasizes the need to care about the people and living things around us. The humanities offer crucial intellectual tools for understanding the precarity and resilience of ordinary people and the environment. A “care-filled humanities,” such as the facilitation of humanistic engrossment through digital reading of small data or small things forgotten in an age of big data and AI, would help the marginalized to be heard and seen.<sup>17</sup> But we are also aware that care could be an exploitative concept, and we are critical of the ways “caretakers” might be abused. Care implies imbalance of power, and we need to be mindful of the complex relationships and emotions involved. We also resist a condescending mindset of welfare, but we learn with the communities for self-care, taking

<sup>11</sup> Morris and Hjort 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Denecke, Forte, and Brown 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Leavy 2021; Smulyan, 2020, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Sommer 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Crompton 2022; Risam 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Butler 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Nowvieskie 2018.

small steps to make gradual headway instead of being guided by master plans. We should challenge the tendency to oversimplify or objectify humans and the public without seriously engaging with their lived realities, diverse perspectives, and responses.

Connection is another core value we want to cultivate among students, with the aim of developing empathy and rapport among humans and elements that are more-than-human. We are particularly dedicated to community building, and we connect the privileged communities in the university to the less fortunate ones. The public, in its various forms, intersects with a wide range of issues and phenomena and is deeply entangled with categories of identity and language. Many pressing concerns require knowledge beyond conventional humanities, such as environmental issues, public health, and medical challenges, ethics of data extraction, the biases inherent in artificial intelligence, biometric surveillance, augmented reality, and other advanced technologies.<sup>18</sup> We will cultivate our students' sensibility and ability to make creative connections.

Emphasizing the values of care and connection, we believe that we can cultivate responsible citizens and build communities based on trust and openness. We want to rebuild trust at a time when larger economic and political powers tend to speak for each of us and when some individuals are allowed to act and speak irresponsibly. By encouraging our students to genuinely express their opinions while paying attention to each other's conditions, we learn together to imagine and cultivate innovative forms of public engagement through honest and open communication. We also aim to promote open and meaningful civic participation across all sectors and geographies, making connections among Hong Kong, China, Asia, and the wider world. We hope that students and collaborators will contribute to the public good in diverse ways, whether through community activities, cultural production, policy-making, or other innovative paths. We also aspire to expand the scope of humanities scholarship, challenging conventional boundaries and promoting meaningful conversations across disciplines, industries, and sectors. While our Public Humanities program is inherently a work in progress—and will always remain so due to the evolving nature of the humanities—we are committed to fostering practices that enrich the humanities, contributing to a more open-ended and inclusive future for humans and beyond.

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<sup>18</sup> Cao and Yousefzadeh 2023; Crawford, Brown, and Charise 2020; Emmett and Nye 2017; Gates 2011; Harrison, Rose, and Sterling 2025.

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