"Making Streets": Planned Space and Unplanned Business in New Kujiang, Taiwan

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Abstract

New Kujiang, a shopping destination in Southern Taiwan known for youthful fashion and imported goods, emerged in the 1980s. As part of Taiwan’s national project to modernize its business environment, New Kujiang was reconstructed in the image of Euro-American shopping streets a decade later. Although the revitalization project and its cosmopolitan image fit in with the official vision of globalized urban space, its incorporation into this national project was not a seamless process. The ideal was confounded by incomplete execution of the project and troubled by customary practices that also sought participation in the market. Looking into ideas of urban commercial districts that informed the planning of New Kujiang and the actual process by which the space was constructed and occupied, this study seeks to understand the aspirations, contestations, and imaginations that enter into processes of constituting global/local spaces. [Keywords: consumption, entrepreneurism, urban planning, Taiwan]

Named after the old commercial area that had once flourished with the establishment of an American military base in the coastal city of Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan, New Kujiang shopping district built its reputation by providing imported goods for sale. Its quick ascendant to fame is often attributed to a successful public-private partnership where local business initiative was backed by state-sponsored programs. Its reputation as youthful and cosmopolitan is often accredited to the traders who shuttle between Taiwan and elsewhere to bring in trendy commodities. However, although the engineering of New Kujiang’s space and its cosmopolitan image fit in nicely with the official vision of globalized modern urban space and a narrative of ingenious entrepreneurism, its incorporation into Taiwan’s recent place-making project was not a smooth process.

The state-initiated endeavor to reconfigure Taiwan’s landscape started as an effort to remap Taiwan’s national space and revitalize local economies in the 1990s. Building on earlier policies of community (shequ) development aiming to “modernize society as a whole by transforming and restructuring the local” (Chuang 2005:383), the initiative connects local places to a national project that seeks economic and social development through spatial reorganization (Chuang 2005:398). From nostalgic old streets to revitalized downtowns, the kind of constructions
that transform places into commodities resonates with the global trend of reconstructing local places to make them attractive to capital (Harvey 1989, 1990; Judd and Fainstein 1999; Mitchell 2004; Philo and Kearns 1993; Zukin 1995) and positions Taiwan in a global market of localities where nations, places, and local actors become entrepreneurs of themselves. In the late 1990s, to combat declining business, New Kujiang took part in this national endeavor by drawing up a plan to remake the area in the image of Euro-American streets. However, the ideal of an “upgraded” shopping district never completely materialized. Once put on the street, it was confounded by poor execution of the construction project and troubled by existing customs. As Low and Lawrence-Zuniga argue, the images of urban space constructed by designers and political elites are “rarely consistent with the daily spatial experience of urban residents and workers” (2006:20). The spaces remain contested and are often imbued with different meanings as locals navigate their physical and discursive constructions. Whether it is the business leaders who look for official endowment or merchants and vendors who want to take part in New Kujiang’s success, local actors constantly negotiate between a project that seeks to impose order on the street and a market principle that encourages them to stay flexible. By examining the ideas of urban shopping districts that informed the planning of New Kujiang, the actual process by which this space was constructed and occupied, and the way it became encoded with various meanings and intentions, this study explores the contestations, aspirations, and imaginations that enter into the process of constituting global/local spaces.

Rise and fall

Kaohsiung’s growth from a fishing village to a city began before World War II when the Japanese colonial government, which ruled Taiwan from 1895 to 1945, started to utilize its deep-water port to turn Kaohsiung into a transportation base. As it became a gateway to the island and to the world in the Japanese empire’s economico-political geography, the foundation of today’s Kaohsiung was laid. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) government took control of the island. Losing the civil war against the Chinese Communist Party forced the KMT to relocate to Taiwan. With financial and military aid from the United States, it began to reconstruct the local economy and consolidate its rule as the Republic of China. State planning coupled with land reforms and an educated labor force allowed Taiwan to develop into a strong economic presence in East Asia. This quick rise to prosperity from the mid-1960s to the 1980s has been lauded as an economic “miracle” and a model success story of “Asian application of liberal . . . economic policies” that “came to fill in the gap of recognition caused by the exclusion of the Republic of China from the status of nationhood” (Pazderic 2004:196; emphasis original). In the new regime’s export-oriented economic design, Kaohsiung continued to be a
transportation base and grew into an industrial center. With a population of 1.7 million, it is now the second largest city in Taiwan next to the capital Taipei. Kaohsiung’s harbor is one of the largest container ports in the world.

New Kujiang’s emergence is tightly intertwined with this economic miracle and the fortune of the Datong Department Store (Datong Baihuo Gongsi) in downtown Kaohsiung. Established in 1975, the ten-story department store located at the northeast corner of Chung-shan Road and Wu-fu Road was an important landmark at a time when most buildings in the city hardly exceeded five stories. It helped shift the commercial center of the city eastward from the seaboar Yancheng District and granted the area a trendy and upscale character. A sharp contrast to the industrial city’s public image as an agglomeration of factories, the Japanese-style department store offered locals and visitors an opportunity to experience an imported modernity. “Oscar,” the

![Figure 1. Map of Downtown Kaohsiung. Map by Chi-rei Huang.](image)
movie theater, that showed primarily foreign films, and fast food outlets that came into the area in the late 1980s augmented the cosmopolitan atmosphere of this district. In 1988, a group of real estate developers acquired a few buildings on Wen-heng 167 Alley across Wu-Fu Road from the department store. Taking advantage of the drawing powers of the department store and the relatively low cost of real estate not directly located on main thoroughfares, they remade these apartment buildings into a shopping center named New Kujiang Shopping Mall (NKSM hereafter). They rented out store units at a cost about one-fifth of that on the main roads. The location and low rent attracted young entrepreneurs who were keen on testing the booming market. Starting from NKSM, they gradually turned the residential 167 Alley into a mixed commercial-residential street where the ground levels of most buildings were converted into shops. By the early 1990s, many in Kaohsiung had begun calling the area across Wufu Road from Datong “New Kujiang.”

To most Kaohsiung residents, Kujiang was a familiar name. Less than four kilometers to the west of Datong in today’s Yancheng District, there is a marketplace that was given the name Kujiang (pronounced Horie in Japanese) by the Japanese. First developed in the 1930s, Kujiang began to gain prominence in the 1950s for the trade of foreign imports because of its proximity to Kaohsiung Harbor and the old American military base. The activity of “running a solo gang” (pao danbang), that is, merchants traveling overseas to bring back exotic goods, became Kujiang’s trademark. Sailors and American soldiers on vacation during the Vietnam War also took part by providing things from abroad, but the vast majority of these “shipped goods” (shuihuo, literally “water cargos”) were from Hong Kong and Japan. Japanese appliances, in particular, were highly coveted for their quality. The abolition of restrictions on international travel in 1979 spelled an end to Kujiang’s near monopoly over foreign goods. When the Americans left Taiwan after the diplomatic relationship between the two sides was severed in the same year, there was also one less source for merchandise. The Datong Department Store’s establishment further shifted the commercial center away from Yancheng District. The economic miracle in the 1980s sped up Kujiang’s decline, for now the Kaohsiungers could afford to travel abroad or purchase foreign goods that had become increasingly available.

While Kujiang’s marketplace had declined, the name was still associated with foreign goods and independent merchants, allowing the developers of NKSM to build on the familiar local image to create an instant identity. A developer explained that “when people hear [the name] Kujiang, they immediately think of unique imported goods and danbang merchants. That’s what we want people to associate us with.” In addition, the name and its “pao danbang” tradition also connoted an enterprising spirit that was perceived to be a major contributing factor to Taiwan’s miracle. Making use of the exotic image of old Kujiang and the increasing number of upscale customers as well as novel modernity of the

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Datong Department Store, the developers created a shopping mall that would be recognized as cosmopolitan, daring, and unique with a tinge of nostalgia for the energetic free spirit of Kujiang.

Even though Taiwan did not have the spatial development of what William Kowinski has termed “Highway Comfort Culture” (1985:51) that had given birth to American shopping malls, and NKSM does not resemble those expansive malls with ample parking space, it still adopted the English name, as it was a concept more foreign and novel than the department store. It also adopted the strategy of centralized management and employed the shopping mall features of “standardized units in an extensive network” and limited entrances and strategically placed staircases to “control the flow of consumers through the numbing repetitive corridors of shops” (Crawford 1992:13). NKSM’s floors were divided into independent and self-enclosed units. Applications for spaces were carefully screened to ensure that no two shops in NKSM sold the same thing and every shop sold only imported goods. These differences, however, were organized into visually consistent displays to order the foreign novelties into easily accessible displays and to construct an alternative space distinguished from the streets outside. All shops had to adhere to strict codes dictating store hours and decor. Everywhere one turned, one saw endless corridors of the same width with shops flanking them. These corridors were named “streets” (jie) marked by signs, and the shops had street numbers posted on them. The miniature copy of shopping malls became a miniature city-within-a-city where shops and streets were of a smaller scale. After years of renovation and expansion, shops in NKSM now have oversized glass windows facing the “streets,” giving consumers a full view of store interiors. Because most shops are only big enough to allow two or three people inside at a time, shopping in NKSM is in effect window shopping—one often has to browse through the glass panes. A salesclerk even compared working in the shop to being inside a display case, saying that she felt extremely uncomfortable to be “watched” by passersby and clerks in adjacent shops.

Small boutiques like the ones in NKSM were becoming more common in Taiwan in the late 1980s. Called jingpindian for the double meaning of “shops of refined (jingzhi) goods (pin)” and “shops of specially selected (jingxuan) goods,” they attest to a growing desire in Taiwan to construct taste and identity based on commodities. In addition to emphasizing their sophistication, boutiques also are shops with “individual characters” (gexing) built on the personal taste of store owners who handpicked their merchandise. Tian, a store manager in her early 40s, recalled that, without much money and experience, but lots of ideas and enthusiasm, many young people took the rare opportunity of having their own boutiques in a golden location. They were mostly first-time business owners who saw the shops as a means to express themselves, become their own bosses in a growing market, and achieve financial independence. Their enthusiasm reflected the broad optimism in the 1980s on the island that was beginning to open up economically and politically and the feeling that Taiwan was catching up to the advanced modern
world. Carrying on the *pao danbang* tradition, they would travel far and often to bring new commodities from abroad. And Tian firmly believes that they were “the ones who made New Kujiang a young and fashionable place.”

At the time when Tian and her peers were learning the trade, the “teens” started to become a consumer category in Taiwan. Regulations on junior and senior high school dress codes were loosened and the economic miracle produced a generation of young people who had more money at their disposal. This change occurred concurrently with the democratization process on the island and the proliferation of youth popular culture as marketable commodities elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, there emerged a “post-miracle” generation encouraged to express themselves, and a youth culture largely generated and influenced by commodities, advertising, and transnational flows of popular culture. New Kujiang’s fast fashion changes established by *danbang* merchants, the juxtaposition of images and goods from all over, and the mixture of languages on business signs composes a world where the youthful consumers could not only imagine but also touch and consume the global.

Less than ten years later, the formerly residential area of Jen-chih Street, Wen-hua Road, and Wen-heng 167 Alley had developed into a thriving shopping area. Other shopping gallerias with spatial layout and managerial style similar to NKSM were built. Even though NKSM aimed for more affluent consumers, the movie theater, fast food outlets, trendy goods in the shopping centers, and cheap counterfeits sold on the streets brought in a younger crowd. An overwhelming majority of the shoppers there were under 30 years old and most of them female. Clothes and accessories appealing to young female shoppers filled most shops and street stalls and vendors congregated everywhere, especially in the vicinity of the movie theater.

The expansion of New Kujiang hit an unexpected roadblock when a fire broke out in the Datong Department Store and burned most of the building in October 1995. Without it to draw shoppers and with its ghostly presence turning people away, business in New Kujiang began to dwindle. Further complicating New Kujiang’s plight was the construction of other department stores along the axis of Wu-fu and Chung-shan Roads already begun by the time Datong was burned. Led by NKSM’s management, some local business people formed the Committee for Development in New Kujiang and turned to Taiwan’s official place-making programs for help. As they were already familiar with government projects to facilitate commercial activities, these business leaders were the first ones in New Kujiang to realize the opportunities presented in Taiwan’s national endeavor to modernize its business environment and became the major force behind New Kujiang’s transformation. In the name of market success, a local entrepreneurial initiative converged with state-sponsored projects, and NKSM’s stress on visual consistency was carried on to the street of New Kujiang to render the area into an open-air shopping mall.
Blueprint for “quality”

The official place-making project in Taiwan started in the early 1990s when the Council for Cultural Affairs began its nation-wide effort to “develop comprehensive communities” (shecu zongti yingzao) through writing histories and identifying cultural heritages for local villages and towns. In order to display and market these newfound “cultures,” business streets and marketplaces were then revitalized or reconstructed in the next stage. “Culture, beauty, space, and economy were subtly interconnected through an ideology of total community planning” (Chuang 2005:398) that also served to consolidate a localized Taiwanese identity. As the Council took effort to “make towns” (zaozhen), the Department of Commerce implemented the Business Streets and Districts Develop Program to “make streets” (zaojie) by renewing (gengxin) and recreating (zaizao) commercial districts for the purpose of attracting investment and tourism. Through “improving the environment for consumption” and “elevating the quality of service” (CSDC 2000b:3), the projects aim to achieve “commercial modernization” and make these business districts a part of the modern landscape of Taiwan.

In 1999 these place-making and street-making programs were incorporated into the Ministry of Interior’s “Project of Transformation and Redevelopment of the Styles and Features of Urban and Rural Areas” (also translated as “Township Renaissance Program”). The objective was to create a “healthy, clean, and beautiful” island with emphases on “prosperity, modernization, and culture” in the effort to “elevate the nation’s competitiveness and improve international image, enhance life quality and achieve sustainable development for cities and towns, and strengthen investment environment and further economic development” (CEPD). A politico-cultural project at first, these programs have shifted their focus to economic development for places that are facing the plight of losing their production to overseas locations due to Taiwan’s own economic success or are struggling to become desirable sites for consumption as Taiwan became increasingly integrated into the global market. Under the guidance of the state, local business and governments were to change their environment and the way they operate businesses to reach modern consumer standards. Because of their dependence on government subsidies, the marketplaces and shopping districts thus produced need to meet the visions and expectations of the officials who evaluate the proposals. The stress on tidy and legible streets with easily recognizable local differences in various proposals, therefore, reflects not only the aesthetics of the planners but also an official vision of progress informed by an imaginary “modernity” characterized by cleanliness and prosperity.

As Tsung-yi M. Huang (2008) observes, in reshaping urban spaces to attract capital, East Asian cities often take a double approach, looking inward to the cities’ past for historical incidents of transnational connec-
tion and outward to other global cities for inspiration. The narrative surrounding New Kujiang's transformation promoted in various publications also supplies it with a history and outlook that links its “cosmopolitan” past to the national quest of modernization. Its previous commercial success and its abundance of exotic commodities connect it to a globalized future. The active role local business people took in refashioning the streets conform to today’s neoliberal principle of self-promotion and profit-seeking. And its revitalization project was built around the keywords of modernization and competitiveness. Instead of stressing a “local” image specific to New Kujiang, it was to make New Kujiang stand out from the rest of Taiwan by making it look like one of those cosmopolitan shopping streets in “advanced countries” (xianjin guojia).

In 1998 New Kujiang became one of the Department of Commerce’s “Exemplary Business Streets” (shifan shangdianjie). The proposed area included Wen-hua Road, Wen-heng 167 Alley, and Jen-chih Street between Wu-Fu and Hsin-Tian Roads. After receiving three years of funding, the Committee teamed up with consultants from the Corporate Synergy Development Center, a private firm commissioned by the Department, to survey merchants and shoppers to determine what they considered to be the worst and the best features of New Kujiang. The survey also tried to identify the extent to which shoppers and merchants would be willing to cooperate with spatial changes and regulations on traffic. A detailed Development Plan for the New Kujiang Business Street was then presented to the municipal government and the Department of Commerce for approval.

What the merchants wanted most was to see more attention paid to the aesthetic improvement of the buildings and infrastructure. They
did not rank reducing the “chaos” caused by business signs and regulating street vendors as among the most urgent issues. Nonetheless, the Development Plan stressed that a disorderly (*zaluan*) streetscape was the main factor that held New Kujiang back and, like other similar street-making projects in Taiwan, focused its attention on reducing disorder (CSDC 1998:1–3). It acknowledged that street vendors “contribute to shopping activity in the area” but pointed out that they “cause traffic congestion and an untidy appearance” and need to be “tidied up and regulated” (CSDC 1998:4–5). The number of vendors should be “reduced or regulated,” restricting them in “areas where space and sight permits,” and their pushcarts and stalls would all have the same design elements in a style that would “match the streets.” (CSDC 1998:4–5). The competing business signs and retractable awnings hanging outside of many shops were also regarded as culprits in New Kujiang’s chaos. To achieve better visual consistency, the Plan proposed to design small business signs mounted at the same height. The awnings would be colorful but organized, with the same colors and patterns and hung at the same height (CSDC 1998:4–7). On Wen-hua Road and Jen-Chih Street, ornamental flowering trees would be planted on both sides. The Alley is too narrow for trees. Therefore, the Development Plan proposed to build arbors overhead, creating “a pedestrian space underneath green canopies (*chonglong*)” (CSDC 1998:5–5).

The reason why they needed to create a pedestrian space, the Plan argued, was that “good-quality shopping streets are often pedestrian zones” where “pedestrians can enjoy the fun of shopping without being bothered by automobiles” (CSDC 1998:4–2). While there were many buses serving the area, most shoppers and merchants in New Kujiang relied on scooters as their primary means of transportation. Lack of parking facilities forced people to park their scooters in the arcades (*qilou*). However, merchants had been using the arcades as an extension of their merchandising area. Street vendors also set up stalls in the arcades for protection from the weather or on the sidewalks right outside, blocking access to the arcades. Pedestrians were often forced to spill out onto the streets to avoid the blockage, exacerbating the already congested traffic and ensuing constant turf battles between the merchants, pedestrians, and motorists. Thus, the most important item to be addressed, according to the plan, was to “give pedestrians their space back” (CSDC 1998:4–5), so that they could move in a leisurely way through a space where there would be no confusion, no crowding, and no automobile traffic. It recommended employing minimum street furniture to keep the space as open as possible and using bricks to form mosaics on the surface of the streets for better artistic quality. Spray nozzles embedded in the street would allow cars to drive on them when the water is turned off and could serve to cool the street in summer when turned on. The sidewalks and the streets would be on the same level to open up the space. However, in order to ensure that foot traffic and automobile traffic would be separated, they would be paved with
bricks of different materials or in different patterns. Planter boxes would be placed on both sides of Wen-Hua Road and the automobile lanes would curve around them to form a wavy pattern and force the traffic to slow down. Since traffic on Jen-Chih Street is interrupted by crosscutting streets and automobiles are already forced to go slow, the designers preferred to leave it open so that large outdoor events could take place on the plaza in front of the movie theater. Automobiles would not be allowed during the evenings and on the weekends. Chen, a consultant to New Kujiang Shopping Streets, explained that the spatial arrangement would encourage users to behave as designed. “When you have a planned space, people would form a habit.” He argued. “Once it is formed, there would be no need for authorities to regulate their movements anymore.” Without the need to compete with unruly scooters and street vendors, merchants and shoppers would also be “less aggressive” and the environment would be safer and more peaceful, allowing for pleasant shopping experiences.

The picture of pedestrians leisurely strolling down paved walkways shaded by colorful awnings and flanked by flowering trees, outdoor cafes, and carefully designed kiosks recalls the pedestrian malls of many urban centers that strive to bring commerce and consumers together in a controlled environment without automobile traffic. These projects are often a marriage between the “malling” of urban centers into engineered environments devoid of negative urban elements, and a nostalgic conception and construction of “urbanity” according to an imagery of urban public space that presumably existed before shopping malls (Boddy 1992; Crawford 1992; Jameson 2003; Kenny and Zimmerman 2004; McMorrough 2001; Mitchell 1996). While prototypes of today’s shopping mall attempt to recreate civic centers in the suburbs (Crawford 1992; Leong 2001; McMorrough 2001), these designated pedestrian zones in urban centers are also artificially constructed “organic” streets nostalgic of an “aura of urbanism” (Shepherd 2008:8). New Kujiang was engineered to be a downtown that evoked these shopping malls and pedestrian zones that were, in themselves, simulations of downtowns. However, for New Kujiang’s planners, the ideal was not to bring back a supposedly organic urban space but to close down the distance between New Kujiang and the modernity represented by shopping malls and the malled downtowns. To explain the ideal of their design, Mr. Liao, a member of the Committee for Development, brought out a box of photos taken at various malls and shopping streets throughout the world. They show carefully maintained gardens on the side of walkways, bright light, small kiosks, water fountains, stores with small business signs, and corridors paved with bricks or stone slabs. It was difficult to tell whether the scenes depicted were taken at open-air malls, enclosed shopping centers, or actual city streets. Even Mr. Liao himself could not remember. What he did remember vividly, however, were the colorful and “refined” (jingzhi) kiosks in a Detroit shopping mall and the “small and cute” (xiaoyiao ke’ai) streets in Austria. “This is the standard [biaozhun] we want.”
On the street

Even though New Kujiang’s blueprint was comprehensive, the Committee quickly realized that the plan they drafted to convince project reviewers was also a design that could not be fully carried out without breaking or bending a few rules. Moreover, since proposals to the government should not ask for funding to assist economic activities discouraged officially, the development plan had to neglect certain unwanted elements in New Kujiang. This inability of the design to accommodate existing practices is not only the result of a plan that looks too far away for inspiration but also a product of Taiwan’s highly formalized government regulation that often divorces itself from social realities. This gap, Jane Kaufman Winn (1994) argues, encourages people to look for alternative solutions or relegate the law to irrelevance. As the locals often say, whenever there is a policy from above, there would be a counter strategy from below. The rigidity of planning and control inevitably produce its own “dark twin” (Scott 1999) as people employ various “tactics” (De Certeau 1984) to shape and make use of the space. In the end, the streets in New Kujiang never did work as according to the plan.

The result of New Kujiang’s experiment, according to Hsu Ying-Chie and Yang Cheng-hsueh, is a failure. Inconvenient transportation, unregulated street vendors, insufficient promotional activities, a lack of a visitor center, and a lack of government cooperation have given it a “bad shopping atmosphere” and inferior “conditions [tiaojian]” compared to other projects (Hsu and Yang 2001:10). The cause of the failure to implement the plan properly, both Mr. Liao and Chen argue is that the government did not do its part and that those who carried out the construction did not understand the plan. By law, there has to be an open bid for every process of every construction project funded by public money. And the winning bid, according to Mr. Liao, did not always go to the company that understood their vision. Chen criticized the government for not having the foresight to create appropriate regulations and blamed the government’s inability to enforce traffic rules as the reason why the pedestrians did not change their habits. He recognized that, while Japan’s business streets have been one of the inspirations for Taiwan’s street-making projects, Taiwan does not have the regulations specifically devised for business streets that Japan does. Planners often find it impossible to implement similar designs. Moreover, because regulations are unclear, it is difficult for everyone involved to figure out who is responsible for what and what could or could not be built. As a result, the Committee did not get the trees, the specific kind of bricks, the designer trash cans, or the lamps they wanted. The awnings and fountains were never built. The decorative brick works and wavy street pattern lack the visual impact that had been planned.

Disregarding the rules of street closure, people still ride their scooters to New Kujiang. Wen-Heng 143 Alley, the residential street within New Kujiang, suffers heavily. Shoppers frequently leave their automobiles...
there, blocking entrances to buildings. Residents have raised complaints with the Committee numerous times and meetings were called to discuss the issue. However, since 143 Alley is not a business street, it is difficult to justify the inclusion of it in the planning for the New Kujiang Shopping Street or to seek resources from the project to address it. Even though vending is clearly visible on the street and the Committee needed cooperation from vendors to move their project ahead, the funding agency refused to grant any money that could help vendors in their illegal economic activities. Therefore, the plan had to give up on designing kiosks and pushcarts for them. Another “bad element” in New Kujiang that the project never addressed and the government does not want to support is arcade game houses. Residents and the Committee feel that they bring in bad crowds. But unless the game houses were to leave the area voluntarily, nobody could make them go away.

To counter the apparent contradiction between what they must propose to build and what they could actually build, the Committee resorted to doing things on their own and forming alliances with other shopping districts to pressure the municipal government. Since they could not hang transparent canopies over the streets to make them look like arcades, the Committee came up with private money to make banners that stretch across the streets to produce the same orderly effect. The Committee also exploited the inconsistency between central and local regulations. Because the project, including the design of pedestrian zone, was already endorsed by the central government, they ignored local construction codes to pave the streets with bricks and erect barriers at the entrances to New Kujiang to keep automobiles away. The Committee then lobbied with the city council and pled with local police to help enforcing the pedestrian rules. In addition to building things and waiting or pushing for the government to catch up, the Committee also began working with other shopping districts, bringing New Kujiang’s successful experience to them. Here, “success” refers not to being able to implement the design properly, but to being able to come up with a design to obtain government money and deal with bureaucratic procedures. Now that more people are making up streets, the Committee believes that the government has to react and the new spaces that they produce would be “legalized on the spot” (jioudi hefa). Moreover, since these shopping districts and the space for consumption that they provide are now an important part in the city’s tourism promotion, the city government turns a blind eye on these constructions and on other activities on the street even if the space underneath the colorful banners is not the kind of Euro-American cityscape that the Committee proposed and the official place-making project envisioned.

Like most shopping streets in Taiwan, New Kujiang’s space is densely occupied and highly fragmented. Property owners and shop managements often rent out the arcades in front of their shops to vendors or use them for storage or display of their merchandise. At times, when vendors do not use their spots, they would sublet them out to others. It was never the Development Plan’s intention to profit the street vendors. However,
the more famous New Kujiang becomes due to official planning and promotion, the more it attracts vendors and the more its space is divided up into the disorderly streets that the development plan wanted to eliminate. Once the streets were opened up for foot traffic, they became ideal environment for setting up vending booths and property owners now extend their control beyond the arcades to the street surface. There are multiple rows of vendors and shops on the street level and even more shops upstairs. To make the space more convenient for vending, water faucets are placed on the outer walls of buildings and power cables are extended from the shops onto the streets to provide water and electricity, making the space even more chaotic than before.

From a legal perspective, vending is illegitimate because vendors block traffic and do not have business licenses. But the local definition of what is legitimate is different. Once a person pays rent, she is entitled to a spot and to vend there. Therefore, even knowing that their business is illegal, vendors still feel that they are unfairly overlooked by the construction project and harassed by the police who sometimes give out citations twice a day and sometimes leave them alone for weeks. Shops and property owners do not appreciate any attempt to deny them the “right” to rent out space in front of their shops for extra income. They feel that what the Committee and local politicians should do is to ensure that this long-standing symbiotic relationship between shops and vendors can go on without disruption. As Yu Shuenn-Der (1999) notes, in Taiwan, street vendors are often crucial to whether or not a marketplace (shi) could “take shape” (cheng) because they attract shoppers and give the street a lively atmosphere. Many business and property owners in New Kujiang persist in renting out the space to vendors because their presence is considered beneficial to the market as a whole. Tian appreciated the constructions that came with the project but disagreed with its neglect of vendors. Joyce, the owner of a clothing boutique, believed that vendors brought in the crowd and this is good for business in the area in general. Peipei, a salesclerk, observed that, when the streets in New Kujiang were repaved and vendors relocated temporarily, business was down because people thought the “shi” was not open for business. After working there for nearly a year, she had developed a sense of camaraderie with the vendors: “I help them put their stuff away [into our shop] when the police come.” It was simply an act of reciprocity.

The plan that ignores certain elements on the street, the gap between regulation and social realities, and the police’s selective enforcement of the law caused frustration and confusion among street vendors and conventional businesses. What is clear on paper, that is, the design and the regulations, is experienced as arbitrary and unjust. Local police never attempt to evict street vendors completely, but they also never stop giving out citations. Some vendors flee from the police, some chalk up the fine as cost of business operation, and some attempt establishing personal relation with police officers in the hope that they would be spared the citations. Vendors are not the only ones upset by the project and the officials. Sam, a store owner, thought that the plan had missed
the point. He felt that the better-organized streets benefited the street vendors more than his shop inside NKSM because “people would spend their money outside and have nothing left to spend inside [the mall].”

Unable to work out what the government wants from them and what these on-going projects are for, some decided that the constructions are a proof that the government is corrupt. As this theory confirms the commonly held view of government corruption in Taiwan, those who practice their trades there or frequent the area also think that they are justified not to follow the rules. Merchants and shoppers still ride their scooters to New Kujiang and use any unoccupied space for parking. Property owners still rent out spaces to vendors. To cope with parking issues and earn extra income, some residents in 143 Ally turned the ground floor of their buildings into parking lots or rent out rooms upstairs to vendors for them to store their merchandise or hide from the police. The development plan called for cooperation in the hope of being competitive as a whole, but those who work there ignore or do not care to know about the regulations on business signs, usage of sidewalks and arcades, and public safety precisely because they want to compete. In stressing competitiveness and profit-seeking, the official project and narrative inadvertently provided a ready vocabulary for these local actors to justify their persistence in evading, bending, breaking, or neglecting regulations. Moreover, the official vision of a globalized urban space became reworked by locals to construct alternative visions of transnational connection.

Energy even though it never turned out to be the legible and user-friendly “quality” shopping district that the planners had in mind, a look at New Kujiang’s streets would suggest that they are far from lacking in commercial activity. Instead, it is in this “failure” to submit the streets to the plan that New Kujiang maintains the unruly energy that had made it famous. On any given afternoon and evening, the streets are crowded. Shops put poster stands or flags outside their doors to draw more attention and set up tables and awnings outside to extend their space. Popular music from various eras and in different languages blasts out from shops. Vendors, who now have expanded beyond the area in front of the movie theater, shout in a mixture of Mandarin, Hoklo, and occasionally, English, or Japanese. Foot traffic is slow and pedestrians have to keep stopping and looking around, either at the displays on the streets or at other shoppers. Inside the shopping gallerias, the supposedly clean and clear construction never fully materialized. The corridors are narrow and not well lit by Taiwanese standards. Store directories are often unavailable. In NKSM, as a result of later expansion that incorporated previously existing buildings, the floors are not of the same height and the corridors take strange turns and crosscut each other at unexpected intervals. The joy of discovery or the frustration of getting lost make shopping in New Kujiang an adventure in itself.
The action-packed street was exciting for Mika, a 25-year-old from Taichung. The crowds and the astonishing quantity of goods reminded her of a night market where “people go about their everyday business.” New Kujiang was the highlight of her weekend visit to Kaohsiung. “People say it’s like Hsimenting (Ximending) [commercial area in Taipei] but I don’t agree. This place has more life.” She claimed enthusiastically. Mika looked at New Kujiang as a place where people live and a representation of what she thought the tropical city was—sunny, healthy, and renao (hot and noisy). But exactly the same streets that represented “Kaohsiung” to her are places where local shoppers come to get in touch with elsewhere. Merchants and vendors often advertise their merchandise as freshly imported and claim that they are “synchronic” (tongbu) with Tokyo, New York, London, and other locales representing the centers of world fashion. Every once in a while, some shops would close their doors for a few days. Notes would be posted to inform the shoppers that the managers have gone abroad for more supplies. Joyce claimed that New Kujiang’s fashion trends are more current than that of department stores. Her “Japanese” apparel, it turns out, is mostly manufactured in southeastern China with Taiwanese designs. Even though many shops still build their reputations on unique water cargos and the accessories and clothes sold in New Kujiang maintain close association with Japanese and American youth fashions, managers like Joyce who rely on Chinese or Taiwanese products are not uncommon. To differentiate her merchandise from others, Joyce renovates her store almost once a year to maintain a fresh look. Constant visual changes in store design and display reinforce the sense that New Kujiang’s fashion is timely and that its reaction time to the newest trends is rapid. But underneath the decorations intended to distinguish one shop from another and the advertisements of uniqueness and individual characters, one finds similar products everywhere in New Kujiang and beyond. The attraction of merchandise in New Kujiang lies not in their uniqueness but their being embedded in a landscape composed of the images, names, and languages of elsewhere that, together, constitute a context within which the objects consumed become “unique” signs of participation and inclusion in a transnational commodity culture.

For many merchants and shoppers, New Kujiang is “internationalized” not in the sense that it physically resembles Euro-American shopping streets, but in the sense that these distant locales are evoked through imaginations as well as material objects to build a different kind of place. In “celebrating the spectacular,” “demonstrating their nuanced grasp of a cosmopolitan spatial order,” and “remaking the streets they inhabit in the image of the topoi they admire” (Weiss 2002:105), those who took to the streets of New Kujiang conflate the world into the streets there to construct an order of transnational fashion. Joyce’s shop has an Italian name. A photograph shop in the Alley is called “Tokyo” (Dongjing). Across the street from “Tokyo” is a small shopping mall by the name of “Queen’s Boulevard” (Huanghou Dadao of Hong Kong) and a shop selling household goods called “L.A.” (L.A. Shenghuoguan). Not far
from “L.A.,” Lian, a food vendor selling “Indian Chai Tea,” proudly displays English-Chinese bilingual menu on his pushcart. This juxtaposition of “international array of locales representing ‘other’ places” constitutes a “fantasy geography” that not only provides illusion of temporal-spatial travel but also distances New Kujiang from the surrounding city (Weiss 2002:104). However, this distancing works both ways, for these foreign signs also remind those who stroll the streets of the absence of New Kujiang/Taiwan itself in this “international array of locales.” While Mika saw the revealing outfits sported by female shoppers and vendors as a peculiar style that reflected local weather, Tian saw the fashion statements being made in New Kujiang as poor imitations of other cities’ fashion style. New Kujiang, to her, was Hsimenting with a tan living under its shadow.

The double distancing is manifest clearly in a dance studio where a space of “America” was constructed in order to promote hip hop dance. On the wall along the stairway leading to the dance studio are graffiti portraying dance moves. One side of the studio is covered by a large mural depicting street scenes. A faux storefront made of wood panels and another façade of a wooden house also takes up part of the wall. Large signs of Coca Cola and Sprite are painted on them. In front of the shop and the house is a boardwalk reminiscent of buildings from Western movies. When asked why they chose to paint Coca Cola signs and build the boardwalk, a member of the dance group who founded the studio answered that it was because they are “American” and America is where hip hop started. The juxtaposition of these images based on transnational commodities, whether these are images from Western films or brand-name logos, simulates an “American” space different from the streets outside. Here, hip hop dance is promoted as a healthy sport. Eddie, a dancer, explained that, while its “central idea (zhongxin xixiang)” originated from the streets of New York, “the whole world is influenced by hip hop.” Therefore, this global popular culture form could be dislocated from the streets of New York and become a neutral medium through which Eddie expresses his life philosophy and imagines his position in the wide world of hip hop. “Hip hop is about living happily,” he explained. “But you need an economic basis to live happily.” Regrettably, making it as a hip hop dancer is not easy in Taiwan and even less so in Kaohsiung. Eddie had to travel to Taipei to take part in dance competitions. Adding to the difficulty is the lack of opportunity in the music industry because record companies prefer foreign dancers to local ones. In this global hip hop landscape that Eddie has constructed, Taiwan remains at the margin even though it does not have to be so. Working as individuals, Taiwanese dancers cannot compete with foreigners. However, Eddie professed, “if we can bring everybody together, we can change the situation.” The solution, according to him, is that someone rich and powerful, “like the government,” has to get involved: “It can fund a program for all dancers. That way, everybody can devote all their energy to promote hip hop dancing. And then, things can change in an instant.” Eddie felt that an ordinary citizen (xiao laobaixing) such as himself has
limited resources and power to change things and hoped that, through
government intervention, this distance between Taiwan and the world
can be crossed. But if the government did not do anything, Eddie would
try his luck in China. With entrepreneurial initiative, he was going to
find a way out no matter what.

While Eddie saw his future in China, others in New Kujiang were
more ambivalent. Unlike Eddie, most of them cannot simply pack up and
leave the island or the city. Even though vending is still active on the
streets in New Kujiang and transnational labels are opening shops in the
area, small businesses are feeling the pressure from the real and perceived
economic plight on the island due in part to industries moving offshore
to China. Despite all the constructions and promotions to make Kaohsi-
ung more attractive to capital, its postindustrial transformation is expe-
rienced as rising unemployment rates and stagnation in real earning.
Forced out of dependent employment, some turned to vending or small
businesses for survival. And many young people, like Eddie, find it
difficult to get the jobs they desire in their hometown. With the pressure
from economic recession rising and challenge from transnational chains
and vendors mounting, many merchants are considering leaving for a
cheaper area or pinning their hopes on the Chinese tourists who might or
might not buy from them. In any case, “the government has to do
something,” Sam argued. “They’ve got to make things right for us.”

Showcases

A decade after the Datong Department Store burned down, the
formerly residential streets in New Kujiang have been dressed up
into showcases of transnational flows of goods and images. Across
the road from Datong, a park long associated with the Formosa Incident
has been renamed Central Park and renovated with wide walkways and
outdoor cafes. A new subway system had been constructed and opened
in late 2008. In this engineered space that seeks to emulate faraway
places, it becomes possible to envision being a part of a world beyond
Taiwan—the quality shopping districts of advanced countries, the
fashion centers of Japan, America, and Europe, and the transnational hip
hop community. However, the very effort to construct a cosmopolitan
space in New Kujiang underscores the distance between this shopping
district and all those elsewhere. And while the imageries of moderniza-
tion and internationalization are clearly on display on the streets of New
Kujiang, how to reach out to close the distance between the city and the
imaginary modern globe and how to achieve collective as well as private
gains still troubles it.

New Kujiang built its reputation on its unruly entrepreneurial spirit,
but a constant issue raised there was that the government needs to take
a more active role. This demand for government involvement reflects
Taiwan’s history of dependence on a state-planned economy. However,
in asking and pushing the government to do more for businesses, it also
shows an emphasis on entrepreneurialism that is more inline with the neoliberal logic of a “free” market supported by the state’s (active) compliance to market principles. This call for more government initiative also points to the discrepancy between various visions of New Kujiang’s future as the official construction of local places did not always match the expectations of local businesses and residents. This discrepancy between the plan and the actual street left locals frustrated and gave the authority, often in the figure of police officers giving out citations, more discretion. However, it also creates room for maneuver as customary practices found their way back into this engineered space, and locals gave the regulations and the project different interpretations. The Committee looks to Euro-American streets to physically alter the space of New Kujiang into the kind of globalized urban space endorsed by the government. The vendors, merchants, and customers, however, take their participation in transnational youth fashion as a form of “internationalization.” The principle of market competition and the idioms of modernization and internationalization that have been relentlessly stressed in official narrative become adopted, reworked, or distorted by locals as they negotiate between a national project and personal aspirations—all in the name of good business.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The research and writing for this paper were partially funded by the Taiwan National Science Council (NSC97-2410-H-007-018). Primary fieldwork was conducted in Kaohsiung City in 2002 for a period of six months as part of my research on consumption in Taiwan. Follow-up research was carried out in 2006 and 2008. I began with interviewing the main figures in New Kujiang’s revitalization project and gradually expanded my contact to shop managers, vendors, and others working in the area. In addition, I worked in a specialty shop, splitting my time between its main store in New Kujiang and another branch, to gain better understanding of the daily operations in New Kujiang. I returned in 2008 for follow-up research with emphasis on street vending. All research was conducted in the local dialect Hoklo (Southern Min) and the official language Mandarin Chinese.

1 Although correct pronunciation of the name in Mandarin is “kujiang,” locals often pronounce it as “juejiang.” There are also many different forms of romanization of New Kujiang. The names appeared on the business signs of the shopping mall of the same name show both “Shin Kuchan” and “New Horie.” The official web site of Kaohsiung City translates it as “Hsin Chueh Chiang.” I have opted to combine its meaning with romanization in pinyin system and use New (xin) Kujiang for clarity.

2 “Place making” refers to the combined effort of physical and discursive construction of “locality.”

3 The earliest urban planning in Taiwan by the Japanese was intended to sanitize the cities. From there, the Japanese empire proceeded to more detailed planning that aimed to avoid chaos and maximizing economic benefit of the colonizer (Ye 1993). With its checkered street grids and wide road, Kaohsiung was designed to allow heavy traffic to move resources from the hinterland to the harbor. It has been argued that it was one of the most thoroughly planned cities under the Japanese (Huang et al. 1992).
This aid was part of Cold War politics in which the United States helped protecting Taiwan from the People's Republic of China and allied with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan to contain the spread of Communism. During the Korea War (1950–1953), the United States sent military advisors to assist in the training of Taiwanese armed forces. They established bases and residences in all major military bases in Taiwan. The island also served as a vacationing spot and a midway station for American troupes during the Vietnam War (1959–1975).

Xinkuijiang Jingpin Shangchang. The official English translation is New Kuchan Shopping Mall.

Danbang originally means itinerate traders who bring goods from one location to sell in another. Bang, literally “group” or “gang,” can also be used to refer to trade organizations in traditional China. Itinerate traders often operate (pao) their trades alone (dan). Therefore, their activities are described as pao danbang. Here, pao connotes the double meaning of “run” and “operate.” In Taiwan, traders who frequently travel across borders are called danbangke while the term danbang has come to refer to the trade instead of the trader.

Shuahuo (water cargos) refers to foreign goods that are imported through unauthorized channels.

Because of the colonial connection, to many Taiwanese, Japan remains the symbol of modernity and technological superiority (Cheng 2002; Iwabuchi 2002, 2004; and Lee and Ho 2002).

Kowinski (1985) notes that malls employ the same technique as Disney's Main Street by making the shops smaller than those on the streets to create visual consistency and clarity. Richard Francaviglia (1996) also observes that the spatial layout of shopping malls bear striking resemblance to Disneyland's Main Street, itself a simulation of civic centers. See, Sorkin (1992) on Disney's simulation of small-town America, and Davies (1998) on how imageries of main street America and Disneyland inform one another.

Small-scaled business and self-employment has been stalwart in Taiwan's economy. Fragmented manufacturing process provides a niche for small establishments while a weakly-regulated private sector with little protection for workers and a lack of upward mobility in dependent employment contribute to the choice for self-employment (Yu and Su 2004). In Simon’s accounts on women entrepreneurs in Taipei, personal and financial freedom is also often cited as the reason why they opted for self-employment (2003). In addition, Yu (1999) and Tai (1994) attribute the decision for street vending to the lack of opportunity in the formal sector and the perceived social mobility of advancing from labor to business-owner.

According to surveys made in 1995 and 1997, roughly 65 percent of the shoppers in New Kujiang were between the ages of 20 and 30, and 20–22 percent under 20 years old, about 70 percent of them female (CSDC 1998; Hsu and Yang 2001).

See Lu (2002) for an analysis on this politics of constructing local places within the context of nation-building in Taiwan.

There are two precursors to the program. The 1995 Image Business Clusters Construction Program targeted “traditional business clusters formed organically by individual shops” while the 1996 Business Street Development and Advancement Program targeted “commercial agglomerations formed of small and mid-sized retailers concentrating in one area” (CPC 1999:6). In 2000 the two initiatives were combined to form a single Business Streets and Districts Development Program to eliminate the official division between the rural business clusters (shangquan) and urban business streets (shangdianjie).

After business organizations submit proposals through local governments, the Department provides initial funding for them to come up with detailed plans, usually under the tutorage of planning experts from the Department or affiliated consulting
firms. Subsequent funding is granted through local governments after the plans are laid out and the consultants would provide assistance throughout the grant period. The main consulting firms are Taipei-based Corporate Synergy Development Center and China Productivity Center.

At the time of the proposal, nearly 500 shops of various sizes were located within the area, over 200 of them inside NKSM. In addition to NKSM, there were four other small-sized shopping centers.

The most urgent issues identified by merchants are “parking,” “store management,” “sanitation (qingjie) of the streets,” “holding street events,” “collective promotional activities,” “renewing business signs,” “problems of vendors,” “arcades being occupied,” and “cables,” listed according to the order ranked.

For the survey question “What do you consider to be the most severe [problem of the] streetscape,” three out of eight possible answers contain the word “chaotic” (luan) in them and two others (vendors and garbage) imply untidiness. The eight options are “parking,” “the facilities’ (sheshi) lack of comprehensiveness,” “the facilities’ lack of artistic quality,” “dirty and chaotic environment,” “dumping of garbage,” “unruly and chaotic business signs,” “chaotic cables,” and “vendors all over the place,” listed according to the importance accorded to them by merchants surveyed (CSDC 1998:2–17).

This negative view towards vending is not limited to the planners of New Kujiang. Chuang’s study (2005) in Taipei’s Yongkang community shows similar attempt to confine vendors in a designated area and improve the appearances of vending stalls. Yu observes that, in Taiwan’s modernization process, vending has increasingly been “condemned as an activity sabotaging Taiwan’s economic and social well-being” (2004:133). Tai (1994) provides detailed account on changing policies on vending in Taiwan. Donovan (2008) and Shepherd (2008) also trace the perception of vending as threat to public order, cause of traffic congestion, potential health problems, and unfair competition in different parts of the world.

The arcades, formed by the second stories of buildings overhanging the sidewalks, are a distinctive architectural feature found in most commercial streets in Southeast Asia.

Japanese business streets are used as examples for Taiwanese business districts in official publications (CSDC 2000a and 2001).

The uneven surface and bricks caused inconvenience to female shoppers on high heels and the streets had to be repaved in late 2008.

Residents originally refused to be included in the development plan, preferring to keep 143 Alley residential. This stance has softened considerably throughout the years.

A portion of Jen-Chih Street was left out in the early stage of construction because there was a dance hall and the city government did not want to repave that part of the street. Ironically, the parking issue seemed to have created an unintentional effect that kept the “bad crowds” away. One former game house manager pointed out that the “real gangsters” stayed away from New Kujiang because there is no parking space.

Official publications often compare New Kujiang to Hsimenting, the first pedestrian shopping zone in Taiwan, because it is much better known than New Kujiang and enjoys an iconic status built on the rich literature, cinema, and scholarly scrutiny. See Chi (2001) for detailed study on Hsimenting’s changing landscape.

The incident is sometimes referred to as Kaohsiung Incident. In 1979, an International Human Rights Day rally in the park turned into violent confrontations between the police and the demonstrators. Many of the participants arrested were associated with Melidao (Formosa) magazine, an oppositional publication, thus the name “Formosa Incident.”
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