

Cultural renaissance and cultural tourism in the City of Tainan

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Abstract

Tainan is the oldest city in Taiwan and inherits rich historic assets including national level landmark buildings, important historic fabric and local traditions. The city has lost her political and economic importance since mid nineteenth century. Around the turn of the millennium Tainan started to gain more political and economic importance after the change of central government policy to counterbalance long term uneven development focusing on the north. Claiming to be Taiwan's cultural capital, the city tried to develop an identity emphasising her past over the past decade. Cultural tourism has been promoted alongside the city's overall improvement of the public realm to boost local economy. Nine cultural districts/parks were identified followed with environment enhancement projects and cultural programmes; six festivals were newly formed seeing various kinds of art and cultural programmes taking place on heritage sites and their vicinities. New national museums and parks were developed elevating the city's political and cultural status. Cultural renaissance was acclaimed by both the government and some cultural elites though with different conceptions and probably aims. A new genre of quality housing design, successful community development and a trend of innovative reuse design evolved, forming a new dimension of the city's culture, and attracted media attention and tourists over this period.

After a brief review of Tainan's urban development against Taiwan's history, this paper explores Tainan's cultural tourism over the past decade alongside the process of her successful environment reform and against the background of political changes. Relationship between cultural policy and environment ones are studied and debates on environment and cultural impacts of such an approach are the key concern. The study base mainly on literature, including theory of urban design, studies of cultural tourism, government reports and plans, official statistics, and journal papers.

Though the improvement of some districts won national or international design prizes and now heritage sites and major streets of cultural districts attract quite some visitors, infrastructural problems and the breach of informal sectors on the public realm remain unresolved. Also the stereotyped cultural festivals across the city over the year draw criticism as consumption against historic stage. The way that the city's public realm is used and managed, the way that the city treats planning and design, and the urge for cultural content/meaning and depth are discussed against general studies of cultural tourism and fundamental theories of urban design- responsiveness and a sense of place.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, cultural districts, Tainan City, urban design, Foundation of Historic City Conservation and Regeneration

Introduction

The term 'Cultural Renaissance' was declared by Tainan City Government in year 2003 when Taiwan's National Museum of Literature was opened in the city's former city hall, a renovated historic landmark built in 1916 during the Period of the Japanese Occupation (TCG, 2003). History and culture has been a targeted area of promotion for the city's new image/identity building over the past decade. Cultural tourism was considered important to the city's economy as well as to the marketing of its 'distinct' identity. The city's past was 're-explored', re-packaged and marketed, for example the excavation of

former Dutch fortification - Zeelandia, the designation of nine cultural districts/parks, the promotion of art and cultural festivals incorporating some traditional rituals or events, and the development of themed tours. These have been supported by the development of major redevelopment projects, the enhancement of the public realm and the stimulation of local commercial activities.

Some targeted goals have no doubt been achieved, such as the improvement of the surroundings of heritage sites, the attracting of visitors, the development of local business etc. However, the socio-cultural impact of stereotyped tourism and festival programmes to heritage to the development of local culture has been worries for some cultural elites (Zhao, 2008). Cultural tourism became a major concern of the public sector and conservation scholars and planners, focusing mainly on types of cultural resources. But serious debate on the city's cultural development policies did not take place (Chen, 2006).

In year 2008 the Foundation of Historic City Conservation and Regeneration, founded in year 2001 by a group of architects, planners, historians and cultural elites for the promotion of balanced conservation and innovative and compatible urban development, launched a project called prize for Old Building Happy (new) Forces (named so because one word denoting happiness sounds the same with new in Chinese) promoting innovative reuse design of old buildings. Cultural Renaissance was declared then by the CEO of the foundation to encourage the respect for old houses and design ingenuities and to consider cultural values above purely economic ones (Chan, 2008). The programme gained unexpected media coverage and a new type of tourism, as well as a 'new cultural image' of Tainan, was then developed (FHCCR, 2010). The contrasts to public sector programmes are vivid and worthwhile to be explored.

Employing a wider definition of culture to discuss this highly political process, this paper contends that some changes to the management of cultural districts and suggests the nourishment of the cultural significance witnessed in the OBHF projects to enrich cultural depth of the city. Quality urban space design supported by decent infrastructure and management is also needed.

Theory and Method of Research

This study adopts a rather wide definition of culture- 'a whole way of life.' (Smith, 2003) It considers the peculiar political thinking in Taiwan's (or Tainan's) and the way people tolerate informal sectors and the breaching of regulations root deeply in Taiwan's culture developed over the past decades. This study adopts the following to reflect on Tainan's cultural tourism:

1. the World Tourism Organisation's wide definition that all tourism trips can be considered as cultural tourism, because they 'satisfy the human need for diversity, tending to raise the cultural level of the individual and giving rise to new knowledge, experience, and encounters.' (Richards, 2007: 6)
2. William's idea of seeing cultural tourism as the 'arts and learning, *the special processes of discovery and creative effort*' (1958:8, cited in Smith 2003: 9), and
3. the conceptual definition by the European Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research:... away from their normal place of residence, with the intention *to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs* (Smith, 2003: 30)

For the evaluation of urban space quality, this study refers to the theory of a 'sense of place' and revised principles of 'responsive environments'. A rich variety of activities and the human need for meanings are checked against quality settings (Carmona et al., 2010). Permeability, variety, robustness, and visual appropriateness are primary principles employed for quality check (Bentley et al., 1985).

A Brief History of Tainan's Urban Development

Situated southwest of the island, Tainan is now the smallest metropolitan city in Taiwan. The city saw very little population growth over the past two decades and had only around 770,000 inhabitants in 2010. The cultural historic importance was considered the main reason the city gained metropolitan status. Tainan in this paper refers to the city before merging with former Tainan County to current status in that all planning and tourism materials of the city referred to issued before 2011.

Before the Twentieth Century

Originated from a harbour village in the latter half of the 17th century, Tainan gained a clearer town structure and developed into a walled city during the Chi'n Dynasty (1683-1895). It was the most populated and important city before 1875 and inherits important monuments built over the past three hundred years, including two fortifications built by the Dutch (1624-1653), the first Confucius Temple in Taiwan (1665), quite a few historic temples (from mid of the 17th century onward), the ancient city gates and the walls (built around 1723), and some military bases (around 1850) etc. (Fu, 2001) Its modern structure was planned and enacted by the Japanese during their reign from 1895 to 1945.

The Period of the Japanese Occupation

During this period, 'City and Streets Regularising' plans were planned and enacted putting gridiron street structure with traffic circles to existing urban fabrics. Public buildings (such as the city halls, fire stations, and train stations), commercial buildings and new street houses were then developed according to newly stipulated land use and building regulations. Western classical architectural norms were adopted when Japan was learning earnestly from the West for cultural-political renewal, giving a new townscape to all cities and leaving former urban fabric behind the new modern streets (TCG, 2000). Tainan had its 'modern' plan and characteristic city centre and Taipei became the island's political, economic and cultural centre.

After World War II

After World War II the country came into a period of planning stagnation and urban chaos when the central government, being defeated by the Communist, retreated to Taipei with accompanying boom of refugees. After a decade or so a series of Four-Year Economic Development Plans were launched, in conjunction with some 'grand constructions' from the late 1950s onward which transformed more than once the country's industry and economic base and urban form. The then evolving planning system was mainly a tool to support economic growth without due concern of conservation and environment quality.

During the heydays of housing boom and land speculation in the 1980s and the early 1990s most cities and towns witnessed drastic changes of urban form and the deterioration of urban qualities- insufficient urban services, congested development, serious traffic problems with pollution, omnipresent illegal constructions and land uses, and the loosing of local characters etc.(Hsia, 1993) Long time uneven development made primary cities, especially Taipei, attracting migration population and absorbing most resources leaving other cities and towns secondary in terms of urban services, economic development and urban quality. Tainan's urban growth in this period concentrated mainly on the reclaimed sub-centre to the west and the Eastern District, leaving the historic centre in a kind of stagnation.

In the late 1990s the country's significant political, cultural and urban changes took place seeing the change of ruling parties in central government and some local ones, the spreading of urban environment enhancement programmes, and the emphasis of community empowerment etc. Tainan started a decade of change and new identity building under the rule of mayors from the former opposition party.

Tainan's Cultural Renaissance and Environment Reform

Tainan witnessed significant urban changes over the past decade- much better townscape, increased green and open spaces, redeveloped waterfronts, better visibility of and accessibility to heritage sites, the development of national level museums and parks and the flourishing of department stores, hotels and distinctive housing projects. Culture has been the key element stressed by the city for her identity. Research projects and plans (concerning conservation and city character development), starting from before the turn of the century, paved the road for later government policies that led to this 'reform'.



Figure 1 Some of Tainan' cultural heritage

New Plans and a Culture-led Redevelopment Process

Mayor Chang of the Democratic Progressive Party started this process and proclaimed Tainan to be the country's cultural capital since 1997 when he entered in office. Citing Kyoto Japan as the model and supported by research proposals from university scholars, he advocated conservation-led redevelopment of the city's very first (Confucius Temple) cultural district/park and related environment projects (TCG, 2000 & 2001). The fourth comprehensive reassessment of the city's statutory Master Plan offered key redevelopment strategies concerning conservation, transport, industry, cultural development and community empowerment. Growth management, urban design and transportation were the major areas of concern in the plan. Redevelopment recommendations for different sectors were initiated to support the vision of 'cultural capital' and a 'waterfront leisure centre' (TCG, 2001). Apart from the visible enhancement to the city's historic sites and waterfront and the promotion of cultural festivals emphasising the city's history and local traditions, also significant were the establishment of the city's Bureau of Culture in year 2000 and the realisation of a more democratic and inclusive planning process.

A Period of Proliferation

The successive DPP mayor Dr Hsu, a specialist in finance and economic development and in office for two terms (2002-2010), had successfully promoted the city's political status and remade the city's image as a city of green, culture and economic viability. Immediately after he was in office he ended partly the disastrous project of a boulevard development close to the city's old shopping district. Including an underground shopping and parking complex and incurring complex engineering and social problems, this notorious project (initiated by the former KMT mayor against professional and local disapproval) had not only blocked district traffic but brought local businesses and development into deep recession for almost ten years. The recovering of local traffic and renovation of buildings along the main street had brought

this road and the district back to life. Design guidance with incentives was adopted and some art programmes were included during the process to encourage planned street transformation.

After a year concentrating on environment reform, mayor Hsu later focused his administration on healthy city project, economic development and welfare programmes. Involving both public sector and outside expertise a series of important planning documents were issued declaring new city visions, structure plans for selected districts, and guiding policies for developments. Urban Vision Strategies, Cityscape Policies, Sustainable Development Whitepapers, Healthy City Whitepapers were all issued around 2005, the starting year of mayor Hsu's second term. National level historic parks (An-ping Harbour and Tai-River) were designated accompanying with large scale landscape changes; five more (nine in total) cultural districts/parks were identified followed by environment enhancement and tourism promotion projects.



Figure 2 Distribution of Tainan's cultural parks

Environment Enhancement and Tourism Promotion

Effective environment reform projects were enacted enhancing the city's townscape and urban quality mainly around urban nodes. Especially noteworthy are the 'green doubling' project that added a hundred or so parks to the city in nine years, the 'street corner improvement project' that improved significantly the city's cleanliness and visual quality and the 'wall tearing project' that removed fencing walls of parks, schools and public institutions improving accessibility and visual quality of many streets and

neighbourhoods. A kind of Tainan model was formed. Interesting also is that Tainan created six cultural festivals since 1999, some including existing temple rituals and some emphasising the inclusion of international art programmes. All these were supported by central government policies of environment reform and tourism promotion and strengthened by inter-city competition for recognition and investment.

This period sees the development of tourism-related facilities and services such as hotels, new tourist bus lanes (during the weekends), improved parking spaces around heritage sites, renewed tourist information system (including websites, maps, leaflets etc. from both public and private sectors) and publication of a new city magazine (considered officially touristic). Revived local business and street activities, mainly over the weekends and holidays, accompanied environment projects and business promotion ones. The tactics of tourism promotion are no different from international examples only that Tainan attracts very few foreign visitors (Smith, 2003).

Other Areas of Changes

The development of the Southern Science and Industrial Park drew certain amount of higher income engineers to the city and induced the recovering of housing market in the city. During this period some quality housing projects and schools were developed winning important prizes. A younger generation of architects inserted new visual language and spatial experiences to the city and gave birth to the so called New South Architecture. Some famous projects attract quite some professionals and architecture students to visit enriching architecture tourism of Tainan.

The Old Building Happy (New) Forces Projects

Advocated by Foundation of Historic City Conservation and Regeneration the Old Building Happy (New) Forces projects encouraged the appreciation of innovative reuse designs of old buildings and the lives aside from the main streets. Starting mainly with local scholars evaluating 15 renovated old houses in the first year, this project then developed over the following years into student design competitions and in 2010 twenty two 'new' candidates subject to celebrity recommendation and public poll.

Acting as a promoter that provides a linking net, the Foundation brought scattered individual cases and people together through a series of visits, lectures and events and suddenly it became a big thing in the city. Not only more reuse designs are evolving, a special tourism is developing, but quite some design and media schools now get involved and media coverage has been beyond expectation. The Foundation's original concern was idealistic wishing to promote a better reuse design- appropriate techniques, innovative management, aesthetic quality and cultural contents. Celebrities' comments are encouraging. After staying and exploring candidate spaces, they (two famous writers, two photographers, a five-star hotel manager, an architect from Taipei who runs a similar space and a music maker) all fell in love with a Tainan they do not know. (FHCCR, 2010b) The key contrasts of such spaces to those witnessed on 'tourist' streets or shops will be discussed later.

Seeing all seemingly encouraging scenes regarding Tainan's cultural development and urban improvement, actual life contrast to beautiful pictures in tourism magazine has to be thought of and actual cultural contents of those cultural districts and cultural festivals have to be studied.

Discussions

Tainan has no doubt been a different city now seeing all these physical and non-physical 'progresses', but 'cultural capital' might not be easily achieved counting on history and heritage or the very few national museums and parks!

From the start of the development of cultural districts and cultural festivals, no documents showed a clearer picture of what culture is or in those programmes mean. All elements included seem to be taken

for granted- historic buildings, temple rituals, local food, street music or performance, art market etc. Zhau (2008) considers the development of Confucius Temple Cultural District an engineering of dream. To her, the renovation projects are managed to differentiate the district visually from the surroundings and the reuse of historic buildings are planned toward entertainment and business. Planned area has been rewritten to be another place in terms of urban form, activities and meanings. Open to the public and encouraging daily activities, the temple site has become a park losing its former cultural character and secret aura. The neighbouring historic lane that was turned into a typical tourist lane seeing food stalls, coffee shops, crafts and arts, and various kinds of peddlers that have nothing to do with local history, culture, or daily life and rarely visited by the locals. The chaotic combination of visual elements and activities seems to ridicule the characteristic historic archway. This is not very different from Taiwan's omnipresent night market!



Figure 3 Conflicts in uses and environment aura/ cultural significance

Similar phenomenon can be seen in other cultural districts. The settings and cultural programmes involved might offer new knowledge and experience to visitors, but do they really mean something culturally significant? When popularity and economic viability become key concerns of the public sector, cultural conflicts are generally invisible.

Tainan has been famous for her historic assets and local snacks even before those cultural endeavours. Tourist survey shows this but also deep dissatisfaction of the city's public transport, attractions for exploration, night life and public services (Chen, 2006). Tainan is also notorious for chaotic traffic and non-walkable pedestrian spaces, still a sign of informal sector domination! Un-tackled structural problems and distorted understanding of design quality prevent the city's public realm from further improvement to international standards. Short-termism affects seriously Taiwan's cultural development in that most politicians who have power and control resources want to be popular and to see their promised work done during their term of office. Constructions will be favoured much more than cultural development and none would tackle fundamental changes of ideology, cultural habits, or political and economic systems that take longer time with results not easily seen. Many want to reap in a short time, few understand the need to sow and cultivate. Admirable urban space comes from corresponding cultural soil. Cultural districts and festivals that invite exploration and offer meaningful experience need to have duly managed cultural content coming from the heart of the people.

Though meant for business, none OBHF projects are designed for tourists. Offering distinct spatial experiences, consumptions there are rarely linked with standardised Tainan image. The evolving types of use and ingenuities in space design promise richness that invite exploration. In all those cases owners who give both the spaces and businesses their special touch are indeed precious assets not duplicable

elsewhere. Perhaps we can say that it is people, their life and sincerity constitutes the core part of what can be developed as cultural tourism.

OBHF project stresses the link between past and future, between space and use, between building and surroundings, and between life and culture. It offers a starting point to rethink Tainan's cultural development and cultural district management. More can be explored in the future.



Figure 4 Celebrity comments OBHF candidates

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