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ARTICLE

Civility and its discontents: Subway Etiquette, Civic Values, and Political Subjectivity in Global Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The Taipei Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) System is instrumental to both the reconstruction of a collective identity and the development of a renewed political subjectivity, with which the Taiwanese establish themselves as autonomous, law-abiding citizens vis-à-vis a historically repressive state on the one hand, and enlightened, worthy members in the league of the world's urban civilizations on the other. The rescaling of the world economy from the scale of nations to one with an increasingly glocalized configuration has enabled the possibility of scale jumping that allows Taipei the city to stand in for Taiwan the nation, thus helping Taiwan break through its isolation and increase its international visibility. Under this circumstance, the civility displayed on the Taipei MRT takes on the significance of an act of performativity. It has come to signify the Taiwanese people's belonging, in the dual sense of both 'be-ing' in a social complex with fellow citizens and 'longing' for an identification of oneself in a particular historical present. However, the continuing controversies regarding MRT guidelines also indicate that the rights and responsibilities are not always understood to be equal among individual citizens. The process of civic subject formation is contentious and ongoing.

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On August 24, 2016, one Mrs. Lee posted on her Facebook page a photo of two students in the uniform of Taipei First Girls High School – one of the best girls’ high schools in Taiwan whose students wear a distinctive green shirt – sitting down on the Taipei Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) System, one closing her eyes and appearing to be dozing and the other seen concentrating on the screen of her cell phone. With the photo, Mrs. Lee commented: “Look at these students in their school uniforms who don’t yield their seats to kids! It is shameful. They obviously lack a [proper moral] education, for which they might as well go to work as whores.” As it happened, Mrs. Lee was sitting next to these two students. She was infuriated that, when a mother with two young children came aboard, these two students remained seated and looked seemingly indifferent while Mrs. Lee immediately stood up and offered her seat to one of the children – hence the photo she took of the two students and her caustic remark on Facebook. Her posting quickly generated a large number of online responses. The majority of the responses commented that yielding one’s seat was a virtue but not an obligation, especially when the seat one was occupying was a regular seat (as in this case) but not a priority seat and held that Mrs. Lee’s behavior had amounted to personal attacks. Some netizens suspected that these students were picked on because they happened to study at Taipei’s best girls’ high school and were expected by Mrs. Lee to maintain a moral high ground. Even if Mrs. Lee had a point, they questioned why students at this particular high school should carry such an expectation and raised the possibility that they might be suffering from physical pain or discomfort and needed to sit down. A few days later, another incident was reported on Facebook. This time, a healthy-looking young man sitting on a priority seat was forced by a middle-aged woman to give up his seat. When he explained that he was visually impaired, the woman shot back: “Yeah, right. Don’t think you can fool me! You have no right to sit here.” It turned out that this young man was telling the truth; he was indeed visually impaired. Soon after, a petition calling for the abolishment of MRT Priority Seats (as they seemed to have become a cause of public bullying) was circulated on the Internet, which, in a few days, collected enough signatures to legally revoke the law that requires priority seating on public transportation. The petition also evoked more heated online discussions about the value of priority seats. Proponents of the petition reasoned that yielding one’s seat should be a virtuous and voluntary act, and everybody should be compassionate to people in need. As such, priority seats were not necessary because all seats should be priority seats all the time. Opponents to the petition argued that the proponents had too much faith in individual passengers. Priority Seats were established in the first place precisely because most people were not motivated to give up their seats voluntarily. Furthermore, wouldn’t public bullying – the underlined reason for this discussion – occur more frequently if all MRT seats were considered priority seats? “Look at what happened to the students of Taipei First Girls High School? They were not even sitting on priority seats!” some netizens cautioned.

This was not the first time that priority seat-related incidents entered public discourses. Similar occurrences have continuously made newspaper headlines since the grand opening of the Taipei MRT in the late 1990s. As a result, the term “social justice monster” (正義魔人) was coined to describe those who self-righteously shame others for behavior they deem wrong or offensive in public spaces or take photos of others and put the photos online. Subsequently, MRT Priority Seats are frequently unoccupied even during rush hours. This does not mean that public confrontations or brawls happened frequently enough to disrupt the daily commute of Taipei City residents. The MRT continues to run efficiently and uneventfully most of the time, and it remains a favorite means of transportation in metropolitan Taipei. Nevertheless, these

incidents are significant. Globally, the Taipei MRT is not the only urban mass transit system implicated in priority seating controversies. An online search reveals that how to encourage people to offer their seats – or to discourage (young and able-bodied) passengers from taking priority seats, thus keeping them available to those in need – are questions raised in a variety of cities including New York, London, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Each of these cities has its version of civility campaign to promote proper urban transit manners to which its citizens respond in different ways. The Taipei MRT case, however, is characteristic in two interconnected respects: the strong sense of entitlement some passengers (mostly older people) feel towards priority seats and the intensity of emotion that the society invests in the issue. Together, these characteristics suggest that the Taipei MRT serves more functions and embodies more symbolic meanings than simply a means of public transportation.

This essay takes a close look at priority seating controversies and other MRT etiquette-related incidents and explores how these occurrences present opportunities to gain insight into the social life in which one develops the sense of self as a city resident and, by extension, as a member of a larger whole such as the nation or society. Lee (2007) has argued that the Taipei MRT has become a space of cultural intimacy wherein metropolitan Taipei residents (re)shape their collective identity against Taiwan's shifting politics and within the ever-changing global economic context. In this essay, I extend Lee's argument and propose that the Taipei MRT is instrumental not only to the reconstruction of a collective identity but also the development of a renewed political subjectivity, with which the Taiwanese establish themselves as autonomous, law-abiding citizens vis-à-vis a historically repressive state. Respectively, the MRT is a public asset in which all people have a stake, and the MRT guidelines serve as a medium through which they can constantly articulate their relations. Observing the same code of conduct and being civil to other passengers signify the possibility that people are associating with one another as fellow citizens with common rights and responsibilities. However, the continuing controversies regarding MRT guidelines and the intensity of emotion invested in many of these controversies also indicate that the rights and responsibilities are not always understood to be equal among individuals. The process of subject formation is contentious and ongoing.

To substantiate the points made above, the rest of this essay proceeds through five sections. It starts with an introduction to the conceptual frameworks that guide my analysis. Specifically, I focus on three issues related to urban network infrastructure: as a tool of the concurrent process of social integration and social distinction in the modern era, as a platform for the articulation of competing civic values, and as both a symbol of and vehicle to economic prosperity and civic pride at the current global age. While all of these features are observed in the Taipei MRT, they are distinctively mediated by Taiwan's history and politics. The second section presents a brief history of Taiwan, to contextualize the instrumentalization of civility on the MRT by policy and the state and the way that metropolitan Taipei residents were socialized and subjectivized throughout the 2000s. The third section offers an ethnographic inquiry of the general practice of MRT etiquette. It also discusses how the MRT etiquette yields a ripple effect on other public transportation systems and beyond. The fourth section discusses how and why metropolitan Taipei denizens came to embrace the protocol, considering that they would not hesitate to ignore government regulations only a generation before. It also clarifies what global citizenship or global city status means or looks like in Taipei. The final section covers the issue of priority seating, through which the nature of public life in Taiwan and its highly contentious character are illustrated.

Conceptual Frameworks

Urban Network Infrastructure, Civic Values, and Social Integration/Distinction

Craig Calhoun (1992) states in his concept of “the infrastructure of modernity” that infrastructure, especially transportation and communications technologies, is an essential part of the assemblage that made possible large-scale social relations characteristic of the modern era. Roads, railways, telegraphs in the past, and telephones and the Internet at the present are used by ordinary people to develop connections with one another. The many interactions taking place regularly and concurrently on these networked systems accumulate as broad and relatively stable social practices, which advance the social integration of dispersed populations. The competence of users – for example, while riding urban transit systems – is also imperative for the smooth operation of urban network infrastructures (Tonnelat and Kornblum 2017). Furthering these points, Hohne (2015) postulates in his discussion about the early days of the New York City subway that modern urban infrastructures are not merely essential to the shaping and maintaining of socioeconomic structure in the city, but they also function to homogenize the practices and perceptions of their users. As such, they are powerful devices that help to establish and sustain subject formation. Through this process, individuals are constructed as “desirable, predictable and conforming subjects” which enable them to be incorporated into certain social, economic, and cultural orders (Hohne 2015, 314). On the other hand, the process of social integration can also be a process of social distinction. The promotion of specific subjectivities through public transit systems often entails the effect of reaffirming existing social hierarchies (Butcher 2011) or creating new forms of stratification (Masterson-Algar 2016; O’Neill 2020; Prestel 2015).

Whether playing the role of promoting social integration or reinforcing/reinventing social distinction, public transit systems are primarily inhabited public spaces wherein strangers come into close physical proximity (Tonnelat and Kornblum 2017). This fact creates occasions for social relations and perceptions to be challenged (Aguiar 2011; Freedman 2011). The process of subjectification is, therefore, a highly contentious process in which different ideas of what the subject should be are constantly invented, experimented with, aligned, and negotiated.

It is under these conceptual premises that I begin to investigate the significance of the Taipei MRT etiquette including the priority seating practice. I take the Taipei MRT as a site where different civic values confront one another openly. The controversies over the seemingly simple act of yielding one’s seat on the subway shed light on the questions often asked in the literature of infrastructural subject formation: How do particular transportation infrastructures produce homogeneous or fragmented experiences and perceptions? How do people engage in interpretive work to make sense of what is “at hand”? What forms of sociality are important or permissible? What is okay and what is not? Who decides it? Ultimately, what kind of social contract exists in such a public space? How might we use these interactions to connect experience and places as a way of building a picture of a larger whole? (Angelo and Hentschel 2015; Löfgren 2008).

Urban Network Infrastructure, Economic Prosperity, and Civic Pride

While subway manners may have appeared to be a ubiquitous phenomenon among the world’s urban transit systems – both spatially and temporally – how the manners are performed and the motivation behind particular performances can vary from context to context. To

comprehend why Taipei residents hold a highly positive view about their MRT, put up with the many guidelines established by the Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation (TRTC, the Taipei City government agency in charge of the MRT's daily operation) and feel passionate or obliged to intervene when the guidelines are challenged, I look beyond the MRT's immediate – and apparent – function as a means of public transportation and look for the additional meanings given by the Taiwanese populace.

The Taipei MRT is the first urban mass transit system ever built in Taiwan. The building of its primary network started in the late 1980s and was completed in the late 1990s. At this stage, it comprised of six lines, with a construction cost exceeding NT\$440 billion (roughly US\$15 billion) – allegedly the most expensive subway system in the world at the time (Liu and Lü 1994). In subsequent years, in addition to the expansion of the Taipei MRT, the Taiwan government continued to spend a vast amount of money on network infrastructure projects including the MRT and light rail system in Kaohsiung (the second-largest city in Taiwan until the 2010 redistricting) as well as planned works in other smaller cities. Taiwan is not unique in this regard but a part of the larger global trend. As cities in both the developed and developing worlds are increasingly entrenched in an unstable economic environment exemplified by transnational capital that is highly mobile and speculative in the contemporary “glocalized” capitalism, many of them are forced into fierce rivalries and have to take on strategies like place-making and regulatory undercutting to secure jobs and investments (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 367; Swyngedouw 1997). Urban development projects to improve city infrastructure, renovate city landscapes, or create cultural facilities or festivities, therefore, are as much an effect of local enthusiasm or initiative as of interurban competition. This is particularly prevalent in Asian Pacific cities, where the central governments of these cities have taken to heart the doctrine of infrastructure investment, especially in telecommunications and transportation.

To account for this trend, the worldwide circle of transportation practitioners often turns to economic factors (such as increasing land values near MRT stations and lower costs for fuel, shipping, and vehicle maintenance due to reduced road congestion) and extra-economic factors (such as quality of life, healthy lifestyle, and environmental quality) thought beneficial for a city to move up the ladder of global economic hierarchy (McLellan and Collins 2014). Coined as “railscape” (Ferbarche and Knowles 2017), it is widely posited that urban rail services facilitate the creation of the kind of urban space that attracts high value-added, knowledge-based industries in finance, legal services, and professional consulting to the city center. It is also postulated that modern urban transit systems provide the appearance of technologically advanced, safe, clean, comfortable, on-time transit services that fulfill the expectations of a bustling global city clientele (Niedzielski and Malecki 2012, 1412). Together, these conditions are said to draw a desired type of citizen – globally oriented, knowledge economy workers, who can form a creative and managerial core imperative to postindustrial economic transformation.

However, a direct causal relationship between urban rail systems and global economic competitiveness is yet to be explicitly demonstrated (McLellan and Collins 2014). Neither are urban transit systems always fully utilized by their intended riders (Niedzielski and Malecki 2012, 1410). To explain the disparity between the continued popularity of urban megaprojects and the promises that are frequently insufficiently verified, Siemiatycki (2006) proposes that we should take into account not only the tangible gains (such as global economic competitiveness) but also the intangible benefits of these projects. It is oftentimes the spatially, temporally, and culturally rooted symbols, meanings, mythologies, and imageries that lead to widespread political and public support for urban mega-project investment (Lee 2015; Richmond 2005;

Sadana 2018). As urban megaprojects are constantly equated with “global” stature in today’s intercity competition, rail helps to project a positive image of oneself in the act of “being global” (Ong 2011). Through this process, urban residents can think of their city as having some degree of global significance or having attained some level of world-city standing (13).

Rescaling the Taipei MRT

While the Taipei MRT as urban infrastructure embodies all the aforementioned attributes, how these attributes are manifested is distinctively mediated by Taiwan’s geopolitics and history. For sure, the MRT etiquette movement is not the first civility campaign pursued by the Republic of China government. The New Life Movement in the 1930s, for example, was an expansive operation waged by Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party (Kuomintang; KMT) aimed at personal hygiene and polite behavior (Dirlik 1975). This campaign drew partly on Western ideas of civility and citizenship but interpreted these concepts in an authoritarian manner to impose discipline. Ultimately, the New Life Movement’s goal was to extend government control into the “micro-practices of daily life,” so that the state could remake the citizens’ identity “in ways that would be both modern and malleable to the will of the government” (Weller 2002, 44).¹ More recently, during the late 1970s and 1980s, the “Line-up Movement” (排隊運動), a highlight of the KMT’s Taipei City’s “Rich with Civility” (富而好禮) campaign illustrated a similar intent (Wang 2003). It used bodily discipline to enact the virtues of social order, efficiency, and civility (Wang 2005). In both cases, civility was not democratic. Instead, it was appropriated by the government “to promote a docile populace [but] not to guarantee an independent one, and to enhance the scope of the state [but] not to support a distinct civil society” (Weller 2002, 45).

There is a difference, however, between these previous campaigns and the current one: while earlier campaigns tended to be unsuccessful, the MRT regulations are followed faithfully by the majority of MRT passengers. In the past, government civility campaigns were unsuccessful because the KMT regime was considered authoritarian and uncivil by the citizens and thus in a weak position to promote civility, and because the lack of sufficient public investment in social service and infrastructure rendered many of the campaigns highly ideological but deeply impractical. During previous campaigns, the Taiwanese vented their frustration at a government that was corrupt and lacking popular representation by intentionally or unintentionally ignoring public rules. The point of contention was domestic politics. In contrast, the cooperation evident among the MRT riders reflects a shift of reference in the Taiwanese’s self-identification to an increasingly globalized world within which Taiwan is deeply embedded.

The timing of the completion of the Taipei MRT coincided with the emergence of global cities as the main site of global economic competition. Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations and thus excluded from UN-related intergovernmental organizations (such as the World Health Organization). Taiwan also constantly faces objections or interventions from the Beijing government in its participation in international non-governmental organizations or activities. Consequently, Taiwan as a political polity lacks international recognition. Under these circumstances, the rescaling of the world economy from one characterized by nationally configured frameworks to one with an increasingly glocalised configuration of global-national-local interactions in recent decades has opened up new possibilities for Taiwan in its pursuit of global membership. The parallel development among major cities around the world – though a

result of interurban competition – has not only helped to create “a single imagery space” (Appadurai 2001), with which metropolitan Taipei residents can measure themselves against city dwellers elsewhere. More critically, such a process has allowed the possibility of scale jumping (Smith 1996) for the city of Taipei to stand in for the nation of Taiwan, thus granting the Taiwanese the eagerly-thought international visibility that is not given to Taiwan as a political polity.

Ultimately, the global economic-spatial process of rescaling that magnified the importance of the scale of cities also expanded the significance of urban network infrastructure such as the Taipei MRT. If the Taipei MRT as a sleek modern transportation system is seen as attesting to Taiwan’s technological know-how – thereby pairing Taiwan with its capitalist advanced counterparts – the passengers’ law-abiding and orderly behavior is taken to elucidate Taiwan’s moral high ground, which puts the country in the world’s league of urban civilizations. Whether or not this is conscious or intentional, Taipei MRT riders are performing daily for a global audience with a largely westward-looking orientation. Given the rapidly expanding and increasingly fragmented global mediascape, the global gaze is not entirely imagined by the Taiwanese. From time to time the Taipei MRT indeed receives favorable reporting from international mainstream media, freelance reporters, global trekkers and visitors, and social media influencers, an issue that I will come back later.

Civilizing and Civilized Passengers

Priority seating is not the only behavioral code observed on the Taipei MRT. In the early 1990s, a few years before the completion of the Muzha Line – the first MRT line to be completed – people in Taipei began to read in newspapers that there were rules to follow while riding the MRT (Chen 2005, 84). During the Muzha Line free trial period in March 1996, while experiencing firsthand Taipei’s newest public transportation system, passengers were also shown step by step how to act in the subway, from purchasing tickets from a vending machine, swiping the ticket at the turnstile, following the signs to the right platform, waiting on a safe spot on the platform, to forming a line while entering a subway car. TRTC employees also worked hard to educate passengers about “proper” MRT behavior and etiquette. Before long, signs were placed at the top and foot of nearly every escalator inside MRT stations to remind passengers that they should stand on the right, leaving the left-hand side for those who were in a hurry to pass by. Lines were painted on the platform so that people could stand in line while waiting for the MRT. The lines ensured that passengers would get on the train in an orderly manner (Figure 1). Furthermore, to keep the environment clean, passengers were and continue to be barred from spitting, smoking, eating, drinking, or chewing gum or betel nuts in the stations or inside the train cars. Concomitantly, the Legislative Yuan, the highest legislative body in Taiwan, passed the *Mass Rapid Transit Act* to provide a legal foundation for laws concerning the Taipei MRT (and other mass rapid transit systems in Taiwan) including the aforementioned drinking/eating ban. Passengers who violate the rule will be fined from 1,500 to 7,500 Taiwanese dollars (roughly US\$50-250).

In the first few months after these guidelines were put in place, one often saw TRTC employees guiding passengers and correcting deviant behavior. At first, their task was not easy. Despite the TRTC’s ongoing media campaign and frequent TV and newspaper coverage, many passengers misbehaved particularly when they thought that TRTC workers were not watching. In response, the TRTC intensified its efforts. It added more on-site personnel, increased the

amount of fines, and installed surveillance cameras. Loudspeakers were also used to repeatedly broadcast information and warning messages to passengers. Offenders who got caught were often put on the spot, as a woman who was a college student at the time recalled in her conversation with me: “Sometimes, while riding the train, out of nowhere one heard the conductor’s voice on the public speaker, ‘The Miss in Car so and so, please put away your food.’ How did they know who was eating in what car? It was embarrassing!” The TRTC also secured the support of the Ministry of Education, which encouraged schools in Taipei as well as the rest of Taiwan to make MRT etiquette a part of the civic education curriculum (Chen 2005, 84). Earnest citizens also answered the TRTC campaign by partaking in its enforcement effort. One online blogger who currently resides in Berlin divulged in one of his essays about his youth experience with the Taipei MRT that he would never think of happening on the Berlin U-Bahn. He tells that one day in high school he was taking the MRT home with a classmate after a day of class. His classmate was too hungry to sustain himself and took a bite of his chicken cutlet stealthily when he thought that nobody was watching. On the next day, the classmate’s name was called out at the school-wide morning assembly because a zealous onlooker sent in a photo of him eating on the MRT. Later, for as long as the blogger could remember, “In every military training class, the teacher would project the slide with my friend’s mouth biting into the chicken cutlet! They certainly used it as negative teaching material.”²

The TRTC staff’s labor eventually paid off. The number of transgressions dropped gradually. As an effect, passengers were thrilled to see that it was really clean and orderly inside MRT stations (Figure 2). Unlike what one usually saw in many of Taiwan’s bus and railroad stations, there simply was no littering inside the MRT. Over time, however, the impact of the MRT regulations has also reached beyond the metro system. For example, a “No Eating, No Drinking” sign, similar to the one posted inside MRT cars, can now be seen in Taipei City buses. Even though there is no legal foundation behind the “No Eating, No Drinking” sign on the bus and hence no formal penalties against those who fail to follow the sign, passengers are by and large cooperative. Also, compared to the days before the MRT, people are more frequently observed standing in lines while awaiting buses. Nevertheless, the order formed by the queue often quickly falls into chaos upon the arrival of buses. Part of the reason is that the bus does not come as frequently as the MRT. As a result, buses are usually crowded, and commuters have to compete -- by pushing and shoving through others -- to get on a bus. (It certainly does not help that the number of seats on a bus is much fewer than that in an MRT car.) The fact that many bus routes share one bus station also makes it difficult for commuters to queue up, particularly when two or more buses arrive at the same time. There is neither enough space nor a clear indication of where people should line up at bus stations. Similarly, Taiwan Railways Administration – the government agency that operates Taiwan’s conventional railway services – also encourages its passengers to queue up by drawing lines on the platform, nonetheless to little effect.³ This is primarily because, in stark contrast to the precision of the MRT, railway car doors do not always open at the same spot. As a result, passengers can only chase the door when a train enters the station, thereby rendering queuing up inconsequential.

I should point out that it is not necessarily the lack of will or sophistication on the passengers’ part that caused the failure of these bus and railway campaigns. Rather, the failure is more likely caused by the lack of sufficient public investment in service and infrastructure particularly compared to the vast government support for the Taipei MRT. For one thing, the Priority Seat practice and the ensuing controversies have quickly made their way to other public transportation systems. Frequently reported conflicts on the conventional railway usually

involve an elderly person who holds a standing ticket demanding a younger person who booked a reserved seat to give away the seat. On the bus front, starting November 2020, the Taipei City Government is piloting a “Seat Needed” service bell program in selected bus routes. That is, whenever a passenger who requires a seat presses the seat bell, the message “Dear passenger, please give your seat to those in need. Thank you for your cooperation” will be broadcasted on the bus to alert other passengers. Not surprisingly, the announcement of this pilot program immediately prompted much public discussion.

Compared to the bus and traditional railway systems, the MRT has had the most success in shaping riders’ behavior. Yet, the enforcement of the MRT guidelines has not always been smooth but involved an ongoing learning process for MRT passengers, TRTC staff, and the larger society, whose perspectives on the general issue of enforcement or specific details about the guidelines do not always converge. Since the opening of the MRT in the early 1990s, the Legislative Yuan has passed several amendments to address some of the confusion caused by the different interpretations of the earlier *Mass Rapid Transit Act*. For example, the earlier Act banned spitting gum or betel nuts inside the MRT but did not pronounce the behavior of chewing itself an illegal transgression. As a result, TRTC staff had problems stopping passengers from chewing gum or betel nuts. This was corrected in late 2004 when the Legislative Yuan passed an amendment that clarified the intention of the law.

Another example that illustrates the contention over the MRT guidelines is the “Keep Right” practice on MRT escalators. The TRTC changed its original campaign after a few female passengers seriously injured themselves when their hair rolled into the escalator handrail at the extremely crowded MRT Taipei Main Station on New Year’s Eve in 2004. These women’s hair got caught by the escalator handrail when they tried to create more space for others by leaning themselves against the escalator. After these unfortunate accidents, the TRTC upgraded its safety protocols to accommodate a mass transit system increasingly serving a number of riders beyond its planned capacity. Accordingly, passengers were reminded to “stand steadily and hold on the handrail” while on MRT escalators. They were no longer advised to stand on the right but encouraged to use both sides of the escalator. In addition to facilitating a better flow of passengers, the TRTC also cited technical reasons such as a balanced use of both sides of escalators would help them last longer. However, more than a decade after the TRTC refashioned its “Keep Right” policy, the majority of Taipei MRT riders continue to observe the behavior. From time to time people failing to follow suit are publicly reprimanded by the supercilious looks or impatient sounds or comments made by other passengers. There continue to be public discussions about the virtue of the “Keep Right” practice as well as campaigns to call for its abolishment even though it is no longer in existence officially.

Similarly, the no-drinking decree is a subject igniting public interest from time to time. Among the many incidents over the years, in June 2009, an elder man from central Taiwan was fined for drinking water while taking medicine on the Taipei MRT. After he went home, he petitioned his local representative of the Legislative Yuan to amend the *Mass Rapid Transit Act* so that people could drink water (but not other kinds of drinks) on the MRT. The story attracted a few hundred online comments in a few days as soon as it was made public. These comments overwhelmingly objected to amending the Act, citing maintaining a clean environment as the main reason for the objection. Many mentioned that if drinking was allowed on the MRT, the chance for people to spill their drinks on a moving train was high. The spilled drink would quickly turn into something of a smudge, not to mention the possibility that people might slip on it and get injured. Besides, if the Legislative Yuan indeed passed the proposed amendment, how

long would it take for other kinds of drinks – particularly those with sugar content – to be also permitted and make a worse mess once spilled on the MRT? Other comments argued that, based on the Taiwanese’s habitual behavior of looking for loopholes, it would take no time for their fellow passengers to start drinking all kinds of other drinks once plain water was allowed. “And we can’t certainly count on people to dispose of their empty bottles and jars properly! The MRT crew would be burdened with more work to keep the subway environment clean,” some added.⁴ This by no means indicates that there was no voice supporting the proposed amendment – or questioning the drinking ban altogether. Nonetheless, the support for an amendment remained a minority position. In the end, the Legislative Yuan did not take up the amendment. In spite of a few similar attempts in subsequent years, no-drinking has stayed law until this day.

Renewed Civic Culture and Subjectivity

On the whole, despite the ongoing public discussions and passenger confrontations, the MRT guidelines and etiquette advocated by the TRTC have remained in place, and passengers have continued to faithfully practice them. The fact that the Taipei MRT is a well-run, efficient transit system has certainly facilitated the passengers’ willingness to follow its code of civil behavior. Indeed, the Taipei MRT was ranked No. 1 in the world for five consecutive years (2004-2008) in terms of reliability, safety, and quality standards based on data gathered by the Nova International Railway Benchmarking Group and the Community of Metros (now the Community of Metros).⁵ The system is decidedly punctual, to the extent that passengers feel entitled to complain when the train is running a minute or two late. Digital billboards placed in nearly every station and on platforms inform passengers to the second how long they will have to wait for the next train (Figure 3). Morning commuters are no longer compelled to leave home half an hour earlier than the time required for traveling under normal, non-congested conditions to get to work on time. Soon after the opening of the Taipei MRT, it was also observed that an increasing number of passengers began to dress up for the ride, wearing designer clothes and high heels or coordinated outfits purchased in department or brand-named stores, instead of casual and frequently mismatched garments from vendors in a night market. To attest to the success of the Taipei MRT, the overall passenger satisfaction rate was as high as 97.6% in the TRTC’s 2019 Passenger Satisfaction Survey.⁶ Ultimately, the Taipei MRT has not only changed the habits of its passengers but also helped to initiate a new model for – and image of – metropolitan Taipei residents. Over time, the term *Jieyunzu* (捷運族; literally ‘the MRT Tribe’) was coined by the media, and quickly adopted by the public, to (self-)describe people who rely on the MRT for their daily commute and who thus know the ins-and-outs of the MRT (Chen 2005, 82). Step by step, a collective identity was taking shape among metropolitan Taipei residents based on their shared experience as MRT riders.

The knowledge derived from the shared sentiment of cultural intimacy among fellow passengers has helped people in Taipei to construct a self that is civilized and enlightened, separating themselves from their politically repressive and unruly past. It also reflects a shift of reference in self-identification to an increasingly globalized world within which the Taiwanese economy is embedded. Taipei residents can now appraise their city and themselves on a global scale through omnipresent urban infrastructure like their mass rapid transit system. The convenience and punctuality of the Taipei MRT, the ease it has made of one’s daily commute, the extensive distance one can travel with it, its effect on Taipei’s streets and air quality, the gradual change in etiquette and behavior among metropolitan Taipei residents, and the

transformation of Taipei's civic culture in recent years are all part and parcel of the structure of feeling engendered by the Taipei MRT.

From time to time, the Taiwanese mainstream news media would report on how foreign visitors and observers view the Taipei MRT. While this kind of reporting is instructive in its own right, it is even more significant in the context of revealing how and how much the Taiwanese want others to think about themselves. Whether it was the "Taipei, Taiwan's Metro System is Better than Yours" YouTube video (2017) in which global trekkers Sara and Ryan made the jesting "where can I find a piece of trash?" comment,⁷ or freelancer Martha Sorren's *Insider* essay entitled "I rode the subway in Taiwan and saw why it's one of the best mass transit systems in the world" (2019),⁸ or the Taipei MRT passengers' "appreciation for order" that so much impressed Korean YouTuber Kyeong Heum on his first MRT ride (2018),⁹ or the approval of Japanese wheelchair walker Yuriko Oda of the Taipei MRT as a barrier-free space (2017),¹⁰ the Taiwanese news media as well as individual netizens who reposted these messages tended to amplify the messages by adding "the top," "the world's best urban transit system," or "a marvel" to the original titles. The most meaningful vindication likely came from Singapore-based Channel NewsAsia (CNA) TV Network, which, in 2018, broadcasted a special report "How Taipei Metro turned itself around [to become one of the world's most reliable subway systems] – and the lessons for Singapore's MRT system," following the Singapore MRT's spate of delays, breakdowns, and service disruptions in recent years.¹¹ This CNA coverage spoke volumes given the popular impression among the Taiwanese that Singapore is a well-run country with a highly efficient government and superb infrastructure – not to mention that many of the Taipei MRT rules and regulations were modeled on those of the Singapore MRT. Essentially, for many Taiwanese, through the Taipei MRT, Taiwan is not only "in line with international standards" (與國際接軌) but also gaining the global recognition long desired, awaited, and deserved.

Lately, the Taipei MRT as a marker of identity took on a new layer of signification in Taiwan's relations with the People's Republic of China. The deepening of communications and business transactions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait brings a growing number of Chinese tourists and visitors to Taiwan. The social behavior practiced by local residents on the Taipei MRT has morphed into an emblem of distinction in this context. In his article, "Civility, Taiwanese Civility, and the Taiwanese Civility Reconstructed by Mainland Chinese" (2017), anthropologist Yunxiang Yan postulates that the working definitions of civility in both modern Western societies and Taiwan bear the critical elements of respect, tolerance, and due consideration for acquaintances and strangers. However, the Taiwanese model of civility is also characterized by mutuality, closeness, and hierarchy in interpersonal relations. It is these distinctive qualities of Taiwanese civility that impressed Chinese visitors the most who then reconstructed them to an idealized model of Chinese culture thought lost on Mainland China. Yan observes that, in the process of imagining and reconstructing Taiwanese civility, the preservation of traditional Chinese culture has emerged as a new defining feature of Taiwanese society. Taiwan is upheld as a laudable example of the future of Chinese culture and society.

Yet, rather than the praise and high hopes, the seeming oblivion of some of their Chinese visitors toward the MRT guidelines seems to suggest to the Taiwanese a disjuncture between their enlightened selves and their Chinese others. In his assertion of Taiwan's recent political and civil transformation, Taiwanese blogger Liao Xinzong commented that the acknowledgment of the rule of law and the respect for fellow citizens in public life – both of which are seen as lacking in Chinese society – are keys to contemporary Taiwanese civility (Yan 2017, 251). Liao further emphasized the significance of civic engagement. He observed: "In

their mentality, Taiwanese people have now secured such an identity [of being a citizen] with the capacity to change society and indeed to participate in improving the society, instead of being docile subjects [of the ruler]" (252). Similar remarks that attribute the development of civility in Taiwan to democratic transition, including the emergence of a democratic polity, the rise of civil society, and civic engagement as a form of moral self-cultivation are often cited by other online commentators as well.

Priority Seating: A Virtue of Universal Love or a Culture based on Hierarchy?

Priority seats are established to encourage people to be empathetic and develop the virtue of yielding seats. However, accompanied by the change in demographic structure [with a rapidly aging population], priority seats frequently appeared in news headlines and became the focal point of dispute in public policy.¹²

"Yielding seat" has been something in the Taiwanese culture of which people are proud. However, this goodness seems to be slowly changing. Some people began to think that priority seats are reserved exclusively for pregnant women, children, and senior citizens. As such, a young person sitting on a priority seat is often looked at with prejudice or, worse, gets yelled at. But many people have "hidden needs," you know? The culture of giving seats has lost its original intention but become a cause of public bullying. Since when has something that started with a good intention turned into a duty?¹³

Once I had to pull down my pants and showed the person who accused me of sitting on a priority seat my Hemangioma, to convince her I couldn't remain standing for long and had a legitimate reason to sit down. It made me feel like I was going through a security check and I was subjected to a body search. Why do I have to display my illness in public just because my condition is not readily visible? The same is true for [a pregnant woman with a small belly who has to wear a] "Sticker for the Pregnant." Maybe we should start offering different kinds of stickers -- "Sticker for the Elderly," "Cancer Sticker," "Sticker for Heart Diseases" -- this might be a solution.¹⁴

This section returns to the issue of priority seating. Following the previous discussion about the development of civility in Taiwan, I open this section with three online comments in the aftermath of the Mrs. Lee incident presented at the beginning of this essay. These comments are introduced to highlight the ethical paradox that, on the one hand, interventions on the MRT (such as what Mrs. Lee did) could be considered as acts of civic engagement motivated by the calling to do the right thing for oneself and/or others. On the other hand, however, the interventions are often conducted under the condition of privileging the rights and needs of certain individuals over others. People are not treated equally. Priority seats, in essence, become a platform wherein competing civic values play out in public spaces.

Originating from Scandinavia, priority seats were put in service to benefit disabled passengers on public transportation systems. In Taiwan, they were introduced in the 1980s following several accidents involving senior passengers falling and injuring themselves on Taipei City buses. Called "Bo-ai Zuo" (博愛座) in Chinese – literally "Seats of Universal Love" or "Seats of Love for All" – the name is meant to gain the support of passengers by reminding them the traditional moral value that one should not only care about oneself or one's family but

the entire humanity (Figure 4). It especially encourages that we should honor the elderly of other families as we honor our own and care for the children of other families as we care for our own. Yet, people did not develop the habit of offering seats, and priority seats were often treated as existing in name only. Nobody paid much attention until the arrival of the Taipei MRT. Just like in the case of other MRT guidelines and manners, the TRTC waged several vigorous campaigns – and continues to do so – about the importance of being compassionate to people who need to be seated on public transit (Figure 5). Nowadays, many denizens of Taipei take great pride in their “culture of seat yielding.” Along with other aforementioned MRT practices, it is now a core part of Taipei’s civic culture and identity. People conveniently forget, however, that only a generation ago in the pre-MRT era, (male) high school students would not hesitate to climb through the windows – or quickly throw their book bags through the windows onto a seat – of a traditional railway car to ensure that they get a seat.

Nevertheless, the practice of priority seats differs from other MRT etiquette in two regards. First, the legal basis of MRT Priority Seats is the *People with Disabilities Rights Protection Act*, which mandates that all public transit systems be barrier-free. Furthermore, the Act requires at least 15% of the seats on a public transit vehicle without assigned seats should be priority seats for the disabled, the elderly, pregnant women, and children or adults holding small children, and these priority seats should be located near vehicle entrances. Non-compliant owners of public transit systems would be fined. The *People with Disabilities Rights Protection Act*, however, does not concern the actual ridership. There is also no statute in the *Mass Rapid Transit Act* that dictates who can or cannot sit on priority seats. In other words, unlike the no-eating/drinking regulation, the daily practice of priority seats does not have a legal foundation but depends on the goodwill of passengers. Secondly but more significantly, other MRT guidelines (such as no-eating/drinking, standing in line while waiting as well as entering a subway car, and the escalator ‘Keep Right’ practice) are – or can be – applied to all passengers in more or less the same way. That is, nobody should be eating, drinking or chewing gum, or cutting in line (although some exceptions may be made, like a young child can be allowed to eat when hungry and crying). The common sociality among MRT passengers comes from the fact that everybody is equal. In contrast, the very idea of priority seats is predicated on distinction, whereby people are not all equal but distinguished by need; and those who have needs are given priority to priority seats (or seats in general).

While the need-based assumption seems to be sufficiently straightforward, the ongoing controversies around MRT Priority Seats bring to the fore questions such as: What is “need”? How is need defined? Are there different kinds of needs? If so, is there a rank order among these different kinds of needs and, by extension, among people associated with these needs? Accordingly, how can we identify those who are in need? Given that one’s appearance is readily visible, age-related inabilities (such as from the condition of being old or very young), not surprisingly, are among the most easily recognizable registers of need. Furthermore, because respect for the elderly is central to the Confucian ethos deeply embedded in Taiwanese culture, it is also not surprising to observe that age-based seniority has become the most significant factor in people’s decisions to offer or claim a priority seat or any seat on public transit. In the end, in the priority seating practice, a notion of hierarchy and differential love and respect in accordance with one’s social ranking grounded in the traditional Confucian ethics frequently takes precedence over the principle of equality in modern citizenship that informs other MRT etiquette practices. Concerns of non-senior citizens, especially those of young people, are often overlooked as a result. Indeed, nearly all of the priority seat-related confrontations involved a

healthy-looking young individual reprimanded by an older person for “illegitimately” taking a priority seat. Consequently, to avoid the public scrutiny associated with priority seating, many MRT passengers – young or middle-aged – have chosen to forego altogether priority seats even when nobody in need is in sight – hence the peculiar phenomenon of vacant seats in crowded MRT cars during rush-hour commutes.

Whether or not the elderly should be offered a seat on public transit systems is not in debate in MRT priority seating controversies, because it is generally taken by the Taiwanese as a virtue integral to the Taiwanese culture. Many Taiwanese hold the view that the priority seating culture is part of what makes the Taiwanese morally distinguished on the global stage. What is in dispute is how to treat all citizens as moral equals who deserve the same respect and dignity. In response to the harsh criticisms inflicted on young people, summer interns of 2014 at *iprefer*, a Taipei-based digital-integrated marketing firm, produced a short video entitled “Here Comes Another One Who Seizes a Bo-ai [Priority] Seat?” as their collective project and uploaded the video onto YouTube. The video quickly became a hit.¹⁵ The video starts with the many inquisitive gazes one often endures when taking an MRT Priority Seat and asks the familiar question “How can he occupy a priority seat?” on the screen. It continues on to depict a woman whose belly is too small to show her pregnancy, a high school student who is in pain from her menstrual cramps, a male office worker who is suffering from serious sleep deprivation due to days of overtime work, and a tall basketball player who cannot stand for too long because he is recovering from a recent knee surgery – all of these individuals look healthy, even though they each have a condition that is not obvious to the eye. They all would appreciate being seated on a crowded commuter train, only that they are too afraid to be singled out for sitting on a priority seat. Towards the end of the video, a group of young people is seen holding signs, each with a Chinese character on it. Together it says: “You are not one of the disabled, the elderly, the pregnant, or the children! You have no right to take a Bo-ai Seat” (你不是老弱婦孺! 就不需要坐博愛座). However, in a few seconds, these young people change their respective positions and reassemble their signs. It now says: “No! You don’t need to be disabled, elderly, pregnant, or a child. You can always sit on a Bo-ai Seat as long as you are in need” (不! 不是老弱婦孺, 你需要就坐博愛座). Towards the end, the video calls on the literal meaning of Bo-ai Seat as “Seat of Love for All” and concludes with the message: “Change your perspective, so that Bo-ai Seats can carry more love” (換個立場, 讓博愛座可以承載更多的愛).

The TRTC also weighed in on the issue and started to supply official “Individual-in-Need Sticker” and “Sticker for the Pregnant” – similar to those issued by the Tokyo Metro and the London Underground – to help people avoid public confrontations or humiliations when using priority seats. The agency has also changed the message in its public priority seating campaigns to emphasize that priority seats are not just for a few selected groups of individuals but also for everybody who is in need.

Conclusion: Subway Civility on the Global Stage

By the time that the first line of the Taipei MRT was completed in March 1996, it was ninety-two years after the grand opening of the New York City subway in 1904. The functions identified by Hohne (2015) associated with this early urban transit system remain relevant nearly a century later. Contemporary urban mass transit systems such as the Taipei MRT continue to be a constitutive element of the social-spatial order of the city. The Taipei MRT is a central device for uniting the city and the people in Taipei. In the process, however, it also brings to light the

different ideas about the rights and responsibilities of individuals as members of modern society. An ethnographic inquiry into the MRT etiquette is instructive in this context, as the different notions of propriety are played out in public daily through the conformity to and conflicts over MRT guidelines and manners.

Furthermore, the Taipei MRT case reveals that to fully understand the nature and characters of contemporary urban mass transit systems – or new or expanded lines of existing rapid transit networks – one has to take into account the factor of global place-making. The ferocity of intercity competition as a result of the rescaling of today's global economic system was often behind the urban infrastructure investments around the world. City policymakers and residents are propelled to ponder not only the potential benefit an urban mega-project may bring to their city but also the fallout from the global stage they may risk facing for withholding such an investment. With regard to urban transit, this persistent concern could manifest in the actual construction of commuter rail systems, purposefully planned station architecture and/or artistically designed station interior, or passengers' civil and well-ordered behavior – all of which are observed in the Taipei MRT, to project a positive image of the city.

It is important to stress, while the characteristics of the MRT connect Taiwan to the idealistic modernity of a globalized neoliberal political economy, they are also the embodiment of a distinctively Taiwanese subjectivity. The rescaling of the world economy from one grounded on the scale of nations to one with an increasingly glocalised configuration of global-national-local interactions has enabled the possibility of scale jumping that allows Taipei the city to stand in for Taiwan the nation, thus helping Taiwan break through its isolation and increase its international visibility. Under this circumstance, the civility displayed on the Taipei MRT – with the democracy and civil society as the foundation on which this civility is developed and sustained – takes on the significance as an act of performativity. It has come to signify the Taiwanese's belonging, in the dual sense of both "be-ing" in a social complex with fellow citizens and "longing" for an identification of oneself, one's passions, one's desires, and one's politics in a particular historical present (Bell 1999).

Accordingly, it would be naïve to simply represent the conflicts over the principle of universality/equality and the ethics of particularity/differentiation – both of which are used by the Taiwanese to validate proper MRT etiquette – as a clash between a modern political subjectivity and a centuries-old cultural ethos. To characterize this as a "modern vs. traditional" dichotomy is a false depiction. Whether it is to reprimand a young person for occupying a priority seat or to defend the right of everybody for taking a priority seat, this kind of public intervention was not frequently seen until the coming of the Taipei MRT. They both exemplify a new kind of political subjectivity predicated on the recognition of citizens' rights in public arenas. Furthermore, the intensity of emotion and the strong sense of (self-)righteousness are legitimized and magnified by the desire to project an enlightened citizenry onto the global stage. The enduring question in public life, ultimately, is how to define an "enlightened" citizenry and who defines it in what particular context.

Notes

1. Similar government programs were observed in Taiwan under the Japanese colonial administration around the same time (Wang 2003).
2. http://30plus.30.com.tw/article-content_136.html. Accessed March 25 2018.

3. Taiwan Railways has always permitted eating and drinking in train cars. The reason frequently cited for this permission is the extensive distance covered by many of the railway's inter-city or inter-regional routes and the resulting long hours that passengers have to stay on board, which makes eating and drinking an inevitability. This is said to be in contrast to MRT rides which tend to be short and fast, thus rendering the ban on eating and drinking tolerable.
4. The comments were drawn from several online chat rooms, such as "Why can't we drink water on the MRT – Mobile01 Discussion Group" (<http://mowwww.mobile01.com/print.php?f=37&t+1093360&p=14>), "Kingdom Katino's Archiver" (<http://ck101.com/archiver/tid-1484871.html>), and "Legislator Cheng Ru-feng – YouCute Blog, Protest messages" (<http://www.youcute.com/tw/rufeng/index.aspx?act=article&aid=113339123>).
5. The Community of Metros (COMET, formerly Nova/CoMET) is a multinational consortium of metro systems focusing on international benchmarking, facilitated by the Transport Strategy Centre (TSC) at Imperial College London. At the time of this writing, it consists of 42 metro systems in 39 cities around the world.
6. <https://www-ws.gov.taipei/001/Upload/405/relfile/18288/7605/033b23b1-0c33-46de-82de-6940d195123d.pdf>
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bwBuSmwsaY&t=6s>
8. <https://www.insider.com/taipei-metro-vs-america-2019-1>
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhRukygc4Uk>
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSxrdY0NPFU&t=79s>
11. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_6HNc5CaxY
12. 2016. "Let's rectify 'Seats of Universal Love' to 'Priority Seat'." *Central Daily*, September 25. <http://www.cdnews.com.tw/touch/detail.jsp?coluid=110&kindid=0&docid=103855595>
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14. 2016. "I have a hidden need: A discussion on the seat-yielding culture." *Apple Daily*, August 26. <https://tw.appledaily.com/new/realtime/20160826/936433/>
15. The *iprefer* 2014 Summer Intern Project. Accessed March 21 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOkfw3iYJd4>

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Figure 1: Inside a Taipei MRT Station (source: the author)

Figure 2: “No Eating/Drinking” Sign inside an MRT car (source: the author)

Figure 3: Digital Billboard inside a Taipei MRT Station (source: the author)

Figure 4: The Taipei MRT Priority Seats (source: the Author)

Figure 5: The MRT Heart (New) Culture Movement is up and running! (Source: TRTC)

The poster features a yellow background with a pattern of stylized human figures. At the top left, there is a logo with a blue train and the text '捷運' (MRT) and '文化運動' (Culture Movement). To the right, the main title '正式起跑囉!' (Officially starting!) is written in large, bold, orange characters. Below this, the text '台北捷運公司' (Taipei Mass Rapid Transit Company) and '友聯產物保險公司' (Youlian Property Insurance Company) are listed, followed by the invitation '熱情邀請全民一同來參加!' (Warmly inviting everyone to join!).

In the center, a red dashed box contains the '捷運♥宣言' (MRT Heart Declaration). The text inside reads: '我（請內心默念自己名字）為了展現良好國民的形象，今天開始搭乘捷運我要確實遵守各項規範，在捷運站內/車廂內絕不飲食或嚼食口香糖，看見老弱婦孺、真心障礙人士要禮讓博愛座或電梯，搭電扶梯時要緊握扶手且站穩踏階，愛護自己，關懷別人。' (I (please silently think of my name) in order to show the image of a good citizen, from today when I start taking the MRT, I will definitely follow all regulations. I will not eat or chew gum inside the MRT station/carriage. When I see elderly, weak, women, children, or people with physical disabilities, I will give up my博爱座 (博爱座) or elevator. When I take the escalator, I will hold the handrail firmly and stand/stay on the steps. I will love myself and care for others.)' The declaration is signed '宣誓人：王○○' (Sworn by: Wang ○○○).

Below the declaration, the text '台北捷運公司「捷運心文化運動」特別推出一系列活潑有趣的活動，詳細內容有：' (The Taipei Mass Rapid Transit Company's 'MRT Heart Culture Movement' has specially launched a series of lively and interesting activities. Detailed content includes:)

捷運蒐查隊 95年10月21日至95年12月1日

請持捷運車票，於出站前至詢問處索取限量2D磁鐵及遊戲卡，完成小遊戲並全部答對者還可參加抽獎！每週推出一款限量2D磁鐵！快來搶先收集。

網路挑戰賽 95年11月1日至95年11月19日

尋找捷運高手，快上網參加「捷運標誌連連看」網路挑戰賽，闖關成功者將有機會獲得大獎，讓您瘋狂挑戰玩不停！

At the bottom, there are two red buttons with white text. The left button says '捷運蒐查隊' (MRT Treasure Hunt Team) and '我想知道詳細活動內容' (I want to know the detailed activity content). The right button says '網路挑戰賽' (Online Challenge) and '我要挑戰!' (I want to challenge!).