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Artigo

HOUSING LOW-INCOME PEOPLE IN GLOBALIZING TAIPEI

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ABSTRACT – The idea of "becoming a global city" has strongly influenced the urban policies in Taipei, since the 1990s. The Taipei City Government has implemented several mega projects in the city, claiming to improve Taipei's global status, such as building the highest building in the world and creating a new financial district. Meanwhile, the squatter settlements, which used to be a part of Taipei's landscape after 1949, have rapidly disappeared and are displaced by luxury buildings and parks. Globalizing Taipei has become the fertile ground of housing speculation and has led to serious problems with housing affordability. Recently, the post-2005 housing boom has triggered a strong social rental housing movement. This article will first examine how "global city discourse" has influenced the urban projects in Taipei, since the 1990s. Then, it will explore the status of low-income housing in Taipei's urban policies. This article will draw on several theoretical concepts, including policy mobility, global cities, the right to the city, neoliberalization in East Asian cities, and worlding cities, to discuss the problem of low-income housing in globalizing Taipei.

Keywords: Housing, low-income people, Taipei, global city, policy mobility, neoliberalization.

RESUMO – HABITAÇÃO PARA PESSOAS DE BAIXO RENDIMENTO NUMA TAIPÉ GLOBALIZADA. Desde a década de 1990, a ideia de "tornar-se uma cidade global" tem exercido uma forte influência sobre as políticas urbanas de Taipé. O Governo da Cidade de Taipé implementou diversos mega projetos com o objetivo declarado de melhorar o *status* global da cidade, tais como a construção do edifício mais alto do mundo e a criação de um novo distrito financeiro. Paralelamente, os aglomerados informais, que integravam a paisagem de Taipé desde 1949, desapareceram rapidamente, sendo substituídos por edifícios de luxo e parques. A globalização de Taipé transformou-se em terreno fértil para a especulação imobiliária, gerando graves problemas de acessibilidade à habitação. Recentemente, o *boom* imobiliário pós-2005 desencadeou um forte movimento por habitação de arrendamento social. Este artigo examina, em primeiro lugar, como o "discurso de cidade global" influenciou os projetos urbanos em Taipé desde os anos 1990. Em seguida, explora o estatuto da habitação para pessoas de baixo rendimento nas políticas urbanas de Taipé. Para discutir o problema da habitação social na Taipé globalizada, este artigo utiliza diversos conceitos teóricos, incluindo mobilidade de políticas, cidades globais, o direito à cidade, neoliberalização em cidades do Leste Asiático e cidades mundiais.

Palavras-chave: Habitação, pessoas de baixo rendimento, Taipé, cidade global, mobilidade de políticas, neoliberalização.

RESUMEN – VIVIENDA PARA PERSONAS DE BAJOS INGRESOS EN UN TAIPÉI GLOBALIZADO. La idea de "convertirse en una ciudad global" ha influido fuertemente en las políticas urbanas de Taipéi desde la década de 1990. El Gobierno de la Ciudad de Taipéi ha llevado a cabo varios megaproyectos en la ciudad, afirmando que mejorarían el estatus global de Taipéi, como la construcción del edificio más alto del mundo y la creación de un nuevo distrito financiero. Mientras tanto, los asentamientos informales, que solían formar parte del paisaje de Taipéi después de 1949, han desaparecido rápidamente, desplazados por edificios de lujo y parques. La globalización de Taipéi se ha convertido en terreno fértil para la especulación inmobiliaria, lo que ha generado serios problemas de asequibilidad de la vivienda. Recientemente, el auge inmobiliario posterior a 2005 ha desencadenado un fuerte movimiento a favor de la vivienda social en alquiler. Este artículo examinará primero cómo el "discurso de ciudad global" ha influido en los proyectos urbanos de Taipéi desde la década de 1990. Luego, explorará el estado de la vivienda para personas de bajos ingresos en las políticas urbanas de Taipéi. Este trabajo se basa en varios conceptos teóricos, incluidos la movilidad de políticas, las ciudades globales, el derecho a la ciudad, la neoliberalización en las ciudades de Asia Oriental y las ciudades mundializadas, para analizar el problema de la vivienda para personas de bajos ingresos en la globalización de Taipéi.

Palabras clave: Vivienda, personas de bajos ingresos, Taipéi, ciudad global, movilidad de políticas, neoliberalización.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Global urbanism promotes privatization and exclusion of social housing in Taipei.
- Mega projects raised prices and displaced vulnerable communities.
- Social housing movement grew after 2010 with strong public support.
- Taipei's urban planning prioritizes private interests and global city status.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the Taipei City Government held an international conference called "Conference on Strategies for an International City". This was probably the first conference in Taiwan on the strategies of global cities. During that time, "global city" was still a new term, so the conference brochure used "international city" most of the time. Since the mid-1990s, the question of how to become a global city has become an important goal or justification for urban planning in Taiwan – especially for Taipei City, which is considered the 'node' or 'hub' connecting Taiwan with the world.

This article explores the question of how the "global city" discourse has affected the justifications and priorities of city-making in Taipei City. Later it will deal with the status of low-income housing in this "global city" discourse. The article begins by reviewing literature on policy mobility, global cities, and neoliberalization, and it attempts to contextualize these ideas within Taiwan's experience and current situation. The research methods are based on case studies using participant observation, policy analyses, and archival research.

II. POLICY MOBILITY AND GLOBAL CITY THEORIES

Policy mobility intensified in the era of globalization. Peck and Theodore (2015) use "fast policy" or "policies without borders" to describe the "acceleration in cross-border policy traffic." Traveling policies have accelerated "interconnectivity and cross-referential intensity." The flow of information makes it easier for cities to grasp policy ideas from other cities around the world, which makes policy learning faster than before. The accelerating process of "policy making, mobility, and mutation" is nevertheless full of complexities (Peck & Theodore, 2015, pp. 15-21).

The growth of the urban marketing and branding consultancy sector, city partnerships, and global policy exchange networks promotes "fast policy" as an urban solution (Peck, 2011). The role of policy networks and their capacity to circulate policies is crucial to influencing urban development in local settings. McCann and Ward (2013) argue that the global circulation of policies/models is a process involving policy assemblage through mobilities and mutations. It is important to pay attention to place, space, and scale, and analyze the "politics both within and beyond institutions of governance", to understand "how policymaking operates, how policies, policy models and policy knowledge/ expertise circulate and how these mobilities shape places" (McCann & Ward, 2013, p. 2). Cochrane and Ward (2012) outline that policy is not only actively produced in local settings but also actively circulated through policy networks as a commodity. They argued that local translations of global policy are inherently subject to mistranslations due to the differing "lived experiences of cities" and the "symbolic language of public policy". Roy (2012) presents in her ethnographic study how "middling technocrats" are the key actors. In the past decade, research on policy mobility contributed to the shift to relational thinking by examining the relationship between global and local processes in city-making (Jacobs & Prince, 2012).

Global city research emerged in the 1980s in the global north to explore "the question of how global forces and dynamics impact local and regional social spaces" (Brenner & Keil, 2006, p. 6). Those cities were undergoing several global capitalist restructurings due to the new international division of labor and the crisis of North Atlantic Fordism. New decentralized and flexible production created new uneven geographical development. Global cities rose to coordinate the global commodity chains (Brenner & Keil, 2006). Global cities are:

> basing points for the global operation of transnational corporations (TNCs); production sites and markets for producer and financial services; articulating nodes within a broader hierarchy of cities stratified according to their differential modes of integration into the world economy; and dominant locational centers within large-scale regional economies or urban fields. (Brenner & Keil, 2006, p. 11)

In conclusion, global cities are the dominant command and control centers for global capitalism, headquarters locations for transnational firms, and agglomerations for advanced producers and financial services industries (Brenner & Keil, 2006).

The research on global cities has been rich and varied. Pioneering research has been done by Edward W, John Friedmann, Sakia Sassen, Sharon Zukin, and Susan Fainstein. Soja mentioned socio-spatial polarization. From the perspective of the Global South, Jennifer Robinson (2006) criticized global city research for its developmentalism, its assumption of a 'one world system' dominated by Western countries, and its lack of diversity and alternative urban imaginaries. The questions about globalizing for whom and who benefits are the crucial questions to ask.

Ong (2011) questioned both approaches – capitalism, and post-colonialism –, for being economistic or politically reductionist, thereby neglecting the complex urban realities in engaging with the global. She emphasized the importance of situating the analysis into the "highly dynamic" processes with three angles. First, that cities serve as sites for problem-solving related to modern life and national interests. Second, that cities act as nexuses of situated and transnational ideas for addressing urban problems. Third, that the transformation of Asian cities involves inter-city comparisons, referencing, or modeling that creates new forms of governmentality—with a unique mix of public and private elements emerging from borrowings, appropriations, and alliances of neoliberal techniques.

The priorities of urban projects need justification. In Taiwan, it is interesting to see how the "global cities" theories were used by Taiwanese scholars and governments to set up the goals of urban development. As argued by Aihwa Ong and Anaya Roy (2011), these justifications are driven very much by the desire to be global and inter-reference one another. Before exploring more about the justifications, it is important to understand the existing situation of housing in Taiwan.

III. NEOLIBERALISM AND HOUSING: THE FINANCIALIZATION OF HOMEOWNERSHIP AND HOUSING RIGHTS

Neoliberalism impacted East Asian developmental states later than it did many countries in North and South America and Europe, because in the late 1970s and 1980s these states still experienced rapid economic growth under state-led policies. Neoliberalism altered the strong role of the developmental states in varied degrees, and it had uneven impacts on different policies in different countries. Decentralization, economic competitiveness, and public-private partnerships have become the common tendency, but the driving forces behind this trend cannot be attributed to neoliberalization. Democratization also plays a part in demanding decentralizing decision-making and resource distribution (Park *et al.*, 2012).

The increasing mortgage programs and the reliance on the market in Taiwan, although in a different path-dependent trajectory, end up holding a similar pattern of neoliberalism, that is, "the financialization of homeownership and housing rights" (Rolnik, 2013). This process, as argued by Rolnik (2013), involves three steps: first, promoting homeownership and privatizing public/social housing; second, financing homeownership by lowering the barriers to entering mortgage markets; and third, unlocking land value by encouraging speculative urban development.

However, after checking these three steps, Taiwan had a different path. Firstly, Taiwan does not have a housing welfare system like the West. Private homeownership has been the predominant goal of Taiwan's housing policies. The homeownership rate reached 83.9% in 2010. Public housing constitutes only about 0.08% of all housing stock in Taiwan. In other words, privatization has been the only goal of housing policies in Taiwan. Secondly, in the past 20 years, the Taiwanese government's efforts in housing policies were to formalize the mortgage market and rely on mortgage programs as the major intervention. Thirdly, Taiwan is doing the same thing: unlocking land value by encouraging speculative urban development.

The financialization of housing has emerged as a growing global issue (Aalbers, 2017). This process, marked by deregulated mortgage and capital markets, increased cross-border capital flows, and a rising private-debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio, has further intensified the challenges associated with housing financialization. Although this phenomenon is widespread, its pace and timing vary across countries (Aalbers & Fernandez, 2016). Taiwan's housing system has a similar trend, treating housing as a commodity and demonstrating how financialization has accelerated the process of commodification. Since the 1990s, Taiwan's transition toward neoliberalization and democratization has facilitated the liberalization of its financial system. Increasingly, low- and middle-income people have found housing unaffordable, leading to a crisis and a social housing movement in

2010 (Chen, 2020). It will be intriguing to examine the justification for housing interventions influenced by global city theories in Taiwan since 2000, a period marked by Taipei's first opposition-party mayor from the Democratic Progressive Party taking office.

IV. HOUSING AND ACTUAL EXISTING NEOLIBERALISM IN TAIWAN

John Doling and Richard Ronald (2012) used "homeowner society" to describe housing in East Asia. Homeownership is used as a basis for meeting welfare needs. They argued that East Asian 'productivist' welfare regime favors facilitating rapid economic growth. Despite massive government intervention in housing, housing has been markedly commodified, fitting a strategy of property-based welfare in which the family and private housing assets have been cultivated as the main resources for the provision of social security. It is true in Taiwan that housing has been constructed as a highly privatized commodity and a private matter, so owning a place to live would be the best solution for each individual person. Among the East Asian tigers, Taiwan has the second-highest homeownership rate: it is 83.9%.

Sustaining housing prices is crucial to maintaining property-based and productivist welfare systems. Volatile economic conditions since the 1990s have eroded these welfare arrangements. This explains why homeowners in Taipei near the social housing sites are protesting the projects for fear of losing their lifetime savings.

Taiwan's housing system, established under the Nationalist Party (KMT) government since 1949, is characterized by five key features (Chen, Y.-L., 2024). First, government regulation in the housing sector has historically been minimal, with almost no social housing available before 2010. Second, housing policies prior to 2010 focused exclusively on promoting homeownership as their primary goal. Third, the private housing market has dominated housing provision and urban renewal efforts. Since the late 1980s, neoliberal principles have increasingly influenced housing and urban policies, with subsidized mortgage programs becoming the cornerstone of government intervention and an emphasis placed on market-driven mechanisms.

Fourth, social justice considerations have been largely overlooked. Before 2010, social housing constituted only 0.08% of the housing stock and was primarily reserved for the most impoverished groups. Finally, the financialization of housing has become more pronounced, driven by rising mortgage debt rates. Housing is frequently treated as an investment tool, as evidenced by Taiwan's high vacancy rates, reflecting a trend of using housing to preserve and grow wealth rather than as a means of residence.

Since the 1990s, housing policies in Taiwan have been influenced by two major forces: neoliberalization and democratization. Democracy brings out the rise of civil society, more civil participation, and at the same time the rising power of the capitalist class. Democratization pressures the government to enact policies that can benefit most people. On the other hand, it opens opportunities for the politicians that represent certain interests, especially the better-off, because the design of elections in Taiwan needs money for campaigns. Neoliberalization leads to new forms of governance, such as public–private partnerships and an increasing reliance on the private sector, giving precedence to market mechanisms. As a result, different low-interest mortgage programs are invented with public funding subsidies. The rationale is to increase consumers and hence stimulate the housing market.

Housing prices in Taiwan have nearly doubled since the recent housing boom after 2005. The major reason for the boom is the return of Taiwanese overseas capital due to the uncertainty of global financial markets. Taiwan's government also reduced the tax on inheritances to encourage returns. The second reason was very low interest rates. Escalating house prices led to a strong social rental housing movement. Under social pressure, the government announced future social housing projects.

Increasing housing prices during the time of economic recession triggered a strong social rental housing movement in 2010. For the first time in Taiwan, social rental housing has become an important topic. The movement is still advancing and has provoked policy debates among different interest groups.

In addition to the social housing movement, there are rising urban movements from the bottom-up approach to remake the city. The people who especially want to remake the city are the initiators of the urban protests for forced displacements, such as activists and sympathetic supporters. In the past few years, the protests against urban renewal projects have been a constant issue in Taipei city. In March 2013, one of the last squatters, the Hua-Kuang community, in Taipei City was torn down

to build another global dream: Taipei Roppongi. The residents were forced to leave without resettlement. Before their houses were torn down, students and the residents sat on the ground, hand in hand, to stop the bulldozer. Increasingly, bottom-up actions challenge the ways the city has been planned. The book, City Remaking (Hou, 2013), documented several such bottom-up efforts to resist displacement.

The bottom-up approach gives birth to new urban values, such as questioning whether so-called "public" space is truly public; the definition of heritage about what is worthwhile to be preserved; and whether the idea of a "green" city can make the city sustainable in terms of stronger food security and energy independence; and who has the rights of the city.

Those urban movements examine how Taipei City has been made. The next section is going to explore how Taipei City has been made in the past 20 years and the rationale behind the major urban projects. Then it will talk about the persistence of neoliberal ideology and how it creates obstacles to recent housing movements in Taipei City.

V. GLOBAL CITY RESEARCH IN TAIWAN

I will analyze Taipei's experiences from two angles. One is how academic research appropriates the ideas of global cities. The other is about how the conceptualization of global cities affects urban planning in Taipei.

The academic community in Taiwan is relatively small, so there are only a few researchers. Chia-ho Ching (2005) has conducted many industrial analyses to evaluate Taipei's economic status, especially the industries related to global cities, such as the producer services industry. Wang (2004), Hsu (2005) and Chou (2005) dealt with the strategies of development in promoting Taipei's status. These previous works were not critical of "global cities" theories or suspicious about the use of this discourse to promote specific urban projects that claimed to improve the node, hub, and network functions of the city. Their eagerness to promote the global city status of Taipei made them neglect the issues of socio-spatial polarization, critiques of developmentalism, or more different urban imaginaries. These scholars' positions are relatively "Taipei centered" and they have used the theories of "global cities" to justify the primacy of Taipei City (or the North). They tend to blame the weak link (in Taiwan, it is the area outside "the North") for competing with resources which results in the decreasingly competitive advantage of the North. Their research does not challenge the ideology of developmentalism and seems to form the same discourse that prioritizes the North as well as focuses on the idea that "there is no alternative."

Another problem is that these studies do not question the size and the boundary of the region. Using the theories based on American and European experiences may not be a comparison between an apple and an orange, but it is akin to comparing a big apple with a small apple. If considering the size of the region, the whole of Taiwan can be only one metropolitan area. The whole area is interdependent and cannot be disconnected from the other. These studies are not sensitive about this issue rather than treating the boundary of the region as it is defined now.

Finally, these papers would assume economic integration with China should be the goal of economic development for Taiwan. However, the reasons given to support why this should be the goal are weak. These papers also avoid discussions about the political and social impacts of economic integration, which is a puzzle for many people in Taiwan. The research is not a subaltern discourse that is more sympathetic to local identity and alternative development.

The relationship between Taiwan and China has been changing. Shelley Rigger (2021) argues the significant role of Taiwan's investment in transforming mainland China into a manufacturing powerhouse. However, the trade war between the U.S. and China, coupled with China's increasing aggressiveness toward Taiwan, has significantly discouraged Taiwanese investment in China. Taiwanese business investments in China dropped dramatically from 83.8% of Taiwan's total foreign investment in 2010 to a record low of 11.4% in 2024. In response to these changes and the restructuring of international supply chains, Taiwanese businesses have adjusted their global strategies by increasing investments in the U.S., Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (Chen, Y.-F., 2024).

Among East Asian states, China does not share a similar system or development trajectory with other East Asian countries. As a communist country, China underwent economic openness and deregulation while remaining under the strong control of the party-state. Whether China has been undergoing a process of neoliberalization is a subject of debate (Tang & Chan, 2021). The recent tightening of control by the central government suggests that neoliberalization is not the prevailing

trend. The massive outflow of capital from Taiwan to China in the 1990s contributed to an economic downturn, which became a significant driving force behind the neoliberal transformation of urban policies in Taiwan. This transformation aimed to enhance Taipei's competitiveness and elevate its global status.

VI. THE MAKING OF GLOBALIZING TAIPEI

The pursuit of becoming a global city has affected urban planning in Taipei. Since the 1990s, the Taipei City Government has implemented four mega projects. The first is the Xinyi Planning District, also known as 'Taipei Manhattan.' It was intended to be a trade center, but it did not attract as many international companies to establish their headquarters as planned (Jou *et al.,* 2012). Instead, it drew high-end entertainment clubs and luxury condominiums. The second and third ones, Nankang Economic and Trade Park and Neihu Technology Park, are software parks. The fourth one is the Taipei Main Station Special District, which aims to enhance the quality of tourism by improving the transportation hub and increasing the number of international hotels.

The process of city-making is a process of privatized urbanization. Privatized urbanization has two dimensions: first is the privatization of state-owned land. The public land has been sold to private developers. The second characteristic is the shift toward entrepreneurism in urban government (Jou *et al*., 2012). The methods of urban planning now lean towards public-private partnerships. The public sector greatly enhances the private sector's role in conducting urban projects by providing profitable incentives. The method of BOT, which means a project built and operated by the private sector and transferred to the government several years later, has been a common planning method. The urban renewal projects used to be state-led slum clearance and now become developers-led promoting property value. Private developers have great power in the making of cities. The urban planning projects are targeted at profit making.

The justification of these mega projects is driven by the dominant reason to improve the global city status of Taipei City. Since the 1990s, Taipei has been facing the problem of deindustrialization, so inventing new economies has been the task of urban planning. The four mega projects are trying to create a new economic environment for finance, software, and tourist industries in a subsequent order. In 2011, Chinese tourists were permitted individual travel in Taiwan, which led to a boom in the tourist industry. The income from tourists has doubled in the past ten years.

In addition to economic reasons, the desire to be global is also strongly driven by the new idea that cities can be a diplomatic strategy. Due to China's pressure, Taiwan has been in a status of international isolation. How to overcome the diplomatic obstacle has been an important task of the government. When global cities became a popular theory, the theory gave Taiwan a light on the future. The opening talk of the Taipei City Mayor in 1996 at the first global city conference in Taiwan shows the reasons. The mayor, Shui-Bian Chen, later became the controversial president.

> In addition, Taiwan is facing a difficult situation politically, because it is often impossible to promote international exchange in the field of foreign affairs, economic, trade, and cultural affairs under the official title of our country. According to the results of a survey conducted among Taipei's businessmen, 80% of them believed that Taiwan can be more internationalized if it builds up its role as a regional operations center than if it becomes a member of the United Nations. Taipei is the largest city in Taiwan. It has a superior location, abundant manpower and capital resources, and broadly based links through the city network. Therefore, it has been able to take its rightful place through international cooperation in the regional economic community. Based on this position, Taipei can lead Taiwan in its progress in the years ahead. We are convinced that internationalization is a necessary step for Taipei at the current stage of its development. (Taipei City Government, 1996)

This talk expresses the idea of using the city as the site of diplomatic relations to overcome the problem of international isolation. Cities can replace the nation-state to be the actor of diplomacy. The way for Taipei is to become a global city and also become the major unit to build international relations through sister cities.

The talk also showed the strategies of urban development based on the global cities' idea, such as the financial center, enhancing communication infrastructure, and creating an attractive environment for international business. For the first time, "The Foreign Affairs Committee" was established at the municipal level to deal with "all communication and cooperation affairs with foreign cities, business, or other institutes, as well as improve the living standards and business affairs of

foreigners in Taipei. References from other cities in the world, especially the top global cities like New York, Tokyo, and London, provided a new idea for planning.

The rising power of private developers is also one of the driving forces. The influence of private developers gets stronger when the deficits of the government increase. Without sufficient public funding, the city government has to rely on the involvement of the private sector to conduct urban projects.

VII. CONCLUSION: PERSISTENCE OF NEO-LIBERAL VALUE

Privatized urbanization encourages housing speculation. The four mega projects as well as urban renewal projects greatly increased real estate value. However, under the direction of privatized urbanization and profit-driven urban development, there is no provision of affordable housing in any of the urban renewal projects. In Taipei City, only 0.64% of all housing stock is social rental housing. Even though there is a huge demand for social rental housing, the housing needs of low-income people are not the major concern of urban planning.

After many years of speculative urban development, the exchange value of housing far exceeds its use value. It is ironic that, although social housing enjoys wide public support, ongoing social housing projects face protests from residents in surrounding neighborhoods who seek to protect their property values.

The social housing movement is a resistance to reverse privatized urbanization. In this movement, the discourse of housing rights for low-income people is very crucial. Without establishing the legitimacy of housing rights in society, it would be hard to press the government to provide sufficient low-income housing and design housing according to the needs of low-income residents. However, the urban projects and continuing displacement show that the right to the city only recognizes the right of "the people who own shares of landed property in the city" (Hsu and Hsu, 2013). The urban projects heavily rely on the private sector and the market, which also reveals the persistence of neo-liberal values.

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