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‘Welcome to Taipei, Chinese Taipei’: Urban Place-Making in Taiwan as Nation-Building

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Abstract

Urban regeneration is closely tied to the introduction of neoliberal policy prescriptions in Asian cities, resulting in the development of place-making strategies and urban brands meant to convey a legible, elite-driven image of the city. A significant body of literature has emerged from this phenomenon, examining the process and impact of neoliberal urban regeneration in a variety of local and national contexts. This paper aims to examine the development and logic of neoliberal urban regeneration in Taipei and its implications at both the local and national levels. Since the advent of Taiwanese democratization, urban regeneration has played out in Taipei as political and economic elites push a singular, top-down narrative for the city’s makeover, with investments in spectacular infrastructure and cultural projects aimed at establishing Taiwan’s capital as a global city. However, complicating the narrative of economically driven urban change is the national dimension, since the ongoing debate surrounding the island nation’s identity, self-determination, and colonial and authoritarian past is intractable from Taiwan’s urban place-making and development priorities.

Key words: urban regeneration; neoliberalism; cultural policy; urban branding; nation-building

Introduction

Taipei is the capital and largest city of the Republic of China (commonly and hereinafter referred to as Taiwan), a largely unrecognized state situated on the island of Taiwan which is claimed by the People's Republic of China as its breakaway 23rd province. With 8.5 million people in its metropolitan area, the city is a large and diverse metropolis that serves a variety of social, economic and ideological interests, including as an emerging regional trade and financial hub, a command centre for the information technology industry, a modern capital city for the Taiwanese state, and a symbol of the island nation's claim to sovereignty. Despite its unique geopolitical circumstances, Taipei also faces challenges that are familiar to any Asian city in the globalized neoliberal political economy, shaped by transnational economic forces and a period of intense economic restructuring.

Taipei is an interesting case study of urban branding and place-making due to Taiwan's unique situation as a recent, non-Western-led settler colonial project and its unsettled sovereign status, with a passionate domestic dispute over the Chinese versus Taiwanese character of its national identity. In recent years, as Taiwan has increasingly grappled with its ambiguous status and uncertain future, identity and nation-building have become important issues of public debate. An illustrative example of this newfound attention is the controversy over an editorial decision by the organizers of the 2017 Summer Universiade in Taipei to refer to the city by the bizarre appellation of "Taipei, Chinese Taipei"[1]—*Chinese Taipei* being a euphemism for the Taiwanese

[1] The full line of the official welcome guide to the global athletic competition read: "Chinese Taipei is a special island and its capital Taipei is a great place to experience Taipei's culture." This awkward phraseology—which gingerly avoids the use of the name Taiwan even in reference to the actual island—resulted in widespread mockery and outrage in Taiwan. One pro-independence politician sarcastically exclaimed in response, "welcome to Taipei, Chinese Taipei!" (Lee 2017).

government used in international diplomatic circles to appease the People's Republic of China—which elicited scorn and derision from many elements of Taiwanese society (Lee 2017) and culminated in an unsuccessful 2018 referendum to end the use of the Chinese Taipei name altogether (Sands 2018).

Drawing on literature on urban regeneration, I trace how the evolution of Taiwanese state policy has been reflected in Taipei's urban fabric, transforming it from a hegemonic, state-directed monument of long-time dictator Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese nationalist ideology to a contested neoliberal site of competing visions for Taiwan's economic and political future. Although efforts by local elites to brand Taipei as a global city and the national debate in Taiwan over the island's status and identity appear to be functionally distinct, I argue that they both form part of a single ideological continuum centered on contesting the ethnic character of the Taiwanese nation and the sovereignty of the Taiwanese state.

This paper thus examines the development of urban regeneration patterns in Taipei and interrogates the elite-driven attempts at branding Taiwan's capital by instrumentalizing the rhetorical and symbolic allure of global cities and modernity to assert rival claims to the aspirations and future of the Taiwanese people.

1. Literature Review

Although urban policies in East Asia were dominated for most of the twentieth century by the pervasive and heavy-handed economic direction of the developmental state, the advent of global neoliberal policy circulation has resulted in the transformations of the region's social and economic institutions as states restructure themselves to facilitate the logic of neoliberal market-led development (Choi 2012). This structural adjustment is spatially reflected in the urban fabric,

with cities becoming laboratories for the implementation of policies meant to establish nodes for the transnational circulation of capital; in the global South, this process has engendered the "globalization of gentrification" and the retooling of urban spaces as vehicles of capital accumulation (Smith 2002, 446; He and Wu 2009).

Nonetheless, the legacy of developmentalism persists in East Asia, resulting in the emergence of a hybrid so-called "developmental neoliberalism", whereby state power continues to play an important role in urban development but does so in accordance with the logic of neoliberalism in order to facilitate the globalized flows of capital (Smith 2002; He 2009). This is best exemplified by Mainland China, where the emergence of a robust and competitive private sector has not so much degraded state power so much as it has furthered the state goal of promoting consistent economic growth (He 2009).

One pathway by which the neoliberal state—and especially the developmental neoliberal state—facilitates the spatial movement of capital is through urban regeneration.

1.1. Urban Regeneration in Context

Urban regeneration is a policy approach to development, emerging from the neoliberal policy consensus of the 1990s, that emphasizes the importance of economic success to the improvement of qualities of life for urban denizens (Roberts 2000). As such, it is a widely studied phenomenon, though scholarly attention is most often directed at the global North and focuses extensively on the state response to the deindustrialization and economic decline of (post-)Fordist Western cities during the late twentieth century—policies which aimed to revitalize inner cities through place-based improvements in the physical environment (Turok et al. 2021). In this regard, urban regeneration is often viewed as interchangeable with urban

renewal, an older term used in Western contexts to refer to the aesthetic upgrading of physical urban space in accordance with an entrepreneurial logic to achieve lasting social and economic change (Granger 2009; Leary and McCarthy 2013). This has resulted in the development of a standard 'American model' of urban renewal that prioritizes the redevelopment of 'old' and 'outdated' buildings as a means of achieving social progress and economic efficiencies (Gold 2013).

However, as products of specific local and temporal circumstances, Western models of urban renewal are inherently limited in their applicability to the global South and the Asian contexts. Instead of following a Fordist trajectory defined by deindustrialization, the process of urban regeneration in many East Asian states is rather driven by national elites' transnational considerations, with the formerly developmentalist states viewing rejuvenation projects as key to their global economic competitiveness and their international legitimacy (Hsu and Chang 2013). As Lee (2007) argues, the Asian experience with urban regeneration is thus marked by a "neoliberal shift in cultural policy to economic reductionism" (338), which sees cities commodified in accordance with a neoliberal logic for elite consumption and tourist accessibility. As a result, urban regeneration is increasingly associated with spectacular urbanism, the maximization of economic returns, and a "disjointed and incoherent" approach to development that serves private interests rather than public needs (Granger 2009, 10).

One key aspect by which Asian states operationalize urban regeneration is through policies intended to foster neoliberal place-making (Hsu and Chang 2013).

1.2. Urban Redevelopment as Place-Making

Place-making is often described as a "top-down, master planned, hyper-neoliberal" process to increase the international legibility of a city, often to the detriment of the agency and identities of individual residents (Lew 2017, 451). Importantly, it involves the imposition of an inauthentic, often contrived, cultural identity for the city that is safe for international consumption, doing so through the instrumentalization of the city's culture and sometimes the nation's heritage. In both the global North and the global South, urban redevelopment is frequently an elite-driven process that prioritizes neoliberal and cosmopolitan place-making in order to reshape urban space for the benefit of a homogenous, affluent population (Oakley and Johnson 2012; Rogelja 2020). For example, Oakley and Johnson (2012) trace the logic of Australian waterfront redevelopment efforts—which have seen the reservation of seaside urban neighbourhoods for high-income housing—as physical manifestations of state efforts to reshape the identity of their respective cities in order to reinforce cosmopolitan values and attract international investment.

By intervening on the micro-scale and focusing the attention of the state on the design of individual urban sites and projects, place-making manages to ensure that state ideologies and priorities are reflected in the physical landscapes of cities (Evans 2014). Place-making thus serves as the missing link between state policies of urban regeneration and neoliberal state aims in establishing urban and national brands for international consumption (Pendlebury and Porfyriou 2017).

1.3. Urban Brands, National Brands

Concerted place-making within a city can be instrumental in the development of a coherent branded urban landscape (Evans 2014). Indeed, urban branding initiatives that seek to market a city to the international community tend to rely on the built infrastructure that place-

making programs can create (Lew 2017), with '(urban) renaissance' and 'rebranding' being almost synonymous to some state elites (Tay and Coca-Stefaniak 2010).

Although place-branding is primarily applied in subnational and local contexts (i.e., to the marketing of cities and regions), it is also a conceptual framework that finds applicability for entire nations (Browning and de Oliveira 2017); and despite the salience of place-making at both local and national levels, the intersection between these scales is poorly studied—even as urban brands often inject physical urban spaces with symbolic national meanings, resulting in the nationalization of urban branding and the reinforcement of ideologies constitutive of nation-building (Ristic 2018). For example, in Singapore, strategic urban branding is an indispensable part of reshaping global perceptions of the city-state's national identity, with the state employing the development of new artistic industries to reframe Singapore as a 'creative global city' and showcase the Singaporean nation as an aspirational and visionary player on the international stage (Tay and Coca-Stefaniak 2010).

Thus, by centering the national agendas and priorities that underlie Taipei's urban regeneration efforts, this paper will make the case that, though neoliberal in form, such initiatives have the substantive aim of reinforcing and legitimizing contrasting national visions for the future of Taiwan through nation-building and the construction of international legitimacy.

2. Urban Regeneration in Taiwan

2.1. Situating Taipei in Taiwanese History

Founded in 1949 by the exiled forces of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) after the Chinese Civil War, Taiwan is an "intriguing" example of a modern settler-colonial state (Wu 2002, 208). Despite the island's continuous settlement by Aboriginal peoples for thousands of

years, Taiwan's societal elite and historical narratives are both dominated by the experiences and ideologies of the postwar Han Chinese transplants (Marsh, 2002). Governed as a dictatorship for most of its history by the historically irredentist KMT, who maintain a strong connection to Chinese identity as the heirs to the legacy of Sun Yat-sen (founder of the interwar Chinese Republic), Taiwan has undergone a period of intense economic and political liberalization towards the end of the 20th century that has seen explosive economic growth (Chevalérias 2010) and the emergence of a new, distinct Taiwanese identity associated with the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which emphasizes self-determination for Taiwan and a rejection of Chinese identity (Marsh 2002).

Economically, Taiwan is widely considered to be one of the so-called 'Four Asian Tigers', an exclusive group of newly industrialized countries (NICs) who shared an experience of meteoric economic development fuelled by *laissez-faire* social and economic policies over the last quarter of the twentieth century (Tang 1998). In 1997, Taiwan was ranked by the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing libertarian think tank, as the eighth most economically free country in the world and boasted a Human Development Index equivalent to that of Singapore (Tang 1998). This economic boom is often referred to as the "Taiwan miracle", fuelled by an explosion in export-oriented manufacturing and the development of innovative new high-tech industries, especially in information technology, which have established the importance of Taiwan to the international economy (Chevalérias 2010).

However, the rapid economic expansion of Taiwan belies a long and uneven history of tension between state control and deregulation. The authoritarian KMT government, while it remained in power, held firm control over all sectors of the economy and carefully managed development, consistent with the developmental state model typical of postwar East Asian

economies. The transition to a neoliberal model of economic governance was gradual and the Taiwanese state, unusually for a liberalizing NIC, did not totally relinquish its substantial control over public assets and instead continued to leverage its economic power—marking a "carefully managed" and only partial "retreat from developmentalism" (Minns 2006, 212). As a result, to this day, the Taiwanese state retains many elements of the hybridized 'developmental neoliberalism' that likewise marks its larger neighbour and geopolitical foe on the Mainland.

2.2. Urban Regeneration and Developmental Neoliberalism

However, the lingering power of the state has not hindered Taipei's adoption of a market-driven, neoliberal strategy of urban regeneration. Instead, as Hsu and Chang (2013) trace in detail, the post-developmental Taiwanese state has embraced urban rejuvenation as a strategy for economic growth and social engineering, adopting the rhetoric of global economic competitiveness and foreign investment to justify policies of housing demolition, population displacement, and growing private-sector participation in housing and development efforts in the city of Taipei. The Taipei City Government even proudly boasts an Urban Regeneration Office, whose official mandate includes "[c]arrying out urban renewal and development research" and organizing the "management of reconstruction, renovations, and other urban renewal tasks" (Taipei City Urban Regeneration Office 2020).

The hand of transnational capital is clearly reflected in the urban forms that have emerged from Taipei's regeneration. Thanks to the city government's adoption of entrepreneurial governance, housing commodification has taken hold in Taipei and attracted significant private-sector investment into the city's real estate market, which benefits capital circulation but results in uneven and inequitable development (Lan and Lee 2020).

Indeed, Huang's (2014) discussion of a project to upgrade the housing stock in the Taipei inner-city neighbourhood of Bangka shows many of the hallmarks of Asian urban regeneration, including the instrumentalization of culture to promote urban economic priorities, the role of the private sector in supplementing weak state investment in housing, and the top-down imposition of a place identity alien to the residents of the area for the legibility of tourists. Systematic studies of recent trends in Taipei's development find a similar trend, cautioning that gentrification has become a nearly inexorable force in the market-oriented logic of the city's real estate market and that the dispossession of many city residents is already underway (Jou et al. 2014; Li et al. 2016).

This process—neither entirely public nor entirely private in character—has been described as *state-engineered* (i.e., as opposed to *state-directed*) urban regeneration (Hsu and Chang 2013, 152). Thus, it retains the recognizable outline of East Asian developmental neoliberalism.

3.3. Place-Making in Taipei

The pattern of urban regeneration undertaken in Taipei is however not simply a reflection of the unguided market logic of pure neoliberalism, but rather takes a purposive approach in service of the Taiwanese state's place-making strategies.

A prominent example of place-making in action in Taipei through state-directed urban regeneration is the forced demolition of the so-called "military-dependent villages", a series of informal settlements dotted across the Taipei landscape which had been built by rank-and-file soldiers of the KMT Army who arrived on the island as refugees. As these settlements—shoddily built in the expectation that they would not be needed in the long run after a successful counter-

invasion of the Mainland—were heavily associated with the KMT and their irredentist claims on the mainland, their displacement, undertaken in the 1990s by a newly-elected DPP government that believed in Taiwanese nationalism, thus served the dual purposes of promoting neoliberal housing commodification and eliminating a prominent physical reminder of the KMT's long shadow over Taipei's urban form (Liu 2013).

Even more market-driven projects in Taipei have served a place-making purpose. For instance, the construction of Taipei 101—a 101-storey tall skyscraper that was the world's tallest building upon its completion in 2004—not only benefited the parochial private interests of transnational corporations and real estate investors, but also served the important state goal of putting the city on the world map as an emerging global financial centre (Sigler 2016).

3. Taipei: A Global City in an Unrecognized State

3.1. A Break with the Past

Ultimately, the place-making strategies employed by the government elites of Taipei in their urban regeneration policies serve to create a *tabula rasa* on which to establish their new urban brand for the city. Constructing this blank slate proved to be a messy process, and recent ruling elites in the capital have attacked the issue from many different angles—including the dismemberment of the KMT regime's legacy and the erasure of the island's settler-colonial past.

Because the physical urban landscape of Taipei, as the long-time provisional capital of the KMT's government-in-exile, was thoroughly shaped by the KMT regime in accordance to its belief in a Chinese national identity, the contestation of Taipei's urban form has taken on new urgency in the wake of the emergence of Taiwanese nationalism as a political force (Leitner and Kang 1999). As a result, DPP-led governments in recent years have made concerted efforts to

purge Taipei's urban landscape of overt references to the legacy of the KMT regime and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek—most notably renaming the grand Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in an attempt to rid Taiwan of a prominent reminder of its first and most famous leader (Taylor 2010).

Another historical legacy of Taipei's urban form that the ruling elites have sought to downplay is the city's nature as a settler-colonial settlement built and dominated by the Han Chinese migrants at the expense of the original Aboriginal Taiwanese residents. Although the ascendant Taiwanese nationalists reject the conception of Taiwan as a Han ethnostate and instead affirm the island nation's multiethnic character, "this new self-representation does not signify reconciliation with the country's settler-colonial present" (Hirano et al. 2018, 215). Indeed, the settler legacy of the KMT's rule in Taipei has been remarkably difficult to dislodge, with the first non-KMT administration in the country's history being "unable to affect urban legacies of the former regime" in Taipei's urban fabric (Liu 2013, 245). With the DPP taking a forward-looking approach, confrontation with the city's settler-colonial legacy thus appears to be ignored.

3.2. A Cosmopolitan Urban Brand

Ridding Taipei of its complex and contentious historical legacy in turn opens space for forward-looking city elites to rebrand the city in their desired new image of cosmopolitan modernity.

Since its first stint in power in 2000, the Taiwanese nationalist DPP has emphasized its desire to promote "Taiwan's economic, industrial and cultural development" (Huang 2012, 219). In turn, this has entailed an emphasis on attracting tourism to Taiwan through selective investments in spectacular commissioned architectural works and the development of new

cultural sites for an international audience (Huang 2012). Another approach taken by the DPP involves attempting to establish Taipei as an economic gateway between North American and Southeast Asia in order to wean the Taiwanese economy off dependence on Mainland China and maintain the city's prominence as a node in the transnational circulation of capital (Ching 2005).

However, the transformed urban branding of Taipei is not solely an exercise in Taiwanese nationalism by the DPP, as even the KMT has embraced the establishment of Taipei as a global brand. Though, unlike the DPP, its support for the place-branding of Taipei conversely arises from a desire to establish the Taiwanese capital as "a regional center coordinating the Greater China economic arena" (Li et al. 2016, 6). Moreover, KMT administrations have attempted to brand Taipei as an economic hub for the high-tech manufacturing sector and as a cultural centre for Taiwan in attempts to highlight the city's international connections (Ching 2005). A final example of KMT urban branding in Taipei comes from the 1990s, when the municipal government built up the Hsin-yi Financial District in an attempt to create a 'Manhattan of Taipei'—a first step towards establishing Taipei as a global financial centre in the twenty-first century (Wang and Huang 2009).

These examples—where neoliberal urban branding is placed in service of nationalist goals—further highlight the uniquely complementary nature of neoliberalism and nation-building in the Taiwanese context.

3.3. From the Local to the National—Nation-Building in Taipei

Reflecting the salience and passion of the Taiwanese nationhood debate, urban planning in Taiwan is caught in the bitter political divide on the island between those who cling onto its Chinese identity and those who seek to create a new separate Taiwanese identity—with other

political considerations for land-use debate dragooned by the overriding issue of cross-Strait relations with the People's Republic of China (Bristow 2010). Thus, the urban branding of Taipei plays an important role in Taiwan's national branding and supporters of both sides have attempted to use Taipei to nation-build the island in their faction's image.

For the DPP, branding Taipei as an international hub for transpacific capital flows and international tourism legitimizes the Taiwanese nation as one that is distinct from and not reliant on the People's Republic of China for its continued survival and prosperity. Thus, by inscribing their aspirations for the future of Taiwan onto the city's place-making strategies, the DPP nationalizes Taipei's urban brand into a nation-building exercise to further the legitimacy of Taiwanese sovereignty and promote Taiwanese nationalist ideology. This is consistent with the theorized link in the literature between nation branding and soft power, as a distinct brand permits states to draw attention to themselves and their governing ideologies on the world stage (Johnson 2013)—an urgent imperative for the diplomatically isolated and unrecognized Taiwanese state.

For the KMT, branding Taipei as a global city instead serves a radically different goal of positioning the capital city as a gateway for foreign investment into Mainland China—further cleaving together the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and integrating Taiwan as an important node in the Chinese economy (Ching 2005). Moreover, with Taipei still bearing numerous physical representations of the KMT's claim to Chinese identity (Huang 2012; Liu 2013), the prominence of Taipei on the world stage—especially at the expense of southern Taiwanese cities like Kaohsiung that favour a separate Taiwanese identity (Wang and Huang 2009)—reinforce the party's desired image of Taiwan as an inherently Chinese nation.

However different in ideology the two sides are, both of their place-making agendas for Taipei seek to nationalize the city's brand in order to convey a clear message of modernity and an aspirational claim to global city status for the Taiwanese capital.

4. Conclusion

This article traces the link between the neoliberal urban regeneration policies in the city of Taipei and the broader national debate in Taiwan over its identity, future and independence, with the urban brand of the city being a hotly contested side by supporters of both sides as a tool for nation-building Taiwan in their ideological image. This link further highlights the observation that, unlike in the West, where neoliberalism is seen as opposing state power, neoliberal policy currents in Taiwan have in fact been instrumentalized to further state priorities and the ideologies of ruling elites.

In turn, this contributes to the literature on urban regeneration by questioning the normative understanding of regeneration as a primarily market-driven force, instead highlighting that the market and the state can have a symbiotic relationship in achieving their self-interests. Furthermore, this article aims to contribute to a stronger understanding of how urban branding and national branding are inherently connected—suggesting that studies of place-branding should pay more attention to linkages between different scales.

Despite the above discussion of the settler-colonial nature of the Taiwanese nation-state, a major limitation of this article is its lack of a more detailed discussion of Aboriginal Taiwanese perspectives on the Taiwanese state's place-making and nation-building initiatives in Taipei. This is due to a relative sparsity of academic research into Indigenous communities in Taiwan,

with the greatest attention paid in the scholarship to lowland tribes in Eastern Taiwan rather than communities in Han-settled areas (Tang and Tang 2010).

Ultimately, Taiwanese nationalism is a phenomenon that has—since its entrance onto the political mainstream less than 40 years ago—seen an explosive ascendancy, with self-identification by the country's citizens as Taiwanese rather than Chinese going from a minority view to a dominant one within a single generation (Wu 2020). Thus, this paper only represents a snapshot of the situation at the present moment in time, and further research into the construction of Taipei's urban brand through developmental neoliberalism will be needed in the future to assess its continued role in nation-building agendas and the reproduction of nationalist ideologies.

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