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Place-Making, Mobility, and Identity: The Politics and Poetics of Urban Mass Rapid Systems in Taiwan

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This chapter argues that a mass rapid transit system – as a component of urban infrastructure traversing a particular locality – and the meanings and interpretations that it helps to engender are mutually interdependent. I will address this issue through an ethnographic inquiry into the construction of the Kaohsiung Mass Rapid Transit System (hereafter, Kaohsiung MRT). Kaohsiung is located in southern Taiwan and is the country’s second largest city, its hub of heavy industry, and a world-class port. Not long after the groundbreaking ceremony of the Kaohsiung MRT in 2001, a telling story circulated in Kaohsiung City. According to the story, an old man stood by a Kaohsiung MRT construction site, looking over the fences with a solemn look on his face. People wondered why he bore such sadness. "Is it because the construction is blocking the city's traffic?" they asked. The old man answered, "oh no, how can I grieve over such a wonderful event? I came to pay homage to the huge construction machines. It has been many years since I last saw them in our city.” The fact that this story was part of the Kaohsiung City government’s campaign to muster popular support for the Kaohsiung MRT did not make it less powerful.

Although apocryphal, this story effectively captured the deep sentiment among Kaohsiung City residents surrounding the project, underlain by a sense of injustice that their city had not seen major public investment since the Ten Major Construction Projects in the early 1970s. This general sentiment was best captured in the words of Mr. Hsu, the person who brought my attention to this story. A civil servant in his 40s and a native of Kaohsiung, Mr. Hsu laughed at the contrived nature of the story. Yet, he was also zealous about the importance of an MRT to his city. He did not care how and why the MRT project came to be in Kaohsiung. "It might very well be the result of political calculation," he said,
But so what? Kaohsiung has always been ready for big tasks. We have a well-educated population who are highly motivated, but who in the past had to seek [professional, high-skilled] jobs elsewhere because they couldn’t find suitable jobs in Kaohsiung. The question is how we can create an environment – an infrastructure – to embrace their talents. What we need are opportunities and adequate resources. Now we've finally got the [government’s] recognition. This will be our best chance.

But others are more skeptical. Around the same time, I had a conversation in Taipei (the capital and financial center of Taiwan, located in the north) with a transportation engineer who was involved in the planning of several MRT projects, including the Kaohsiung MRT in the late 1980s. Having just returned from a Kaohsiung MRT panel discussion in Kaohsiung, she commented:

Nobody took it seriously when we were commissioned to do the planning. None of us thought this was a feasible project. We knew there wouldn't be enough passengers to make the system financially viable. A light rail would satisfy the need of Kaohsiung City – or they could simply put two thousand more buses on the streets of Kaohsiung if they really care about public transportation. Even today, when the [Kaohsiung MRT] construction is well underway, I still can't believe that they are doing it. They know it's not going to work. This cannot be real.

She is not alone in her skepticism. The potential for Kaohsiung MRT ridership has been called into question before, during, and after its construction by Taiwan’s planning circle, the media, and the general public (including Kaohsiung residents). Indeed, the number of Kaohsiung MRT passengers upon its grand opening fell far short of previous government estimates. Original
estimates projected a daily ridership of 450,000 by 2010 (KRTC 2007), but by the end of May 2014, only 165,000 passengers rode the Kaohsiung MRT each day (KRTC 2014). Perhaps more revealing than the number of daily passengers, however, is the phenomenon that more people travel on the Kaohsiung MRT on weekends and holidays than on weekdays. A survey conducted by the Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corporation (KRTC, the private company in charge of the building and day-to-day operation of the Kaohsiung MRT) in 2009 indicated that only 7% of respondents utilized public transportation (including buses and the Kaohsiung MRT), while roughly 65% used a motorcycle, and close to 20% a private automobile, as their primary means of transportation (see Table 8.1 for acronyms). In addition, 25% of the Kaohsiung MRT users surveyed happened to be visitors from out of town, indicating the actual percentage of local residents to use the Kaohsiung MRT regularly is likely lower than 7%. In short, Kaohsiung MRT is less a means of daily commuting than of leisure and entertainment (Chen 1996; Wang and Hsiao 1996).

This chapter takes its departure from the discrepancy between the enthusiasm for the coming of the Kaohsiung MRT and its underutilization, and examines the circumstances under which this discrepancy was produced. Specifically, I ask how mobility was discursively constructed and represented (cf. Cresswell 2010) leading to the completion of the Kaohsiung MRT, and what we can learn about the materiality and spatiality of mobility, using the Kaohsiung MRT as a case study. I draw my inspiration from Sheller and Urry (2006), who assert that there is no increase in mobility without extensive systems of immobility, because “all mobilities entail specific and often highly embedded immobile infrastructure” (p. 210). As such, “[m]obility is always located and materialized, and occurs through mobilizations of locality and rearrangements of the materiality of places” (ibid.); it is “a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship”
(ibid. p. 211). I seek here to extend Sheller and Urry’s point of the concurrent existence of mobility and immobile infrastructure through an emphasis on the notion of locality. What matters metaphysically is not simply that mobility is conditioned by the presence of located infrastructure, but also where the infrastructure is located. For example, to build a public transit system in a small rural area or major urban area could mean different things; or to build a mass transit system in two cities comparable in size and economic activity might entail very different connotations. That the Kaohsiung MRT is an urban infrastructure traversing a particular metropolitan area is reflexive to the meanings and implications of mobility that it has facilitated to shape and generate.

Thus, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it addresses the question of what kind of mobility has been envisioned as enabled by urban mass transit systems in the case of the Kaohsiung MRT, arguing that its significance derives from the fact it was conceived as more than a public transit system. From the beginning, the Kaohsiung City government has been capitalizing on the novel image of urban mass transit system to craft a vision of prosperity, centered on the Kaohsiung MRT. Since the early 2000s local government has implemented a series of urban renewal projects to create a better living environment and transform the city into an attractive tourist and investment destination, reviving Kaohsiung’s deindustrialized city economy (Lin 2006), reflecting place-making trends observed elsewhere (Chang 2000; Harvey 1989; Smart and Smart 2003; Steven and Paddison 2005; Yeoh 2005). In a metaphorical sense, therefore, the Kaohsiung MRT has been imagined as a vehicle of not only physical movement but of change, breaking away, and becoming. In other words, the Kaohsiung MRT enabled not only the possibility of flow for the city population, but also the flow of the city into a different and brighter future.
Because the built environment of any given city could always be altered without the construction of a mass transit system, one might ask: What is distinctive about mass transit systems in this context? Thus the second purpose of this chapter is to highlight the significance of spatiality in the understanding of mobility, approaching the ‘why mass transit’ question in two different but interrelated ways. To build a mass transit system involves a massive scale of creative destruction of urban space such as city streets, presenting an obvious and convenient opportunity to carry out other renovations towards global competitiveness. Given the substantial amount of money needed for such projects, however, the question of acquiring the financial resources for construction is a significant one. Many major cities in the world (especially those in the Asian Pacific region) have made major investments in urban infrastructure like public transportation (Lo and Marcotullio 2000; Olds 2002), yet many of these megaprojects have also failed to fully deliver anticipated benefits. To explain the disparity between the continued popularity of urban megaprojects and the unfulfilled promises, Siemiatycki (2005, 2006) postulates that we should take into account not only the tangible gains (such as global economic competitiveness) but also intangible benefits of these projects. Beyond their functionality, it is perhaps spatially, temporally, and culturally rooted symbols, meanings, mythologies, and imageries that generate the widespread political and public support needed for urban megaproject investment (Richmond 2005).

Accordingly, public discourses about the Kaohsiung MRT touch upon a set of emotionally provocative, yet politically potent, questions about citizens’ rights writ large in the language of national identity. The quotidian presence of the Kaohsiung MRT embodies Taiwan’s historical-spatial inequality, which is both a product of and conducive to the national geopolitics.
In this sense, the final product of an urban megaproject is no longer simply urban mega-infrastructure, but it represents something more or something else altogether.

To understand the values and meanings associated with the Kaohsiung MRT, this chapter explores four related issues. I start with “From North to South: The Moral Geography of Taiwan,” presenting Kaohsiung City’s geopolitical-economic and spatial-regional context, essential for comprehending popular support for the Kaohsiung MRT and political pressure for its funding. It highlights the salience of locality – and locatedness – in understanding mobility, through a case in which huge funding allocated for its construction was perceived as a belated step towards regional equality in Taiwan, and as spearhead for the transformation of Kaohsiung to excel on the world stage. The next two sections, “Taipei MRT as a Reference Point” and “Envisioning the Kaohsiung MRT,” further address the extended role of mass rapid transit systems beyond the function of public transportation. While the “art of being global” (Roy and Ong 2011) is always a process of modeling and/or interreferencing, the Taipei MRT itself provided a major (and hugely expensive) reference and prime target against which the popular discourse in support of the Kaohsiung MRT was formulated. Looking at how the Taipei MRT changed the people and city is a conduit to understanding different meanings and popular imageries explored in “Envisioning the Kaohsiung MRT,” which discusses the various urban renewal projects carried out by city government in conjunction with MRT construction, representing an official vision of – and practice about – the potential of mass transit systems and, by extension, the future of Kaohsiung City itself. That the Kaohsiung MRT is an urban transportation infrastructure embedded in a particular locale and, correspondingly, a specific web of sociocultural and political-economic dynamics is integral to the meaning of mobility that it has helped to engender. The last and concluding section ties together this chapter and the larger
theme of this collected volume, in which Prytherch and Cidell (this volume) call for cross-fertilization of transportation geography and mobilities studies by proposing a new urban geography of networked flow with a new focus on transportation. The chapter reflects on the politics and poetics of the Kaohsiung MRT as a locale “whose form, function, and meaning are not self-contained but woven with the networked social organization of flow” (this volume, p. 45).

This chapter is derived from nearly a decade of ethnographic fieldwork coinciding with the construction of the Kaohsiung MRT (2001-2008), including archival research, formal interviews, and participant observation/informal conversations, from 2001 to 2009. Transportation geography has traditionally relied on spatial analysis and behavioral science methods, especially when studying the impact and effect of transit systems. To approach the meanings and imaginaries associated with transit and urban (re)development, I offer ethnographic research methods as a more appropriate alternative for the realm of imagination, which is itself a realm of indeterminacy (Larkin 2013; Sneath et al. 2009). Ethnographic research, with its attention to specificities of time and space and its intention to give thick description to social and cultural life, is therefore crucial for exploring the processes of imagination and the possibilities of imagining enabled by these processes.

**From North to South: The moral geography of Taiwan**

To analyze urban transportation as ‘a place of flow,’ one must understand the interdependence of an urban system with the meanings and implications of mobility it helps to generate and shape. For the Kaohsiung MRT, that means accounting for the political-economic context – including (factual and perceived) South-North regional disparities – from which the project emerged.
Interviews can manifest such contexts, in which words exchanged embody not only affective expression but also certain political potency.

One year after the grand opening of the Kaohsiung MRT, in 2009, I interviewed two young coworkers in their 20s about their experiences with the Kaohsiung MRT. One had lived most of his life in Taipei and only recently relocated to Kaohsiung for a job; the other was a Kaohsiung native who had lived in the city for all her life, except for the years away in college. The Kaohsiung native said she was in high school when the construction of the Kaohsiung MRT was announced. “How did you feel then? Were you excited?” I asked. She tilted her head slightly, thought for a few seconds, and said, “not really. We didn’t pay much attention. [It’s not like] the subways were leading to anywhere.” There was no stop planned near where she lived or where she went to school at the time, but since then, she added, she and her family had consciously moved to a new residence close to the Kaohsiung MRT. However, even though her current company was located at the end of one of the lines, she did not take the Kaohsiung MRT but continued to ride her motorcycle to work. As a matter of fact, she hardly ever used the system except for the few weekends when she went shopping at Kaohsiung’s largest department store.

Her words seemed to trigger some strong feelings that her coworker from Taipei had held for a while, who quickly said,

I have never quite forgiven… [“You do mean ‘forgiven’? Not just ‘understood’?,” I teased him half jokingly.] Yeah, I have never quite forgiven [laugh], given the size of its population, Kaohsiung had to build a heavy-capacity mass transit system but not [for
example] a medium-capacity light-rail system, even though it costs much less to build a light-rail. Besides, one could enjoy the scenery along the way while riding a light-rail.

“Maybe because there is nothing [for the passengers] to look at on the ground… I know a light-rail loop system has been planned to connect with the existing Kaohsiung MRT lines,” his Kaohsiung-native coworker felt obliged to respond. She continued: “Mass transits are important. It’s like… I don’t have a car. Now we have moved to close to the MRT, I can take it to go around. It’s convenient.” “CONVENIENT? When do you ever take the MRT?,” her coworker could not help but cut in, “I don’t understand. I have heard so many times [from Kaohsiung residents] that they like the MRT because it’s convenient. But only once in a blue moon they will ride it. What’s the point [of having an MRT] then?” “S-E-C-U-R-I-T-Y! Just in case you need to use it,” said his Kaohsiung-native coworker.

This young woman described the Kaohsiung MRT project “like the coming of a dream” that people in Kaohsiung had been waiting to happen, although she never clearly articulated the detail of the dream. If the exchange of words between her and her coworker bears any larger significance, it is the seeming callousness and persistent questioning from people in Taipei – in this case, her coworker – under which people in Kaohsiung feel they are unduly subjected. The indignant and defiant sentiment voiced in the young woman’s words, though expressed jokingly, resonates with that of Mr. Hsu, who was introduced in the beginning of this chapter.

At the heart of such comments is a discourse about the Taiwan government’s developmental policy, rooted in the country’s history and political-economic context. Critiques of perceived unequal resource distribution and regional disparity between Southern Taiwan/Kaohsiung and
Northern Taiwan/Taipei surfaced after the political democratization since the late 1980s and were widely circulated among people in Southern Taiwan, but have a deeper history. The development of Kaohsiung as a modern city began in the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945), during which Taiwan was perceived as a colony of high economic and military value in the expanding Japanese empire. In the empire’s blueprint, Kaohsiung was not only to be a fishing and commercial port but also an important military base for the Japanese Imperial Army’s southward advancement, especially after the onset of the Pacific War in 1941. To accomplish this, the Japanese worked out detailed urban plans to transform Kaohsiung into a modern city. They built the Kaohsiung harbor, constructed roads and railways to connect Kaohsiung with the surrounding regions and the rest of the Taiwan Island, set up modern amenities of electricity and running water, and established the gridiron of streets. By the early 1930s, the Japanese also built up industrial infrastructure, including steel plants and oil refineries.

These construction efforts greatly influenced Kaohsiung’s development, state policy overall, and local perceptions. On the one hand, they indicated the importance of Kaohsiung in Taiwan’s modern economic history; on the other hand, they also underlined the colonial state’s power in shaping natural environments and livelihoods in Kaohsiung. This trend continued after World War II, when the defeated Japanese turned over Taiwan to the victorious China, at the time represented by Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT). Equipped with the port facilities and other infrastructure from the Japanese period, Kaohsiung quickly developed after World War II into a manufacturing center important to Taiwan’s rapid industrialization. Under Taiwan’s industrial policy at the time, Kaohsiung became a base of container logistic centers, steel plants, shipyards, shipbreaking, scrap metal, cement (both mining and processing), and petrochemical industries (Hsu and Cheng 2002), most of which were highly polluting and
have had great impact on the health of metropolitan Kaohsiung residents (Lü 2009). Furthermore, due to Taiwan's tax structure, the profits earned by these companies were taxed by the local government relative to where the companies' headquarters were located (namely, Taipei), but not by the local government of where the production actually took place (i.e., Kaohsiung). Consequently, it was the Taipei City government and the residents of Taipei who enjoyed the fruits of these industrial endeavors, while Kaohsiung City government and residents bore the consequences of environmental and health degradation, and lack of city funds for public investment and social development. Over time, deeply seared in the mind of Kaohsiung City residents was the sentiment that they were treated as secondary citizens and their welfare was overlooked by the central government (Lee 2007a).

Designated with different functions in Taiwan’s post-WWII economic development (Hsu and Cheng 2002), Taipei and Kaohsiung were thus affected differently by Taiwan’s recent economic restructuring (Lee 2004). On the one hand, the role of Taipei as Taiwan’s command and coordination center has been reinforced. Dubbed by Hsu (2005) as an “interface” city, after the 1980s Taipei emerged to be a node in the global flow of capital, knowledge, and technology connecting high-tech industries in the Taipei-Hsinchu corridor, the technology hub in Silicon Valley, and high-tech production in Shanghai (aided by foreign direct investment from Taiwan). Taipei is also the site of the corporate headquarters and the market center for the majority of Taiwan’s leading companies. On the other hand, the manufacturing-based economy of Kaohsiung has been hard hit due to capital outflow and the consequent deindustrialization. The unemployment rate of Kaohsiung is among the highest in the country. What’s more, as capital city, Taipei was said to have been the jewel of the central government and given a lion’s share of resources. The new ‘global’ status of Taipei has only reinforced the sense of unfairness in
resource distribution, which has been appropriated by opposition party politicians to marshal electoral support.

These discourses have framed the planning of Kaohsiung MRT over the past 20 years, as it has been transformed from transportation plan on paper to a transit infrastructure under construction. First proposed in the late 1970s, Kaohsiung MRT remained an idea until 1989, when the Taiwan government finally made the decision to build it, and only in the early 1990s were routes determined. Up to this time, the KMT was still the ruling party, and the Kaohsiung City mayor was an appointee of the central government (the first direct mayoral election took place in 1994 after the city was granted status of special municipality in 1979). The actual construction of the Kaohsiung MRT finally materialized in 2001, after Chen Shui-bian, the then opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, won the presidential election, running on a Taiwan-centered, South-based (as opposed to a China-friendly, Taipei-focused) campaign, and when Kaohsiung City mayor Hsieh Chang-ting was a fellow DPP member. The announcement of the Kaohsiung MRT construction also came at a time when the Taipei MRT was just completed and had proven to be hugely popular among metropolitan Taipei residents. The Kaohsiung MRT, therefore, served as a potent political symbol that indicated the determination of the DPP-led government to balance the (perceived and factual) South-North disparity.

**Taipei MRT as a reference point**

To comprehend why the Kaohsiung MRT, among other possible public works projects, played such a significant role in the DPP’s political discourse, one has to look at the Taipei MRT as a reference. The Taipei MRT’s construction began in 1988, and its primary network was completed in 2000. The vast funding provided by Taiwan’s central government to bankroll the
Taipei MRT construction (NT$441.7 billion [US$13.4 billion] in total) was only one of the factors, albeit a crucial one. Equally – if not more – important was the observation of how the Taipei MRT functioned as not only a highly effective transportation system but also a catalyst in transforming the urban culture and civic identity of Taipei City (Lee and Tung 2010).

Originally intended by government officials and planning professionals as a solution to Taipei’s worsening traffic problems, the Taipei MRT quickly took on other meanings. Upon the grand opening of the Taipei MRT, the Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation (TRTC), the city agency in charge of the daily operations, waged a zealous public campaign to educate passengers about ‘proper’ rider behavior. Signs were erected at the top and foot of nearly every escalator inside Taipei MRT stations to remind passengers they should stand on the right-hand side to let others in a rush pass by. Lines were drawn on the platform so that people could stand in line while waiting, ensuring passengers would not push or scramble, but get on the train in an orderly manner. To keep the environment clean, passengers were forbidden to eat, drink, or chew gum inside the stations or in the carriages; anyone who violates these regulations is fined. The Taipei MRT also hired an army of middle-aged female workers to sweep the floor, wipe the walls, and dust every surface – high and low – inside Taipei MRT stations. These women’s hard work has kept the stations dirt free and spotless since the very beginning. As a result, the stations are exceptionally clean; there is simply no littering. On the whole, passengers observe a behavioral code of order that one does not normally see anywhere in Taiwan outside mass transit systems, although we have begun to see these influences extend beyond the space of the Taipei MRT.

While not the first civility campaign attempted by the Taipei City government, it was the first supported and followed by most citizens (Lee 2007b).
Step by step, a collective identity began to take shape among Taipei residents based on their shared experience as MRT riders. The Taipei MRT is decidedly punctual, so morning commuters are no longer compelled to leave home half an hour earlier. Soon after opening, 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, because they no longer needed to race frantically to catch a bus. Passengers nowadays are also more willing to yield their seats to the needy or the elderly, for their trips are made short and pleasant by the efficiency of the Taipei MRT, even if they have to stand. This is a great departure from riding Taiwan commuter railway trains in previous decades, when people would not hesitate to climb through the windows of a train so that they could be quick enough to get a seat. Ultimately, the Taipei MRT not only changed the habits of its passengers but also helped to initiate a new model for – and image of – metropolitan Taipei residents. People in Taipei seemed to pay greater attention to their own city and appraise it (and themselves) in a larger, global framework.

The novelty of the Taipei MRT also quickly turned the mass transit system into a tourist attraction. In the first few years after its opening, on weekends even the most casual observers could easily spot big tour buses unloading travelers on the roadside outside Tamsui Station, a charming harbor town and the final destination of one of the Taipei MRT’s most scenic lines. These out-of-towners then joined the stream of crowds who traveled via the Taipei MRT from the surrounding metropolitan region for a day’s excursion. The Muzha Line, the shortest among the routes operating between downtown and the zoo, also became a part of the standard tour package for schools in central and southern Taiwan. As a matter of fact, the son of Mr. Hsu, who was introduced in the opening story of this chapter, was the first in his family to ride the Taipei
MRT on his elementary school graduation trip. Mrs. Hsu, who had been listening to my conversation with her husband, chided in and told me: “The kids liked it. It was a new experience. My son enjoyed it, though he said the car quivered at times.” The young boy’s joy was obviously communicable, and the parents shared the excitement created by the novel technology. The changes in the urban life of Taipei observed upon the grand opening of the Taipei MRT had also served as a reference for their high anticipation for the impact of the Kaohsiung MRT.

In addition to such (extratransportation) implications, the Taipei MRT is first and foremost a public transit system for Greater Taipei residents, serving close to 2 million passengers (in a metropolitan area of 7 million people) on a daily basis (TRTC 2014). 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 overall transformation in Taipei’s civic culture are all part and parcel of the structure of feeling engendered by the Taipei MRT as a transportation technology (cf. Thrift 1994, in Cresswell 2006, p. 46).

Yet, however contradictory this might sound, it is also true that the transportation function did not dominate the public discussion about MRTs in Kaohsiung or elsewhere in Taiwan. Most out of town visitors as tourists in Taipei did not take the Taipei MRT with commuters during rush hours on a weekday; neither did they come to ride the Taipei MRT to experience its efficiency and advantage as a means of public transportation. They did not become interested because they wanted to learn how a mass transit system could help to solve the traffic problems of a congested city. Rather, novelty aside, it was the amalgam of the sleek and orderly image of the Taipei MRT,
the busy commercial activities, the bustling urban life, Taipei as Taiwan’s primary and globalizing city, and the seeming sense of self-confidence – or arrogance – among Taipei citizens that was leaving a lasting impression in the minds of out of town visitors. In sum, MRTs in general – and the Taipei MRT in particular – became the personification of progress and were marveled at in themselves as objects of admiration, fascination, and desire. Their attraction lay in the promise that they were carrying a better future (cf. Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000, p. 129).

**Envisioning the Kaohsiung MRT**

However, can this structure of feeling be replicated – or another kind of structure of feeling generated – with the MRT technology but without the habitual practice of using the MRT? The Taipei MRT has become a reference for urban development in Taiwan, but can its lessons be extended? To answer my own questions, the current section addresses how MRT was envisaged in the context of Kaohsiung City. Specifically, I focus on the official (re)presentations by the city government and transit agencies (KRTC) behind the Kaohsiung MRT and urban policies.

The government’s decision to build the Kaohsiung MRT engendered deep skepticism among Taiwanese planning professionals, especially those based in Taipei, which they suspected was based on political calculation to attract the support of southern voters. The feeling of lack of urgency was also echoed by both the media and residents in Kaohsiung, who saw their city as having broader streets, less traffic, and more parking space than Taipei. Many of them, like the planning experts in Taipei, also questioned whether there would be enough passengers.

According to my interview with Chou Li-liang, a former MTBU director-general whose term (1998–2004) covered the inceptive and defining period of the Kaohsiung MRT construction in the early 2000s, there was a discrepancy of 2 million people between the population of Taipei
City during the day and at night. That is, 2 million people commuted from neighboring towns and cities to work or school in Taipei on a daily basis, and, as such, the need for public transportation was pressing. Prior to the construction of the Taipei MRT, a well-developed bus system was already in place to serve Taipei’s commuters. In comparison, there were approximately 1.5 million people in metropolitan Kaohsiung both during the day and at night. The number of people who commuted to Kaohsiung City from the surrounding areas was small. Moreover, only a tiny fraction of commuters in Kaohsiung – mainly high school students who possessed no better means – used the city’s underdeveloped, inadequate bus system. The majority of Kaohsiung City residents relied on personal motorcycles as their primary means of transportation. Similarly, time and again I was told during the course of my research that there were only two routes planned for the Kaohsiung MRT, which, together, would cover the downtown area already served by most of the existing bus lines. As such, what good could the Kaohsiung MRT do for the commuters in the city? Even the executive secretary at the Kaohsiung City government spokesperson’s office confessed with some embarrassment that he would continue to ride a motorcycle to work, after he earnestly informed me of the wonderful things that the Kaohsiung MRT would bring to his city.

Former MTBU Director-General Chou emphasized to me that the Kaohsiung MRT “is not about the present but about the future.” Using a metaphor from traditional Chinese medicine, he referred to Conception and Governor, two of the vessels in the human body. It is said that a martial arts master will become invincible if s/he has these two vessels open to allow unimpeded movement of chi in the body.
Transportation is basic infrastructure; it is like the Conception and Governor vessels [ren
du er mai]. If you have these two vessels open, you will have all kinds of possibilities.

[The Kaohsiung MRT] is to give Kaohsiung such a chance.

By evoking this metaphor, Director-General Chou conjured up a popular cultural imaginary
parallel to the MRT as a medium of flow. Similarly, Mr. Cheng, the chief secretary under Chou
at the MTBU, explained how much of a struggle it was to reconcile with himself that the
Kaohsiung MRT was a necessary project, in spite of the concern over its future ridership. “No
city could have a successful mass rapid transit system without a well-established, widely-utilized
bus system,” he said. At the end, he reckoned:

This is an age of intercity competition. Have you ever seen a service-based city that
doesn’t have a mass transit system? Kaohsiung might still not have a chance [in the
current stage of global competition] with the MRT system. But we will definitely not
make it without an MRT.

Opportunity for change or chance for transcendence was very much a part of the official
discourse regarding the Kaohsiung MRT. If the indignation derived from regional disparity
provided the Kaohsiung City government the moral justification to obtain funding for the
construction of a mass transit system (NT$181.3 billion [US$5.46 billion] in total), the
transformative effect that an MRT could have on city culture and image (as observed in Taipei)
has served as an inspiration for practice. One difference between Taipei and Kaohsiung, however,
was the level of urgency of the need for alternative urban transportation plans. Accordingly, as
opposed to the Taipei MRT that was ‘demand driven,’ the Kaohsiung MRT was promoted as a
‘supply-oriented’ system in the Kaohsiung City government’s public campaign. Furthermore, the Kaohsiung MRT was taken by both the city government and urban planners and transportation experts to be a key to the urban renewal and economic revival of the city. The Kaohsiung MRT was expected to not only facilitate the flow of people but also of goods and capital, and art and culture.

To put this expectation into practice, local transit agencies commissioned several world-renowned architects and artists to design, or incorporate their works into the structure of, a handful of “Special Stations” (MTBU 2009). Among these Special Stations, the most prominent is likely the Formosa Boulevard Station, which is located at the traffic circle of the busy intersection of Chung-shan Road and Chung-cheng Road (the two main boulevards in Kaohsiung), wherein the two MRT lines meet. The intersection is also where the Formosa Incident, a watershed event in Taiwan’s struggle for political democratization, happened in 1978. Installed in the ceiling of the grand concourse of the Formosa Boulevard Station is The Dome of Light, the largest single piece of glasswork in the world designed by Italian artist Narcissus Quagliata (Figure 8.1). The station structure above the ground, named Praying, is the work of Japanese architect Shin Takamatsu, comprised of four station exits of identical shape made of glass panels standing at the four corners of the intersection. Jointly, they take the shape of four hands coming together to pray. Both of these works address the historical event of Formosa Incident with contemporary artistic interpretations. Simultaneously, the MTBU spearheaded a “Formosa Boulevard” project, which involved transforming a section of Chung-shan Road adjacent to the Kaohsiung MRT into a tree-lined boulevard with expanded pedestrian sidewalks wide enough to accommodate open-air cafes and street art performances – that is, “like Champs-Élysées” (MTBU 2006; Nan Zhu-jiao 2003). An earlier proposal for the Formosa
Boulevard project also called for mobile bookstalls on the sidewalks, “so that there will be not only fragrance of flowers [from the trees] and coffee but also fragrance of books,” Mr. Cheng, the aforementioned MTBU chief secretary, explained to me by invoking a popular expression in the Chinese language. Unfortunately, the idea of mobile bookstalls was dismissed due to the lack of regulatory laws. “Besides, who’s going to enjoy browsing books while standing under [Kaohsiung’s tropical] scorching sun?” Cheng continued, “But just imagine! What if it weren’t open-air bookstalls but enclosed book kiosks with air conditioning? And what about encasing the metal frameworks of these kiosks with glass, like this restaurant in Rome?” Cheng showed me some photos of this restaurant that he took on one of his official trips to Europe and said:

We could have five of these book kiosks on each side [of Formosa Boulevard]. Just imagine! When the light comes up at night inside these book kiosks, and when the light shines through the glass, these kiosks will be transformed into luminous pearls. With a string of gleaming gems along Formosa Boulevard, what a gorgeous picture that would be!

The idea of mobile bookstalls or book kiosks was never realized. However, in conjunction with the MTBU endeavor in station architectural design, the Kaohsiung City government has been pursuing a series of urban renovation projects in recent years. These include renovating the harbor into a pedestrian-friendly waterfront and converting vacant port facilities into exhibition spaces and art studios, in addition to greening and widening the sidewalks, as well as creating parks near the Kaohsiung MRT (Lin 2006). More specifically, Ai River (literally ‘Love River’), which flows through the heart of Kaohsiung and was once considered by many as the soul of the city but turned into a huge open sewer over the past few decades as a result of the wastewater
dumped by factories and private households, was cleaned up. Concomitant to the effort to clean the river was the endeavor to improve the landscape along the riverbanks. Today, sightseeing cruises sail along much of Ai River. One can also take a stroll along the riverside promenade, spend time at the Museum of History, listen to music at the Concert Hall and its plaza, watch a movie at the Municipal Film Archives, or simply sit down, have a cup of coffee, and “enjoy the exotic, romantic ambiance of Love River, day and night, as if sitting on the Seine riverbank in Paris” (Yeh 2004). Through these efforts the Kaohsiung City government is attempting to create a renewed civic identity, as well as to announce to the country – and to the world – that Kaohsiung is Taiwan’s southern capital, a better alternative to Taipei.

Over time, *The Dome of Light* has garnered huge popularity and become one of the most trendy photo locations for both local residents and out of town visitors; it has gradually grown into a landmark of Kaohsiung City. The KRTC has been providing guided as well as audio public art tours at the Formosa Boulevard Station. The company also sponsored photography competitions and musical concerts under *The Dome of Light*. The station concourse as an open space has also been utilized by different groups in the city for assorted purposes, such as a romantic wedding ceremony for 78 couples (Hsieh 2013). In 2012, the Formosa Boulevard Station was chosen by the BootsnAll travel website as the second most beautiful subway stop in the world.6 Both the KRTC and the MTBU publicly advertised this on their websites. In spite of the Kaohsiung MRT’s less than ideal volume of ridership, for both of these agencies, as well as city residents, this seemed to indicate a moment of vindication that their effort had not gone to waste but was slowly winning world recognition.

**Conclusion: Urban transportation as a place of flow**
What is distinctive about mass rapid transit systems? How do they inform us about transportation as a place of flow? This chapter takes on these queries by addressing a seemingly self-contradictory question: how and why an urban mass transit system can be considered as urgently needed while, in reality, infrequently used. An immediate answer to my own question is that technologies are unstable things (Larkin 2013). A mass rapid transit system is never just a piece of transportation technology. Rather, it is loaded with meanings, and these meanings are embedded in the political-economic context and cultural-ideological dynamics wherein the mobility is taking place. This brings to the fore that all mobility stories are essentially local stories, however much they are conceptually understood as technical issues or discursively constructed as global and/or universal phenomena. The material aspect involved in an act of movement, be it manifested in a corporal body or a piece of infrastructure – or both, such as in the case of urban mass transit systems – made the act inevitably a spatially grounded practice and experience. That the Kaohsiung MRT is a piece of urban infrastructure traversing a particular metropolitan area is reflexive to the meanings and implications of mobility that it has facilitated to generate and shape.

This chapter offers new insights to advance our understanding of urban transportation as a nexus of space and flow. First of all, let me go back to the question: What can a mass rapid transit system be other than a means of public transportation? In the current world of networked societies, urban mass transit as networked infrastructure takes on the function of linking not only local communities but also increasingly the local and the global, both physically and metaphorically. Although MRT systems and interurban competition have, up till now, been considered as largely separate phenomena in academic literature (McLellan and Collins 2014), the case of Kaohsiung shows that they are obviously closely connected in the minds of those in
charge of MRT planning and construction. Often counted in the worldwide circle of transportation practitioners are the 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, even though a direct causal relationship is yet to be openly established (McLellan and Collins 2014). What is highlighted in the Kaohsiung MRT is the growing significance of the notion of place-making as manifested in transportation infrastructure. That is, it is no longer just the function of mass transit systems as facilitators of movement but, rather, the physical presence of mass transit systems as sites of cultural and artistic exhibitions that is increasingly emphasized. But, of course, a ‘place’ of flow such as an MRT can become exhibitional precisely because it is a place of ‘flow’ wherein the large number of passengers and/or passersby could be turned into potential spectators and consumers.

However, why should a mass rapid transit system be the focus of place-making among other possible subjects? As there is no palpable exchange value in such an effort, the conviction in the transformative effect of mass transit systems has to be – at least partially – based on something symbolic that is not readily exchangeable but locally identifiable. In Taiwan, MRTs came to symbolize renewed civic cultural formation and (subsequently) economic revitalization against the background of Taiwan’s unequal regional development and the resulting differential positioning of these regions in the Asian Pacific economic ordering. Yet, these symbolisms were not merely products of active imagination. What we learned from the experience of Taiwan is that they were made real – or they could be realized – exactly because an urban mass transit system as a transportation venue is a space in which not only flows of goods and capital occur
but, through structured interactions and routinized behavior on a daily basis, where shared sociality and a collective identity are cultivated (such as in the case of Taipei). The meaning of mobility is thus embodied and spatialized.

This takes us to the third and last question: How might a municipality acquire the financial resources to pay for its infrastructural construction? While infrastructural development including mass public transportation is widely deemed necessary for economic vitality, not every city in the world that shares this inspiration can garner the resources to make it a reality. The way that the Kaohsiung MRT project was funded underscores for us that urban transit is a medium of spatial-political relations, the material condition of which plays a role in constituting and contesting the effectiveness of government. Through MRT a new means of anticipating the future emerged in Taiwan, not randomly, but as a result of its governance structure and the consequent regional disparity. The heightened expectation brought about by the MRT – and the concurrent indignation of being deprived of an MRT in one’s own city – thus became the basis for political redress that provided the moral justification for the construction of the Kaohsiung MRT.

Notes
1. For a listing of acronyms that appear in this chapter, see Table 8.1.
2. The Ten Major Construction Projects were national infrastructure projects embarked on by the Taiwan government in 1973. They involved massive government investment and had been considered as a major factor in bringing Taiwan out of an international recession and accelerating its economic and social development. Three of the Ten Projects were located in Kaohsiung: China Shipbuilding Corporation Shipyards, China Steel Corporation, and an oil
refinery of Chinese Petroleum Corporation (all of these three corporations were state-owned enterprises then).

3. All the interviews referred to in this article were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The English translations of the interview quotations used in this article are my own.

4. This covered the Taipei MRT’s primary network of six lines, with 79 stations and 76.8 kilometers in length.

5. This cost covered the construction of the current system, which comprises two lines with 36 stations covering a distance of 42.7 kilometers. Different from the Taipei MRT, whose construction was funded in entirety with public money, the Kaohsiung MRT was a BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) project with a public-private partnership. However, the government provided most (83.2%) of the funding, despite the fact that this was a BOT project.


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Wang Chibin (王啟彬), and Hsiao, Y. (蕭永秀) (1996) “Xinjiapo jieyun neng, women weisemo buneng? (新加坡能,我們為什麼不能? [If the Singapore MRT can, why can’t we?]),”
Yingjianzhixun (營建知訊), 166: 38-47.


Table 8.1 List of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KAOHSIUUNG MRT</td>
<td>Kaohsiung Mass Rapid Transit System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRTC</td>
<td>Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTBU</td>
<td>Kaohsiung City Mass Rapid Transit Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAIPEI MRT</td>
<td>Taipei Mass Rapid Transit System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRTC</td>
<td>Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>Nationalist Party [Kuomintang]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>Democratic Progressive Party</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 8.1 “The Dome of Light,” Kaohsiung MRT Formosa Boulevard Station.

Source: Perng-juh Peter Shyong (Dimension Endowment of Art in Taipei), with permission.