

# Cultural Heritage in Conflict Narratives in Urban Development Plan

## The Case Study on Shezih Region, Taipei City

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**Abstract:** Taipei's Shezi Island is a case of suspension of development, visions (or fantasies) from authorities and alternative vision from residents. The region's development has been restricted since 1970 when it was designated as flood buffer zone of Taipei City. The restriction prohibited new buildings in the region. From 1980, Taipei City Government raised several urban development plans for the region. These development plans were all embedded in visions based on famous cities in western world, and most of them are famous with their relation to water, such as Venice and Manhattan. However, these visions neglected Shezi Island's urban morphology, and were all discarded due to conflicts of land expropriation and other issues. The suspension of future development makes Shezi Island into a spatial limbo. By discourse analysis on urban development plans and news release, I tried to figure out landscape narratives of Taipei City Government under different regimes after 1980. By field research and participatory design with local residents, several students from my institute and I inspire different possibilities of landscape narrative, and understand the conflicts between different actors in the development process. "Ecological Shezi Island," the latest version of development plan is also creating debates and conflicts in the region. Coalition of local residents, scholars and professionals are finding the alternative vision while resisting the newest fantasy from city government.

## 1. Introduction

Shezih region (社子島) is a peninsula on the downstream converge point of Tamsui River and Keelung River, the most important rivers in Taipei metropolitan area. The region usually gets public attention only in typhoon season, when media would check if the region floods. The region's landscape is very different from other parts of Taipei City. Houses are built in bricks with iron sheet roofs and no more than 3 floors. Factories also built by iron sheets are settled in the middle of farmland. People can find many temples in the region, some of them are still the religious center of local settlements.

Shezih region's development has been restricted since 1970 when it was designated as flood buffer zone of Taipei City. The restriction prohibited locals to build new buildings and renovate original housing. From 1980, Taipei City Government raised different visions when a new mayor takes the office. Some of the visions were embedded in visions based on famous cities

in western world that are famous for their relation to water, such as Venice and Manhattan. However, these visions neglected the region's original landscape, and were all discarded due to conflicts of land expropriation and other issues. When Wen-Je Ko (柯文哲) took the office in December 2014, he seems to have a different way dealing with the region. Ko raised three plans and the option of remain current status to residents in Shezih region. Although concerns on settlement plan, land expropriation and different issues raised during discussion, the city government held a voting in the region and claimed that *Ecological Shezi* (生態社子島) would be the plan despite low voting rate.

The main purpose of this paper is analyzing how heritage is used in the narratives of different stakeholders in conflict in the process of new urban development.

## 2. Methodology

In Taiwanese context, urban development plan is usually a threat for the region's cultural heritage. Huang (2016) reminded us that in most of the discussion of future development in Taiwan, cultural heritage preservation plan and urban development plan are often in parallel and disregarding each other. The Cultural Heritage Preservation Act. Heritage preservation movement on new urban plan does not only calls for attention on local heritage, but also reminds authorities not to ignore development and planning history of a place.

There are researches on how authorities recognize cultural heritage. Smith (2006) raised the concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). AHD emphasizes on aesthetically pleasing tangible objects, places, sites or events. AHD also prefers heritage with clear historical context and single historical narrative. Authorities build their heritage discourse and exclude heritage that cannot fit into the discourse. Also in the process of defining heritage, AHD chooses narrators for the meaning of heritage. To Harrison (2012), authorities try to redefine cultural heritage through various methods of memory selection. Harrison noticed heritage associated with small-scale societies and the everyday practices is rarely credited as heritage due to various reasons. Heritage which falls into the category of daily ritual can be seen too regular to have the value to be preserved. Smith (2006: 82) pointed out that heritage is a constitutive social process which is dissonant. It is about regulating and legitimizing, but also about contesting and challenging a range of cultural and social identities, sense of place, collective memories, values and meanings that prevail in the present and can be passed to the future. Heritage activism and advocacy can be engaged with social movement against urban changes that threaten original cultural context. There are studies on the importance of heritage activism and advocacy to contest and resist enforced urban change ignoring local histories and cultures (Casari & Herzfeld 2015; Hammami & Uzer 2018; Herzfeld 2009; Ingram 2016; Mozaffari 2015; Non 2016). Heritage activism and advocacy which engaged with resistance movement gives alternative narrative for communities to against exclusion and oppression caused by top-down planning.

This paper combines discourse analysis and participatory research method to analyze the narratives from different stakeholders in the conflict of Shezih Region's development. Discourse analysis is based on urban development plans, news release and heritage nomination document. Participatory observation has been done in Shezih region and Taipei City Government Urban Planning Commission (TUPC). My main participation time was from October 2015 to June 2016 with the studio course *Landscape Survey of Urban Islands* lead by Professor Min Jay Kang from National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Building and Planning (NTU-GIBP). Kang has become one of the scholars raising concerns on the upcom-

ing urban development plan and assisting residents to raise their opinions. The course raised my research interest on Shezih region and the Earth Gods' Parade. It also gave me the chance to become an observer collecting empirical data through observation, discussions with residents and personal analysis.

### 3. Analysis/Results

Shezih region is a religious region that pays respect to gods and ghosts. The Earth Gods' Parade (夜弄土地公) is one of the most significant festival in Shezih region. It is also a day of reunion for local families. The parade is held by four settlements in Si-jhou-di, Gang-cian-zih, Wun-liao, Jhong-ku and Si-tai-kou. Every year on the day of lantern festival, settlements carry out their Earth God and rally through Shezih region. Firecrackers are set by the routes of the Earth Gods' Parade to welcome the Earth Gods and people carrying the gods. People also carry and watch lanterns at night. The Earth Gods' Parade has unclear origin and evolution history. Archives of Shezih region's religious events are insufficient. It is only confirmed that the ritual was originated from Han immigrants and has lasted more than a hundred years. Earth God is usually the protector of a certain region and highly related to agricultural society. In Taiwanese tradition, Earth Gods are in charge of a region's harvest, fortune and prosperity. The purpose of parade could be also related to the region's high flooding risk in the past. According to former Taipei City Councilman Bi-Feng Chen, there were local elders saying that the firecrackers in the parade was meant to wake up earth gods to protect the region from land loss<sup>7</sup>. As for now, local residents pray for protection and fortune in the following new year. People also believe that setting up more firecrackers contribute more fortune. Kang mentioned the difficulty portraying the depth and width of history of the Earth Gods' Parade in an interview<sup>8</sup>. The challenge comes from not only the lack of archives, also settlements that participated in the ritual varies due to settlements development. For example, Gang-cian-zih, one of the four current settlements, only developed into an independent settlement in recent years. There are also settlements that participated in the ritual before but not anymore. Sia-jhu-wei was one of participating settlements in the ritual, but the settlement does not join the parade anymore. The main reason is the loss of younger generation in the settlement due to the restriction of development.

Taipei City Government Department of Cultural Affairs announced that six buildings in Shezih region would be designated as municipal cultural heritage in March 2016. The five historical buildings were recorded and traced reports by Department of Cultural Affairs before designation. On June 17, 2016, Taipei City Government released *The Main Changed Plan on Shilin Shezih Region* and *The Detailed Changed Plan on Shilin Shezih Region*. There is a section on local culture and folklore in the main changed plan which takes four pages. It (19) starts with an introduction summarizing the history of Han immigrants in the region and comparing settlement names to the past. It then mentions that religion and worship circles shaped the settlements. It does not mention the kinship in these settlements. In the end, it says that "settlement buildings, worship circles and cultural performances are the soul of settlement" (19), and "there are several buildings and several intangible culture with historical values". (19) The section then makes local cultural heritage into three categories: 'historical buildings', 'other buildings with cultural meanings' and 'cultural heritage with cultural value related to traditional arts and folklore.' The description on the Earth Gods' Parade is short, vague and contains mistakes on basic ideas, just like description on other cultural heritage.

With the inspiration of the studio course, residents in Shezi started to collaborate with professionals and activists, and takes cultural heritage into the narrative of resistance. The first phase of the course can be divided into two parts. While in classroom, we made structural analysis from second-hand materials of development plans, governmental policies and historical documents. We also discussed and categorized first-hand materials from the field. Some of the materials would be presented as pictures, photo collage and other things that will be mentioned in the following paragraphs. While visiting Shezi region, we met local residents in visiting and did non-structural interviews. It built up the social network that would be helpful for the following research and actions. We visited temples in Shezih region and spent most of the time in Kun-Tian Temple. We met the Completion Jiu of Kun-Tian Temple and joined in one of the nights. We tried to describe the cultural identity of Shezih region from its religious culture. In this phase, we also found Marshal of the Central Altar could be a metaphor for Shezih region's development.

In phase two of the course, we tried to create a landscape narrative of Shezih region after the field research from phase one, such as local memories, mythology, historical events, images and local residents we talked to. The narrative was expected to inspire multiple interpretations from local residents (Kang 2017: 59). We made a photo collage scroll with illustration based on our research in phase one. We brought the scroll into the region and shared with local residents. We got many feedbacks from local residents. They told us our feelings and thought toward the scroll. Some of them even shared more memories and information of Shezih region. We met Mr. R in the process, who inspired us the main figure of our next version of scroll. Mr. R's story was a miniature of a group of local residents who do not own land or even property. He was born and raised in Shezih region after his mother divorced and brought her children back home. He raised his three children in the region and let them study in local elementary school and junior high school. Mr. R and his family would face departure from the region, as they rent house from family member and do not have property ownership. Mr. R, like many people who recognized themselves as Shezih people, have faced the same crisis in the new urban development plan. With Mr. R's permission, we took him as the model of our main character in the story. The main concept of the story was originated from a line in the movie *Interstellar*. "Once you are a parent, you are the ghost of your children's future". We adapted the idea of complex time-space imagination from the movie and compared it to the Shezih's culture of ghost. Ghost was also a metaphor for local residents like Mr. R. These people live in the region for decades, even over generations. However, the urban development plan does not take them into consideration. Most of them would be like ghost because they couldn't afford new housing in the future and left their hometown forever. In our story, the main character tells his story in first-person narrative. He is permitted to go back to Shezih region by Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝). In the short visit for only three days, he sees a Shezih region under uncertain future. The narrator sees places and people he was familiar with. He sees residents being rushed to decide their future in I-Voting in limited knowledge and information. In the end, he watches the documentary of last year's Earth Gods' parade with residents on a silver screen at Si-tai-kou. He tries to manifest himself within the image of earth god when light and smog at their fullest and wish that could see him. The story was co-created in magical realism, as it was originated by field research but adapted elements of fantasy. We named the scroll *Along Rivers of Shezih* (社子上河圖), which was inspired by *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, the most famous scroll painting in Chinese art history. The scroll came along with a board game. During the course discussion, we thought the future development of Shezih region is just like a big game. Most of the residents were like chesses controlled by other stakeholders. By creating board game, we tried to encourage resi-

dents becoming players of the big game of Shezih after playing it. We adapted the game rule of Ticket to Ride, a famous board game. In Ticket to Ride, player who builds the longest railroad wins the game. In our version of board game, player who connect the longest route of firecrackers wins the game. The earth god and the father's ghost would come up in the smoke of firecrackers. People can play the board game without knowing the story. But with the prequel story of the scroll, players can have a better understanding in Shezih region and the development issues. The first version of the scroll was presented in the final presentation of fall semester in January, 2016. The second version was created with hand-drawn line illustration instead of photo collage. It was printed out as a large scroll lengths 15 meters. The course chose to display the scroll and the board game to the public for the first time in Fu-An Junior High School (福安國中). The display was held with presentations by foreign students in the course. Students from China, Spain and Sweden shared stories about culture differences and their hometowns to students between 12 to 15. After the sharing by foreign students, the scroll was hanged in the hallway. Course members read out the story to students, parents, other local residents and Mr. R and his wife. After this, we invited students to write down their own stories or memories of Shezih region on Post-it notes. We also invited them to draw themselves into the scroll, as we left blank it the ending part of scroll. After the display in Fu-An Junior High School, the scroll was displayed twice in Kun-Tian temple and Si-tai-kou. When the scroll was displayed, residents gathered and started to recognized scenes in the scroll. They found out places and people they were familiar with, and told us about more places and stories of the region. The third phase of the course started after the school year ended. The initial coalition between Shezih residents, scholars and professional was established in the studio class. Kang and students mainly from NTU-GIBP cooperated with Self-Saving Community of Shezih Region (社子島居民自教會), a group organized by residents who had concerns on future development plan and demand city government to reconsider the plan. They attended Taipei City urban plan commissions and presented petitions to city government. These people along with professionals and scholars later joined in would become Professionals Coalition on Shezih Planning (專業者關注社子島陣線). Two important incidents happened before the Earth Gods' Parade in 2017 due to the coalition. First was on the parade itself. After the course members discussed with representatives from four settlements participated in the Earth Gods' Parade, they decided to find volunteers and filming team of Our Island to help filming the Earth Gods' Parade. These filming materials would later become a short documentary and two episodes of Our Island. In this meeting, people from the four settlements also made an agreement that four earth gods would gather together during the parade, which has never happened before. These efforts were made to preserve memories of the festival and raise awareness from citizens of the city. The coalition also contributed a workshop in January, 2017. The coalition believed that a professional and responsible plan for Shezih region should be originated from the real problems the region is facing and based on a sufficient, meticulous site analysis. Based on the idea, Professionals Coalition on Shezih Planning and Self-Saving Community of Shezih region organized a workshop together. *A Blueprint in Microcosm Workshop and Forum for an Alternative Future of Shezidao Settlement* was a five-day workshop held in Shezih region. Students from urban planning, landscape, architecture, hydrology and related fields were divided into three groups. In the first four days, participants of workshop work intensively with interviews, field research and group discussions in daytime. Participants and local residents gathered in Kun-Tian temple at night. Each group presented their work, and residents gave feedback from their perspectives. On the last day, every group proposed their alternative plan for settlement in front of local residents. Professionals and scholars were invited to give suggestions. From the workshop and

alternative plans proposed, the coalition declared to the city government that there were more possibilities for the future of Shezih region and the it was trying to figure out. The studio class made some inspirations and created possibilities for alternative discourses in the place's future. In the studio class, we approached local residents that rarely had the chance and courage speaking out for themselves. Residents like Mr. R were encouraged to share their memories and experiences as a Shezih people. They shared their worries and expectation for future, which ironically were ignored while the city government tried to communicate with local residents. Some of the residents started to participate in the self-saving community and speak out in public hearings and urban commissions. Another effect of the course was highly related to Kang. His professional network was motivated as the course goes on. As a scholar and activist in urban movement for a long time, Kang's professional network is widely across universities, research institutes, public administrations and NGOs. He was one of the Director of Board of OURs at that time, an NGO worked on urban planning and housing policy for a long time. Professionals Coalition on Shezih Planning and the following international workshop in 2017 recruited students and scholars who were concerned about Shezih region and wanted to help. Finally, some of the works in studio class reminded local residents that the cultural heritage in their region was important, and it should not be excluded in the future. The reminder was one of the reasons that local residents nominated the Earth Gods' Parade as municipal intangible heritage.

In general, the file tries to build up the history of the parade, its value for the region and the city. The file tries to prove to the committee that the parade's history should be a strong reason supporting it to be cultural heritage. This is caused by the disadvantage that there were no archives which can give clear picture of the parade's history. The file also emphasizes the importance of the parade to Taipei City. It makes efforts on changing the image of Shezih region from an underdeveloped and poor place restricted by building prohibition. The nomination is not only a legal step preserving the parade, but also a tactic resisting the upcoming urban development plan. The tactic is both 'rooting' in to preserve local heritage and 'routing' for support out of local communities (Kang 2017: 58).

The New Shezih Urban Development Plan has faced confrontations since its debut in the 692th meeting of Taipei urban Planning Commission (TUPC) on July 29, 2016. Local residents filed petitions to the committee with their concerns of the new plan. Scholars and professionals represented by OURs also filed a petition and listed 12 questions on the plan. In these questions, one of the points was the potential threat of the plan to local heritage (3-4). OURs argued that Intangible Cultural Heritage and the spirit of place raised in ICOMOS Quebec declaration were ignored in the plan. The original social relations, routes and nodes would vanish or be destroyed. Some members of the TUPC also noticed this concern and responded it during the review process. In the 694th commission, LC Chen (陳亮全) urged that the development plan should consider keeping the communities in Shezih region and reconsider the spatial form of high-rise buildings. He claimed cultural heritage and memories of Shezih region may be better preserved with reconsideration and adjust of plan. Chen-Meng Kuo (郭城孟) also suggested the city government to invite OURs into the project, as the group had strong ability in working and communicating with communities. Taipei City Government responded to the concern of heritage preservation twice during reviewing process of the urban development plan. In the first meeting, Department of Urban Development stated that folklore events in the region could be preserved and lasted. It claimed that since four settlements that participated in the Earth Gods' Parade would be in the second stage of future development, the ritual could be lasted for another while. It also guaranteed that since most of the cultural heritage buildings and religious centers would be preserved on-site, the parade and other ritual would be lasted

too32. In the last meeting in TUPC, the city government restated that historical buildings and religious centers would be land used for park. The city government also assured that the parks would meet the demands of religious rituals such as the Earth Gods' Parade.<sup>33</sup> The responses from city government revealed its optimism or carelessness in heritage preservation as we look into the future of the Earth Gods' Parade. Although three temples are preserved as religious center in the plan, none of the earth god temples is appointed as religious center or historical building. The routes and nodes of the parade have not been neither investigated nor considered into the plan. The social relationship in and across settlements could dissolve, since many residents may not stay after development due to disqualification and unable to afford rents.

#### 4. Discussion/Conclusion

The future of the Earth Gods' Parade and the social bonding of several settlements is under threat due to the ignorance by the city government. The Ko government have tried bottom-up strategy in policy making since taking the office. But in the case of Shezih region, the i-Voting and following planning process reveals that the city government cares more on efficiency. From zone expropriation to resettlement plan, Ecological Shezi has similar solutions comparing to former development plans. The main concerns in the past could not be solved. The Ko government however was satisfied with Ecological Shezi and determined to accomplished it with all costs. The vague culture and heritage preservation policy in the future plan revealed the planning authorities' limited understanding on cultural heritage. These threats resulted in resistance and different discourse on the Earth Gods' Parade.

The Earth Gods' Parade in Shezih region gives us a look on how a place's heritage is related to local development. Shezih region's marginality in Taipei City's spatial development history made the region the first choice to sacrifice under the city's flooding prevention policies. The Earth Gods' Parade is also preserved due to the bonding within settlements in Si-jhou-di and the preserving efforts made by local residents. The bonding is strengthened as the parade being held every year. The event is under threat as Taipei City Government ignores the risk of settlement disintegration. The development plan is lack of solution to the risk and preservation of the parade. The plan's potential threat to the Earth Gods' Parade became one of the arguments for coalition of resistance resisting the plan. The parade however has never become the main focus for both the city government and the coalition of resistance. There are reasons that the Earth Gods' Parade has not become the main focus in the future development of Shezih region. The controversy on land expropriation and settlement plan during construction has been the main issue since Taipei City Government raised their vision of Shezih region in 1988. The issue is still the main concern for residents and stakeholders in Shezih region under Ecological Shezi. The long time efforts made by local residents like Hsieh and help from activists and professionals is still inspiring people in the region to discover its culture. However, the further discussion and persuasion of the place's future is hard as Ko's government forces the agenda of development going faster than former mayors. As the Ecological Shezi doesn't solve some of the residents' worries on land expropriation and settlement plan during construction, the Earth Gods' Parade is hard to become top issue in the conflict. Finally, the coalition of resistance paused the nomination for the Earth Gods' Parade as municipal intangible heritage. The event will still be reviewed under limited view from city government in the process of resistance and negotiation. There could be some difference if the coalition of resistance finds a strategy of shaping discourse apart from AHD and gains more support from people in the region and other parts

of Taipei City. However, the tense relationship between Ko's government and cultural heritage preservation activists can offset any efforts from the coalition. The city government claimed that the upcoming cultural heritage census in the region would prevent heritage preservation groups from nominating new cultural heritage, but the census could delay the development process. It is not a sign of friendliness from city government, since it blamed nominating cultural heritage in advance as a possible reason of development delay. We can observe strategies from different actors during the census in the coming days, and if the Earth Gods' Parade can become the main battlefield in Shezih region's future development. The effect of the nomination of the Earth Gods' Parade should be analyzed in several perspectives. The nomination tried to emphasize the importance of the parade and its relationship with current settlements. But the city government did not face the questioning on the plan's potential threat to communities and cultural heritage. On the other hand, land expropriation and resettlement plan during in future development process are still main concerns for local residents. It made the coalition difficult to set the future of cultural heritage as the main battlefield in the resistance. On the other hand, works from the studio course inspired residents to notice the possibility of losing cultural heritage if the development plan being realized. The narrative of future vision now has a chance to be more related to local culture, and more diverse opinion can be included.

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