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How Subways and High Speed Railways Have Changed Taiwan: Transportation Technology, Urban Culture, and Social Life

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It is 7:20 on a Tuesday morning. Mr Yan starts from his residence in Shi-lin, one of the districts of Taipei City (the capital city and financial-cultural center of Taiwan, located in the north of the country), walking towards the closest Taipei Mass Rapid Transit (TMRT) station. As the executive director of a major cultural research and consulting firm based in Taipei, he has to be at the Municipal Building of Kaohsiung City (the second largest city and hub of heavy industries of Taiwan—and a world-class port—located in the south of the country) at 10:30 a.m. to meet with representatives from the city’s Bureau of Cultural Affairs about the projects his firm has been carrying out for Kaohsiung City. It will take less than 10 minutes to walk from where he lives to the TMRT station; that means he will be able to catch an MRT before 7:30. It will take roughly 20 minutes to travel from Shi-lin TMRT Station to the Taipei Main Station in downtown Taipei, from there he can leisurely purchase a ticket for the 8:00 a.m. High Speed Railway (HSR), and arrive in the HSR’s Zuoying Station in Kaohsiung before 9:40 a.m. Since he has plenty of time before his 10:30 appointment, from Zuoying Station Mr Yan has the option to take the newly minted Kaohsiung Mass Rapid Transit (KMRT) System to the station nearest to the Kaohsiung Municipal Building, and walk or take a cab from there to his final destination. This will save him some money, as opposed to taking a cab all the way from Zuoying to downtown Kaohsiung which will cost a few hundred Taiwanese dollars more (about US$8-10). He will probably take a cab directly from Zuoying, given that the KMRT currently comprises
only two lines and hence has a limited number of stops; it does not always get its passengers (close) to where they want to go.

Mr Yan’s appointment with the Kaohsiung City government officials ends around noon. After that he has planned a meeting with his Kaohsiung-based staff, which he thinks will last a few hours. He will then take the KMRT to catch the 4:06 or 4:30 HSR train, and be home or back to his office in Taipei by 6:30 p.m. Mr. Yan knows that he probably will have to make another trip to Kaohsiung towards the end of the week, either on Thursday or Friday; this has been his routine since his firm expanded its reach to southern Taiwan a few years ago. However, it does not seem to be an unbearable drudgery thanks to the MRT systems in Taipei and Kaohsiung and, in particular, the High Speed Railway that runs from Taipei to Kaohsiung or vice versa in only ninety minutes—or two hours if one takes one of the slower HSR trains that makes a few more stops in between these two cities. As a matter of fact, Mr Yan is coming to welcome the trips that he has to make. Amid his busy schedule and the many responsibilities that he has to juggle, the time that he spends on the HSR has become one of the rare moments that he can slow down, reflect and contemplate, or simply take a nap and recuperate.

The way that Mr Yan plans and implements his trips between Taipei and Kaohsiung would have been difficult, if not entirely impossible, just a few years ago. Before the inauguration of the HSR in January, 2007, ground travel between these two primary Taiwanese cities via public transportation relied largely on traditional railways—the fastest of which took four to four and half hours, but which only ran six times a day—or buses that could take from five to eight hours or even longer depending on the traffic conditions on the road. Certainly, one could always travel by air, which takes only an hour or so but costs roughly two thousand Taiwanese dollars (about US$60) —or two, three or more times as much as traditional railway or
bus fares—not to mention that the Kaohsiung airport is located at the southern end of this North-South, oblong-shaped city and thus quite distant from city center; it would take one a few extra hundred Taiwanese dollars to hire a cab from the airport into the downtown area. Accordingly, a trip between Taipei and Kaohsiung was oftentimes a major commitment. It was time-consuming and took at least half a day to travel one way, and was thus exhausting for the traveler. As a result, one frequently had to—or chose to—stay overnight or even longer in Taipei or Kaohsiung regardless of one’s purpose for traveling.

All of these hassles, however, seem to have been forgotten since the grand opening of the two MRTs and the HSR. The presence of these newly built public transit systems has greatly shortened the time of traveling for many Taiwanese and thus enhanced their mobility. The impact of these transportation systems, however, goes beyond this “time-space compression” effect (Harvey 1989a). They have transformed not only the sense of physical space among the Taiwanese, but also the way they look at themselves as well as their place and the place of Taiwan in the world around them. This paper explores the change in social life and the imagination in social life brought about by two of these systems, the Taipei MRT and the HSR, both of which have become the primary means of transportation and garnered a vast number of commuters and travelers in their respective areas. We leave out the Kaohsiung MRT from the current discussion, mainly because the entire KMRT system was only completed and launched in September, 2008; its full effect on Kaohsiung City is therefore yet to be seen.3

**Introducing the Taipei MRT**

The Taipei MRT is the first subway system ever built in Taiwan. The process leading to its completion was long and arduous, and sometimes tarnished the system’s image among the
Taiwanese. The idea of building a mass transit system in Taipei first appeared on the central government's agenda in the 1960s as a solution to the capital city's potential traffic congestion expected because of the city's fast growing population. Yet, the decision to build it was only made in the late 1980s, when traffic jams in Taipei became unbearable (Liu and Lü 1994: 9-12). There were many reasons for this delay. The scale of coordination required between different levels of government (e.g. central, municipal, and county) in order to complete an infrastructure as vast as the TMRT, as well as conflicts of interests that might emerge among government agencies, impeded the readiness of state officials to undertake the project (Yang 1989). The astronomical budget needed to build a mass transit system also scared away many policymakers until the government’s revenue greatly improved in the 1980s as a result of Taiwan’s successful export-oriented economy (Yang 1989: 66). The Executive Yuan finally gave its approval in May, 1986. Although the construction began in the late 1980s, it took nearly another 10 years before residents in metropolitan Taipei had their first experience with the TMRT. The first TMRT line was inaugurated in the summer of 1996; and the first phase of the TMRT construction was completed by the end of 1999.

Ironically, the Taiwanese economy also began to experience difficulties in the 1980s partly because of its own success. Because of its rapid growth, the economy was confronted with rising land and labor costs, and, during the 1980s, investment declined while the national savings rate remained high. Internationally, the huge trade surplus created great pressure for the appreciation of the Taiwanese dollar, which decreased the competitiveness of Taiwanese products and of Taiwanese production sites in the world market. In addition, growing concern over the environment forced some polluting industries to seek alternative locations outside the country. The need to find offshore production sites for these as well as other industries was
pressing. By the end of the 1980s, Taiwan had become a leading foreign direct investor in Asia. Many industrial producers had closed down their plants in Taiwan and relocated their production to China or Southeast Asia (Hsing 1998). Concomitantly, there was a major reorganization of industrial production in the country (Lee 2004). Taiwan began experiencing a soaring unemployment rate (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics [DBGAS] 2002) and a slowing of domestic investment. To boost economic growth as well as to regain the country's advantage in the global economy, the Taiwan government formulated an ambitious Six-Year National Development Plan (1991-1996) to transform Taiwan into an Asia-Pacific Regional Operations Center (Yeung 2000: 73-75), within which Taipei, the political and financial center in the north, was to be the operations and command center while Kaohsiung, a world-class port and hub of heavy industries in the south, would be the logistics center, following their respective roles in Taiwan’s geo-economy. The HSR stood at the center of this scheme for it was expected to considerably speed up the journey between these two cities, whereas the Taipei MRT was essential because it would help to reduce the time—thereby the economic cost—of daily commuting in Taipei, thus making the city more competitive.

Development of urban infrastructure, however, is as much a symbolic process as a material one (Harvey 1989a; Siemiatycki 2006; Zukin 1991: 179-216; Zukin 1995); and it is often a project of civil and social engineering (Holston 1989; Smart and Smart 2003: 275). Through a combination of designing and reconfiguring the city's landscape and implementing new laws and policies, infrastructure planners can seek to change residents' behavior, foster particular ideologies, or create new civic identities (Jenks 2000; Lemon 2000). Although there is not enough hard evidence to prove whether politicians, urban planners or engineers who initiated the TMRT project had in mind a master plan to create a new Taipei denizen, they indeed helped
to build a new image for Taipei when the Taiwan government decided to build the TMRT. The TMRT was not only an economic necessity; it would also be a showcase of Taiwan's modernity. Often cited in the official promotion literature was the modern and progressive image that the TMRT would be able to bring to Taipei City (Yang 1989: 108-109, 116). A White Paper published by the Taipei City Department of Transportation toward the end of the TMRT construction stated the department’s goal to build Taipei as “an internationalized city” with a “civilized transportation system” to welcome the arrival of the twenty-first century (Taipei City Department of Transportation [DOT] 2001). This is first and foremost exemplified by the signs and directions posted inside and around TMRT stations; they are in both Chinese and English, to serve Taiwanese as well as international passengers. Similarly, the TMRT maps and pamphlets that we collected over the course of our research are published in multiple languages including Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, German, Thai, and Vietnamese; in addition, we learned from the TMRT website that the company also printed these publications in French, Spanish, Indonesian, and Malaysian.¹ By the same token, the TMRT uses four languages to make subway stop announcements on the public speaker system inside the cars: Mandarin Chinese, English, Hokklo (Taiwanese) and Hakka (the two major ethnic languages in Taiwan).²

Furthermore, upon the grand opening of the TMRT, the Taipei City government waged an arduous public campaign to educate passengers about "proper" behavior while riding the TMRT (Lee 2007b). This included 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. Before long, however, the TMRT adopted a more heavy-handed approach. Signs were erected at the top and foot of nearly every escalator inside TMRT stations to remind passengers that they should
stand on the right-hand side, leaving the left-hand side for those who were in a rush to pass by. Lines were drawn on the platform so that people could stand in line while waiting for the TMRT; the lines ensured that passengers would not push or scramble but get on the train in an orderly manner. To keep the environment clean, passengers were—and still are—forbidden to eat or drink inside the stations or in the train cars; anyone who violates these regulations is fined. The TMRT also hired an army of middle-aged female workers to sweep the floor, wipe the walls, and dust every surface—high and low—inside TMRT stations; these women’s hard work has kept the stations dirt free and spotless since that very beginning. As a result, it is exceptionally clean inside TMRT stations; there is simply no littering inside the TMRT. Passengers observe a behavioral code of order and civility that one does not normally see anywhere in Taiwan outside the TMRT system, although we have begun to see these influences extend beyond the space of the TMRT. The TMRT enjoys a towering popularity among metropolitan Taipei residents. In the TMRT’s 2003 Passengers’ Satisfaction Survey—the first year that the TMRT conducted such an annual survey—86 percent of the riders participating in the survey gave the TMRT a positive evaluation; and the satisfaction rate rose to 95 percent in 2008. “Convenient,” “comfortable,” “rapid,” and “reliable” are some of the adjectives that we most often heard associated with the TMRT. The TMRT is also decidedly punctual, to the extent that passengers could time their travel by the minute and feel entitled to complain when the train is a minute or two late. As a matter of fact, the TMRT was ranked No. 1 in the world for four consecutive years (2004-2007) in terms of reliability, safety and quality standards based on data gathered by the Nova International Railway Benchmarking Group and the Community of Metros (Nova/CoMET); and the Taipei City government has not been shy about publicizing this accomplishment. Ultimately, the TMRT’s persistent and often pain-staking effort not only
changed the habits of TMRT passengers, but also helped to initiate a new model for—all Taipei residents. People in Taipei began to pay greater attention to their own city; they also started appraising their city as well as themselves in a larger, global framework. Step by step, a collective identity was taking shape among Taipei residents based on their shared experience as subway riders (Lee 2007b).

As the first subway system ever built in Taiwan, the TMRT has also quickly become a tourist attraction since its opening. Aside from daily commuters who live in the Greater Taipei Area, the TMRT draws visitors from all over the country. Upon its completion, on weekends, even the most casual observers could easily spot big tour buses unloading travelers on the roadside outside Danshui Station, a charming harbor town and the final destination of the TMRT's scenic Danshui-Xindian Line. These out-of-towners then joined the stream of crowds who traveled via the TMRT from the surrounding metropolitan region for a day's excursion in town. The Muzha Line, the shortest among the TMRT routes that operates between downtown Taipei and the Taipei Zoo, is now part of the standard graduation trip package for schools in central and southern Taiwan.

Faces of Modernity

The Taipei City Department of Transportation’s vision of a "civilized transportation system" may be best illustrated by the "Love in Taipei: Stories of MRT" promotion film on the Department's website. The film shows the day of Michelle, the 25-year-old Station Chief of Zhongxiao-Fuxing Station (one of the busiest TMRT stations where international travelers are most likely to be found). Elegantly dressed in a short-sleeve white shirt and a pair of crisply pressed dark-olive trousers, with a matching business vest and a light green scarf tied in a bow,
Michelle wears light make-up and ties her hair in a bun. Described in the film as "radiating the professional's charisma," she starts her day by making rounds inside the station, making sure that everything under her charge is working properly. During the course of the day, we see Michelle and her colleagues, Eric (a 30-year-old line controller) and Janet (a 26-year-old MRT driver), help Sam (a 32-year-old western photographer for a travel magazine visiting Taipei for the first time) find his way inside the MRT system, guide 36-year-old Kenneth (who is visually impaired) and his guide dog Ohara (the first one ever in Taiwan) to the right platform for their train connection, and assist a spiked haired, smartly clad young woman to locate her lost cell phone so that this young lady can get in touch with her boyfriend in time to salvage a love affair. (All of these individuals, except Sam, are Taiwanese.) Towards the end of the film, the sun is going down, and the night is getting late. Yet, TMRT employees continue to work around the clock. We are told that happiness comes from returning home safely, that happiness comes from reuniting with one's family, and that happiness comes from being cared and protected in every moment. TMRT staff will always be there to ensure that happiness, with their will and expertise.

Twice we showed this short film at talks that we gave at college campuses in Taiwan. The first time, in 2005, when we showed it at a university in Taipei, the students in the audience burst into laughter as soon as the film was over. Some giggled. This university is located near one of the major traffic hubs in Taipei City. Most of these students used the TMRT as their primary means of daily travel; they had firsthand experiences with the subway system. When asked why they were laughing—or giggling—we were told that the film was such a melodramatization of the reality; it exaggerated what was really going on. It seemed that they were embarrassed by the film’s portrait of the TMRT, its staff and its passengers, yet at the same time they also acknowledged—and were impressed by—what the system and the city at large (of
which they were a part) had accomplished (Lee 2007b). The second time, in 2008, we showed the film to a class at a university in Taichung, the third largest city in Taiwan and the largest city in central Taiwan roughly equally distant from Taipei and Kaohsiung. Only one of the students was originally from Taipei, but all in the class had used the TMRT when they visited Taipei. We asked them about the symbolism of the TMRT that they picked out from watching the film, and were given answers such as “safety,” “guardianship,” and “professionalism.” They noticed that the people depicted in the film were all young (i.e. in their twenties or early thirties), good-looking and confident; and they all have English names. They also pointed out that some of the female characters had jobs unconventional for a (Taiwanese) woman (e.g. the station chief of Zhongxiao-Fuxing Station and the TMRT driver). The production team of this film had obviously worked very hard in order to give the TMRT a cosmopolitan and progressive image. The student from Taipei, amid her “out-of-town” classmates, sat quietly for a while before she told us that she was deeply moved. The film “speaks the common language of people in Taipei,” she said.

Although our statement that the TMRT as a symbol of modernity was by and large accepted, questions were raised by both faculty members and students at our talks about what we meant by “modernity.” We were reminded that “modernity” might mean different things to different people. As both a support of and caution to our proposition, one student at the university in Taipei told us that she had her first impression of the TMRT in 1994, right before the election for Taipei Mayor that was held later that year. To her, this election was important not only because this had been the first direct mayoral election since Taipei became a special municipality in 1967 but, more importantly, because Chen Shui-bian, the candidate of the then opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), ran on a campaign platform of “Happiness and
Hope.” The positive, optimistic, and forward-looking tone emphasized in the campaign also made it the first of its kind in Taiwan’s political history. Chen subsequently won the election; and the first TMRT line, the Muzha Line, was opened for public use during his term in 1996. For this student, therefore, the TMRT was forever linked to the image highlighted in Chen’s campaign as well as what he did and advocated later as a mayor, which, for her, spoke to mainly middle-class lifestyles and values and oftentimes ignored the issue of social justice. Specifically, this student mentioned two campaigns: the squatter clearance in order to build two city parks; and the abolishment of legal prostitution in Taipei City. The first campaign aroused huge protests among many Taipei-based urban-planning professors and students who saw the Taipei City government’s clearance act as unjust (though not illegal) because it sought to displace the poorest and most vulnerable population in the city. The second campaign caused a major uproar (and split in opinion) among the city’s feminists and labor activists, many of whom argued that prostitutes had a right to work that should not be taken away by government edict. Both of these campaigns were criticized by many in Taipei’s academic, intellectual, and activist circles as intended to create a clean and sanitized urban environment catering to primarily the middle-class taste that is discriminatory to the (working) poor. This female student’s comment was shared by quite a few students in the audience.

While we acknowledge the merit of this comment, elsewhere Lee (2007b) disputes a simple equation between the TMRT and middle-class values. After all, it is hard to argue a subway system that serves more than 1.2 million passengers daily in a metropolitan area of slightly more than 6.5 million people is built for the exclusive pleasure of a few. More importantly, the shared experience of Taipei residents as daily TMRT riders have shaped a common practice that is now considered a central part of the city’s culture and social life. Like
the student at the university in Taichung said, “it is the common language of the people in Taipei.” The perception that Taipei people hold toward the TMRT, we would further argue however, has also to be understood in the current global economic context. The completion of the TMRT coincided with Taiwan’s economic restructuring, and increased competition among Asian cities in the global economy. At the same time, China has become a global economic power, posing great challenges to other national economies in the region. To behave in a civilized manner, as well as to keep a positive image of the TMRT, resonates with Taipei residents’ efforts to keep their city competitive and to thrive under these uncertain circumstances.

**From Subway to High Speed Railway**

The High Speed Railway is like a giant *jie-yun* (捷運) [i.e. TMRT].

An anthropology graduate student in her early 20s on her first HSR ride during the HSR’s grand opening period, January, 2007

I have waited for all my life for this moment to come. Now the moment has finally come, of course I want to take a ride. I want to be a part of it.

Seventy-ish Grandmother Chen at the HSR Banciao Station, January 2007 (China Review News 2007d)

The idea of constructing a high speed railway emerged in Taiwan in 1974; but the idea and the demand for such a rapid railroad system did not attract much attention from the leading Nationalist Party (KMT) technocrats until the late 1980s—around the same time when most of
the recent major public transit projects were contemplated and planned. Similar to the economic thinking behind the TMRT, Taiwan’s rapidly changing economy, its plans to further integrate into the global economy, and Taiwan’s ambition to be the Asia-Pacific Regional Operations Center all pointed to the need for a better and faster mass transportation system along the country’s western corridor (Tung 2006). In 1990, the high speed rail project was considered a part of the Six-Year National Development Plan, and a preparatory department was established under the Ministry of Transportation and Communications in the same year. However, the fiscal situation of the Taiwan government at the time prevented the high speed rail—whose estimated cost was 441.91 billion Taiwanese dollars (approximately US$13.15 billion)—to be solely funded by the government (Tung 2006). At the end, the high speed rail was designated as a BOT (“Build-Operate-Transfer”) project, the first of its kind in the history of Taiwan (Wen 2002).

BOT is a Taiwanese version of public-private partnership in which the government not only grants the planning and construction of a public work project to a private company, but also allows the private company to operate the public facility for profit for a contracted period. After the contracted period, the private company will transfer the right of operation back to the government who then has the option of whether to find another (or the same) private company to run the public facility or to keep it under government management (Tung 2006). In the case of the HSR, Taiwan High Speed Rail Corporation was the company created for, and then awarded, the project. The construction finally started in 1999. Eight years later, the HSR started its service in January, 2007; and Taiwan became the sixteenth country in the world that owns a high speed rail system (Hsu 2004).

In spite of the extensive negative media coverage about the HSR leading to the day of its grand opening—particularly on safety issues—and despite the fact that the HSR’s ticket
machines and turnstiles appeared to be inadequate to handle the huge volume of customers on the first few days of service (China Review News 2007b; China Review News 2007d; Liberty Times 2007b), the HSR turned out to be fashionable. Similar to the novelty enjoyed by the TMRT in its early days, the HSR also attracted a huge amount of riders in its first few months of operation, whose primary purpose was not to travel via the HSR but to take pleasure in the experience of riding Taiwan’s first high speed train. This was evidenced by the crowds gathering at HSR stations to purchase advanced tickets as soon as they were open for sale. On the first day of advanced ticket sale, 80,000 tickets were sold as opposed to 30,000 expected by the HSR Company (Liberty Times 2007a). At some stations, passengers had to wait on line for hours before they finally got the chance to buy a ticket, to the extent that “I could have gone to Kaohsiung and come back to Taipei within the time I wasted here to purchase the ticket,” as one passenger complained (Liberty Times 2007a). There were also people known for simply going to the Taipei HSR Station to get the first available ticket that they could purchase and enjoying their high speed train ride accordingly. Indeed, the technical problems that many of the HSR stations experienced might have been partly caused by this influx of large numbers of passengers.

Admittedly, the half-price discount ticket policy implement by the HSR Company in the first month of its operation certainly helped to boost the ticket sales. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese people’s first experience of riding their first high speed rail seemed to be by and large positive in spite of the many problems reported during this initial period. The excitement was most visible on the HSR platform where passengers were seen busy taking photos of themselves—or camera-recording their families and friends—with the train before the train departed; many continued this picture-taking enthusiasm in the train car all the way through their voyages. People were generally amazed by the fast speed that the train traveled (“Three hundred
kilometers [186 miles] per hour!”) and the short time that it took for them to journey between Taipei and Kaohsiung (“Ninety minutes only!”) (China Times 2007; Liberty Times 2007c). To test the HSR’s stability while in motion—a safety-related issue widely criticized on the news media—one retired public school principal was reported to have put a cup of water on the folding table in front of his seat. “I am pleased to see no water was spilled when the train was moving,” the principal commented at the end of his journey (Liberty Times 2007c). The HSR was also frequently compared to high speed rail systems in other countries by its passengers who were also world travelers. The interior of Taiwan’s first high speed rail was thus said to be “as spacious and comfortable as Eurostar” (Liberty Times 2007c); and the train moved “as fast and steadily as Japan’s Shinkansen,” although there was much about precision, efficiency, and safety that the HSR could learn from Shinkansen (Liberty Times 2007c). Some passengers simply stated that, in spite of its shortcomings, “Taiwan’s HSR is as superior as any other high speed railways in the world” (China Review News 2007c). They were proud of it—or, at least, pleased with it.

**Different Readings of the TMRT and the HSR**

Although the TMRT and the HSR have both captured the Taiwanese people’s imagination about modernity and contemporary life, a major difference exists between them. Whereas the TMRT as an urban mass transit system serves primarily residents in metropolitan Taipei, the HSR as a cross-island railway serves customers who come from many corners of the country. This entails more than a difference in the areas covered by these two transportation systems or in the nature of their clienteles, however. The distinction in geography touches a deeply-seated cord in the minds of the Taiwanese especially those living outside Taipei City (Lee...
As the capital city of Taiwan and a special municipality, Taipei has always been the jewel of the central government and given more resources. Accordingly, compared to the rest of the country, social programs in Taipei City are better funded, and public infrastructure is better developed; the construction of the TMRT was one good example. Yet, the popularity of the TMRT, among both Taipei City residents and out-of-town visitors, seems to also heighten the long-felt South-North inequality among people who live outside Taipei. The HSR, which runs from Taipei to Kaohsiung, crossing the western part of Taiwan, thus carries the symbolic meaning of bringing a modern and highly advanced amenity to the Taiwanese people—whose collective effort (via hard work) in the past few decades has greatly enhanced the economic strength and raised the overall living standards of the country—as opposed to having the Taiwanese travel all the way to Taipei, only to pay homage to a few emblems of modernity that are considered primarily as symbols of Taipei City.

From the perspective of the DPP that was the governing party of Taiwan (2000-2008) for most of the years when the HSR was under construction (1999-2007), the HSR provided an opportunity to rethink the issue of regional disparity within Taiwan, despite the fact that the decision to build an HSR was made by the previous Kuomintang (KMT) government. Whether it was to entice voters in central and southern Taiwan, or motivated by a genuine concern over the unequal development among different parts of the country—or both—the Council for Economic Planning and Development (CEPD) developed a “Challenge 2008: National Development Target Plans” in 2002, a major part of which was about developing areas adjacent to or near the 12 HSR stations (located in different counties of western Taiwan) through expansive government investment (CEPD 2003; also see Chen 2001; Li 2002a; Li 2002b; H. Lin 2001). On a more general and discursive level, the prospect of “One Day Community” (一日生
活圈) was promoted by both government and HSR officials. That is, because the HSR would greatly reduce the traveling time across Taiwan, it was said that people would then have the option of living in one part of the country while commuting daily via the HSR to work in another part of the country. Given the high housing prices in metropolitan Taipei, the HSR would provide people with the incentive to live in Taichung or even Kaohsiung where land was cheaper but continue to hold a job in Taipei. This would help to boost the real estate market and retail businesses in these other places. Furthermore, companies that traditionally would only locate their headquarters in or near Taipei, the political and financial center, could now consider having their main offices in central or southern Taiwan. All of these efforts, it was asserted, would help to distribute the wealth more evenly across the country, thereby bridging the South-North economic disparity (China Review News 2007a; C. Lin 2003). Some DPP politicians and think tanks had taken a step further to advocate the idea of “South-North Dual Nuclei,” in which Taipei and Kaohsiung would be the nucleus cities—some had even used the word “capitals”—at two ends of Taiwan and anchors to a balanced urban-rural development for regions between these two cities (Liberty Times 2004; Now News 2007; H. Lin 2002).

These ways of thinking are not exclusively DPP political ideologies or campaign strategies, however, but shared by a broader population in the larger Taiwanese society (Lee 2007a). An incident witnessed by one of the authors of this article upon the HSR’s grand opening further attests to the conflation of the Taiwanese people’s imagination about the HSR and their imagination about the political situations in and of Taiwan. The incident was observed while riding on a commuter train from Kaohsiung [traditional] Railway Station to the HSR’s Zuoying Station. For unknown reasons the commuter train was delayed for more than 10 minutes. As there was no explanation given to the passengers, some of them became restless and
began criticizing loudly the Taiwan Railway Administration’s (TRA; the government agency that manages Taiwan’s traditional railway system) lack of regard for its customers. Not long after, a TRA staff appeared and demanded that the passengers be moved to the next train, thereby further delaying their departure. Some passengers grew to be very impatient and, in addition to criticizing the TRA, started to comment that this was a TRA-instigated conspiracy, the purpose of which was to make people miss their HSRs; and as a result of that, people might gradually lose their confidence in the HSR and come back to use the traditional railway. However ridiculous this might have sounded, it was quickly agreed with by a few commuters. Some passengers who had ridden the HSR before began to praise how high-tech and comfortable the HSR was. They also made comparison between the HSR and Japan’s Shinkansen, and stressed that the HSR, though a product of transferred Shinkansen technologies, was just as superior as the original and authentic Shinkansen. The conversation among the passengers quickly turned to denounce those [KMT-leaning, Taipei-based] media and [KMT-affiliated, Taipei-centered] politicians who had been bad-mouthing the HSR, but who obviously did not have enough professional training or expertise to back up their criticisms. Some of the passengers thus concluded that these people had neither confidence in nor respect for the HSR because they did not think much about Taiwan. That is, not only did these media and politicians dismiss the Taiwanese people’s ability to achieve such a large-scale, high-tech project but, more fundamentally, they saw the HSR as a tool to advance their own political agenda. They completely disregarded the HSR’s practical function as a means of transportation that could greatly improve the quality of travel—and thereby life in general—of the commuters living in central and southern Taiwan. The delay of a commuter train—likely a mundane incident that
happens more than infrequently—was thus escalated to a heated discussion about Taiwan’s national politics within Taiwan’s current political-economic context.

**Indeed, What Is A “One Day Community”?**

In spite of a slow start, the HSR quickly dominated the transportation market along Taiwan’s western corridor. The number of HSR passengers increased steadily in its first 18 months. In May, 2007, the HSR had served 5 million passengers; the number grew to 10 million in September, 15 million in December, 20 million in March, 2008, and then quickly to 30 million in July of the same year (*Independent Daily* 2007; *Independent Daily* 2008). Currently, the HSR serves 90,000 passengers per day, an exponential growth from 30,000 upon its inception (*Taiwan High Speed Rail* 2009; *United Daily* 2008a). The HSR Company’s discount ticket policy (as a major strategy to increase the number of passengers), as well as the high oil prices in the world market, has certainly contributed to the rapid expansion of HSR ridership (*United Daily* 2008b). Nevertheless, it also reflects the HSR’s soaring popularity in the Taiwanese society. Four hundred days into the HSR operation, in April, 2008, an article entitled “The New HSR Era Brings Forth Four Major Business Opportunities” was published at *Jin Zhou-kan* (*今周刊*, an online financial and business magazine) and was widely circulated on the web (*Business Weekly* 2008). The article states that new patterns of consumption are gradually taking shape in Taiwan as a result of the mobility enabled by the HSR.\(^\text{11}\)

On March 22, 2008, the day of the presidential election, like millions of Taiwanese citizens, forty-ish Taipei City resident Mr. Hsu and his wife got up early, and rushed out with their teenage
son to vote at their designated polling place. However, unlike the majority of the Taiwanese who walked or rode a motorcycle to vote somewhere near home, Mr. Hsu and his family hailed a cab and went to the HSR’s Taipei Station in order to catch an HSR to Taichung. A year ago, Mr. Hsu joined the wave of investment in the real estate market outside Taipei and bought a condominium unit in Taichung. He then moved the household registration of his family to this new address; and this was why he and his wife had to vote in Taichung instead of Taipei. Although Mr. Hsu had an important meeting at work the day after, he still decided that he should make the trip to vote because of the importance of this election. Mr. Hsu was not a person who was fond of travel. He didn’t even want to take his family by car on a weekend excursion to Danshui (which is twenty kilometers [12.5 miles] away from downtown Taipei). However, with the HSR, a trip to vote in Taichung that was more than two hundred kilometers away did not seem to be such drudgery!

After they voted, Mr. Hsu decided on a whim that they should take the HSR to Kaohsiung so that their son could visit his grandmother. The three of them thus continued their journey toward the south. They arrived in Kaohsiung around noon. The family spent time together with Mrs. Hsu’s mother, munching seafood in Cijin, enjoying sunset in Xizi Wan, shopping at Dream
Mall, and cruising in Love River. They had a wonderful day in Kaohsiung, and only returned to Taipei by the HSR after they finished dinner. On the way home, Mr. Hsu couldn’t help but think in awe how the family had accomplished in one day what would have been considered a three-day itinerary in the past. All of this was made possible by the HSR, which had made Taichung or Kaohsiung closer than Danshui!

The Hsu family is not an exception but a part of the growing population in Taiwan who use the HSR to make day trips beyond their conventional terrain for various ends, the *Jin Zhou-kan* article informs its readers. Politicians, business people, singers and entertainers have all used the HSR to dash back and forth between Taipei and other cities and counties for their assorted engagements and responsibilities. For more casual or leisure-related purposes, among the stories cited in the article, Ms Chen, a single office lady in Taipei with a steady income under her own disposal, likes good food and enjoys exploring novel eating places in her spare time. She used to have to confine her hobby in the Greater Taipei Area, because it was too time-consuming to go beyond this area. However, she and her group of female friends now travel regularly to Taichung on weekends to find new restaurants; it will only take them an hour via the HSR to get there from Taipei. An increasing number of ladies have also been seen taking the HSR, traveling from northern or central Taiwan, to seek liposuction or plastic surgery in Kaohsiung where the costs for these procedures are considerably lower. The Kaohsiung Veterans General Hospital, the hospital that is closest to an HSR station, is said to be the biggest
beneficiary of this. “Mobility and change bring new business possibilities,” the article states, “and the HSR has created huge economic profits and opportunities for Taiwan!”

When the idea of “One Day Community” was first proposed upon the HSR’s grand opening, the “One Day Community” was meant to be a “community” within whose range one lives and commutes daily to work. Although the HSR has a rather short history—and thus its full impact on the urban development and social life in Taiwan is yet to be seen—the trend we have observed so far seems to indicate that, instead of “One Day Community of Work and Living,” “One Day Community of Leisure and Consumption” may be a term better describing the reality created by the HSR (Ho 2007). This is not to say that HSR customers are characterized by shoppers looking for better deals or urban explorers seeking novel adventures.

What has been revealed in the pattern of HSR ridership, however, is that it is by no means a means of transportation of daily commuters. In spite of the HSR Company’s continual effort to lower the ticket prices, the prices remain high compared to other means of ground transportation along Taiwan’s western corridor. Consequently, one may not choose to take the high speed train unless the trip carries special meanings (e.g. for leisure or tourist purposes) or high economic value (e.g. for business ends or official assignments) (Ho 2007: 51). Of course, on important holidays like Chinese New Year—or on weekends—when many people travel to unite with their families, as well as after the end of semester when students are going home for an extended break, the HSR would also be a preferred choice.

From the ticket sales data provided by the Bureau of High Speed Rail, the Ministry of Transportation and Communications (see Tables 6.1 and 6.2), it is further revealed that Taipei, Kaohsiung, and Taichung remain the main stops for HSR customers, whereas other stations are used by a much smaller number of passengers. This may have a lot to do with the fact that many
of the HSR stations are located in areas far away from city centers—as aforementioned, a deliberate choice made at the HSR planning stage with the attempt of using the HSR to spearhead the real estate development of these areas. The lack of transport infrastructure connecting to nearby city centers makes these stations less convenient and therefore unfavorable to potential travelers, although the HSR Company, in conjunction with local municipal governments, has arranged (oftentimes free) shuttle services for its customers. Nevertheless, this does not contradict the fact that the three most populous cities in Taiwan—Taipei, Kaohsiung, and Taichung; and especially Taipei—remain the most important destinations of HSR passengers and, by extension, to the social and economic activities engendered by these people. This does seem to contradict, however, the great hope that the HSR would help to amend the regional inequality in Taiwan playing so heavily in the public discourse about the HSR. Indeed, quite a few scholars and social pundits have written articles to forewarn about the siphoning effect of the HSR and the possible enlarging disparities between the two largest metropolitan areas (Taipei and Kaohsiung) at the two ends of Taiwan and the lands in between these two cities (Ho 2007; Peng 2007).

**Conclusion: Situating Taiwan in the Context of Global City Formation**

Taiwan is not the only country that invests heavily on urban infrastructure, but is a part of the larger trend occurring both globally and in the Asian Pacific region in recent times. Since the inception of industrialism in the early nineteenth century the transformation of cities around the world has always been connected to the expansion of urban capitalism (Merrifield 2002). Lately, however, the reconstruction and reconfiguration of individual cities have taken on an increasingly global nature (Bishop *et al.* 2003: 2). Saskia Sassen (2001) contends that this is a
result of the reorganization of the global economy, which gives rise to transnational networks of
global cities (Sassen 2002). In this context, a global city is defined as a strategic site in the
global economy (LeGates and Stout 2001: 208). Decisions made in a global city affect the
livelihood of people and the economic health of nations other than its own.

Sassen's (2001) concept of the global city emphasizes the financial and specialized
service functions played by such a city. Building on her work, other scholars (e.g. Chang 2000;
Miles et al. 2000: 99-155; Yeoh 2005) argue that to reinforce its overall strength as well as its
status in the global network to which it belongs, a global city pursues other sources of investment
such as corporate offices, tourism, and real estate development, with the hope that these will
bring in willing consumers and wealthy residents and clients. To accomplish this, cities have to
accumulate a built environment of both economic and symbolic capital, often by physically
transforming the urban landscape to include transportation infrastructure such as subways, "blue
chip architecture, loft living spaces, public art, aesthetized heritage litter and other gilded spaces,
to help create the appropriate 'aura' of distinction with which the providers of these sources of
investment wish to attach themselves" (Miles et al. 2000: 99; Miles and Paddison 2005). These
cities are engaging in a dual quest for capital (both domestic and foreign) and global celebrity

In contrast to Sassen's work on the global networking of financial capital, Brenner and
Theodore (2002a; 2002b) argue that the making of global cities has to be understood as a result
of the rescaling of political-economic space in the contemporary “glocalized” capitalism. As
cities in both the developed and developing worlds are increasingly entrenched in an unstable
economic environment characterized by transnational capital that is highly mobile and
speculative in nature, many of them are forced into fierce rivalry and have to take on strategies
like place-making and regulatory undercutting in order to secure jobs and investments (Brenner and Theodore 2002a: 367). Urban development projects to improve city infrastructure, renovate city landscape, or create cultural facilities or festivities, therefore, should not been seen as simply an effect of local enthusiasm or initiatives but of political and economic coercion and interurban competition (Harvey 1989b; Jou 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002).

Whether one approaches an individual city's inspiration for—and/or achievement of—a global city status with a celebratory tone (such as implied in the ‘global city’ theorization), or criticizes it from the association between real estate development, huge construction projects, and neoliberal capitalism (Smith 2002), the fact remains that a large number of cities in today's world are deeply implicated in globalization processes and correspondingly engaged in rapid expansion in urban infrastructure. This is particularly prevalent in Asian Pacific cities, where the central governments of these cities have taken to heart the doctrine that infrastructure investment, especially in telecommunications and transportation, is positively correlated with economic growth (Lo and Marcotullio 2000). Through urban infrastructure building, these governments are hoping to advance the comparative advantage of their own cities, so that these cities can assert their importance as nodes in the global economic flows and linkages, thereby attracting international investment and businesses (Lo and Marcotullio 2000; Olds 1995). Furthermore, the parallel development among major cities across the Asian Pacific region—and the inter-urban competition instigating and, in turn, aggravated by this parallel development—has helped to create “a single imaginary space” against which many citizens in these countries including the Taiwanese identify and measure themselves (Hall 1995: 190, in Iwabuchi 2002: 15; also see Appadurai 1996, 2001).
Yet, even though this recent global urbanization process entails a common tendency in aspiration among many cities and their residents, whether a city could attain a global city status—or, more generally, the position that a city occupies in the global economic ordering—is determined by the combination of multi-layered factors including “global niche, regional formation, national development model, [and] local historical context” within which this city participates (Hill and Fujita 2003: 211; also see Clammer 2003). As such, “as constituent elements of the global order, cities both facilitate the globalization process and follow their own, relatively autonomous trajectories” (Hill and Fujita 2003: 212); and this applies to cities both among different countries and within the same country.

All of these are illustrated in both of the shared meanings and differential readings that the Taiwanese give to the TMRT and the HSR. On the one hand, the decisions to build the Taipei MRT and the HSR were both made in the late 1980s when Taiwan’s economy was undergoing a major restructuring, mainly capital outflow and deindustrialization, in order to boost economic growth as well as to regain the country’s advantage in the global economy. The HSR stood at the center of this scheme for it was expected to considerably speed up the journey between Taipei and Kaohsiung, whereas the Taipei MRT was essential because it would help to reduce the time—thereby the economic cost—of daily commuting in Taipei, thus making the city more competitive. Both of these transportation systems have greatly changed the Taiwanese people’s habits of and perceptions about traveling. On the other hand, the TMRT and the HSR carry quite different political connotations within the geo-economic context of Taiwan. Whereas the TMRT is primarily an urban transit system that serves denizens in the Greater Taipei Area, the HSR is given the great expectation of helping to reduce the regional inequality between northern Taiwan and central/southern Taiwan, epitomized by the development of Taipei and
Kaohsiung, the two primary cities located at two ends of the country. Whether or not it is based on reality, this discourse is politically potent because it resonates with the sentiment of injustice widely shared among the Taiwanese citizens outside Taipei City. In fact, we would also argue that, the very existence of the TMRT prior to the construction of the HSR and especially the Kaohsiung MRT had provoked this feeling of unfairness in spite—or precisely because—of its immense popularity. Thus, the HSR project had carried a moral legitimacy at its inception not enjoyed by the TMRT in the backdrop of Taiwan’s own political-economic history.

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*China Review News (Zhong guo ping lun 中國評論)* (2007a) ‘The High Speed Railway started operation; a One-Day Community will be established in Taiwan’ (*Gao tie qi dong quan dao huo yi, Taiwan jian gou yi ri sheng huo quan* 高鐵啟動全島獲益, 台灣建構一日生活圈), January 5. Available HTTP: <www.chinareviewnews.co/doc/1002/8/2/9/100282934.html?co...> (accessed 30 September, 2008).


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United Daily (Lian he bao 聯合報) (2008a) ‘With a number of 90,000 passengers per day, the HSR is making big profits’ (Mei ri jiù wan ri ci, gao tī yìng shōu fēng 每日九萬人次,高鐵營收豐 ), August 14. Available HTTP: <http://udn.com/NEWS/LIFE/LIF1/4471960.shtml> (accessed 1 September, 2008).


Table 6.1 Number of passengers going in and out of HSR stations, January-August 2007 (unit: thousands of people)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Entering the station</th>
<th>Exiting the station</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taipei</td>
<td>2086</td>
<td>2146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banciao*</td>
<td>1131</td>
<td>1121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoyuan</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hsinchu</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taichung</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>1449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiayi</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tainan</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuoying (Kaohsiung)</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>2077</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bureau of High Speed Rail, Ministry of Transportation and Communications.

* Banciao is the seat of Taipei County and a part of the Greater Taipei Area. The HSR Banciao Station is less than ten minutes away from the HSR Taipei Station by the HSR; both of the stations serve the population in metropolitan Taipei.

Table 6.2 Number of tickets sold with HSR Stations, January-September 2007 (unit: thousands of people)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From \ To</th>
<th>Taipei</th>
<th>Banciao</th>
<th>Taoyuan</th>
<th>Hsinchu</th>
<th>Taichung</th>
<th>Chiayi</th>
<th>Tainan</th>
<th>Zuoying (Kaohsiung)</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taipei</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>917</td>
<td>2495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banciao</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>1225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taoyuan</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hsinchu</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taichung</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>1737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiayi</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tainan</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuoying (Kaohsiung)</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>2570</td>
<td>1212</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>1671</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>2366</td>
<td>10445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bureau of High Speed Rail, Ministry of Transportation and Communications.

* Same as Table 6.1.

1 A previous version of this article was presented at the “Charismatic Modernity: Popular Culture in Taiwan” conference at the Center for Asian Studies, University of South Carolina, October 3-5, 2008. We were encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of our paper and benefited from the comments and suggestions that other conference participants gave us. Special thanks go to John Hsieh and James Klein, who served as the discussants for the panel that included our paper. We also thank Keith Markus for his editorial comments, and Marc Moskowitz and the anonymous reviewer for their invaluable critiques.
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2 US$1=NT$33.
3 The first of the KMRT’s two routes, the Red Line, was open for public use in March, 2008. The second and last line, the Orange Line, was inaugurated six months later, on the day of the Mid-Autumn (or Moon) Festival, in September, 2008

5 The use of four languages in the TMRT’s public announcement, especially Hokklo and Hakka, however, may have less to do with serving a broad range of customers, but more to do with the nationalist struggle and identity politics in Taiwan (Wang 2004).

7 The Taipei City Government website (http://www.trtc.com.tw/c/private.asp?catid=%E5%B0%88%E6%A1%88&small=%E7%87%9F%E9%81%8B%E5%8F%AF%E9%9D%A0%E5%BA%A6%E7%AC%AC%E4%B8%80) (accessed 9 September 9, 2008). CoMET, established in 1995, is a consortium of nine of the world’s largest urban railways, including Berlin, Hong Kong, London, Mexico City, Moscow, Paris, New York, Sao Paulo, and Tokyo. NOVA, established in 1998, is the world’s second benchmarking group for medium-sized metro systems carrying fewer than five million passengers daily.

9 Before 1967, Taipei City was administered as a part of Taiwan Province, and its mayor was elected by direct popular vote.
10 For a few examples, China Review News (2006a; 2006b; 2006c).
11 The original text is in Chinese; the English translation is ours.
12 The HSR offers fifty-percent discount tickets to senior citizens (age 65 and above), physically or mentally challenged individuals, and children (age 12 and below). This may have encouraged these people’s use of the HSR.