



Any Way to our Huilan Home: Building the Suhua Freeway or taking the Bali detour?

Shenglin Elijah Chang, Po-Chun Huang

Graduate Institute of Building and Planning,
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

shenglinchang@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic relationships between landscape identities and economic developments in the remote Huilan of Taiwan. Since 1990, locals and environmental groups have been battling over the proposed Suhua Freeway connecting Huilan and other cities. Through qualitative methods, it examines how locals perceive the potential ecological and cultural impacts of the freeway's construction and analyzes Bali's community-based ecotourism as examples for Huilan's own economic development. It concludes that local Huilanese should consider the small-scale eco-tourism model as an option in future economic development.

Keywords: Suhua Freeway, infrastructure investment, environmental conservation, eco-tourism, mass tourism, Bali tourist development, Jaringan Ekowisata (JED)

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1.0 Introduction

“No way. We want free!” vs. “The freeway, the safe-way home!”

“No Way. We Want Free!” Spring 2007, a group of young Hualien students, named “*Hualien Lovers*,” organized a nation-wide petition to prevent the Suhua Freeway proposal from passing the environmental impact assessment review (EIA). The *Hualien Lovers* consisted of Hualien students pursuing higher education in Taipei or other cities. They all needed to return to Hualien homes during important holidays.¹ However, they refused the Suhua Freeway project, because the road is not for young people to return home on, per se. Developers, investors, and politicians, both domestic and international, were waiting for the EIA results. When the freeway proposal re-entered the EIA’s committees May 2008, two groups from Hualien confronted each other outside the Environment Protection Agency’s Taipei Office. As the *Hualien Lovers* chanted “No way we want free!” in defiance to the proposal, hundreds local Hualienese had taken a six-hour-long bus trip to Taipei. These local Hualienese argued that they have been waiting for a safe way to return home for decades with no response. They were begging the committee to pass EIA to fulfill their prolong need.

The construction of the Suhua Freeway, like the center of a whirlpool, has been spinning and unfolding three theoretical discourses. First, from the economic perspective, Gramlich (1994), and Dalenberg and Partridge (1997) have challenged that government investment in transportation infrastructure can stimulate local economic development. Chandra and Thompson (2000) argue that non-metropolitan interstate highway spending in the US has different impacts across industries in various locations. As a result, the non-metropolitan or rural states, as a whole, do not gain extra economic benefits from the billion-dollar governmental investments. The empirical evidences advise the Hualien locals that the economic performances might be suspicious in the post-Suhua freeway era.

Secondly, from the cultural landscape perspective, the Suhua freeway battles unfold the formation of the politics of urban and rural identity that Williams (1973) first recognized. Decades ago, Williams observed the county-city disconnections and argued the phenomenon embodied the industrialized way of life that the capitalist society pursued. Remote viewpoints from rural communities and dismissing the essential value of agricultural culture dominate the mainstream value criticized by Creed and Ching (1997). The battle of Suhua freeway also reflects the identity conflict between rural and urbanized Hualien among the locals. Furthermore, the identity transformation of Hualien echoes the Balinese identity ‘Bali erect’ (ajeg Bali) that Picard (2003) studied and argued.

Finally, from a community-based tourism perspective, the Suhua freeway construction symbolizes the debate between the eco-tourism alternatives and mass-tourism developments. Lately, scholars and researchers (Hughes 1995 and Byczek 2011) in developing countries point out that mass tourism not only decreases the quality of life for local communities, but also destroys cultural and ecological characteristics of certain popular

¹ Such as Chinese Lunar New Year in February, the spring Tomb Sweeping Festival in April, and the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival.

tourist destinations. Community based tourism planning and decision-making processes are urgently needed by many places with sublime landscape qualities. Hualien is one of the most significant tourist destinations in Taiwan that needs critical thinking and planning.

Against theoretical backdrops mentioned above, this article investigates the dynamic relationships between the landscape identities and local economic developments intertwined with the battle over the Suhua Freeway. Based on qualitative methods, this article consists of five sections.² Soon after the introduction, "Hit the road" begins with the cultural and environmental background of Huilan and the Suhua Freeway history. Next, "On the Suhua Alternative Way" investigates how local Huilanese perceive the potential impacts to environmental, cultural, and place-identity with the construction of the freeway. It analyzes the mass-tourism model versus the eco-tourism model emerging in Hualien today. "Vista Point" studies the potential community-based eco-tourism of Bali Island in Indonesia as alternatives for Huilan. In conclusion, "Arrival" suggests schematic actions, both transportation and development, as the potential alternatives for Huilan to consider.

Hit the road: Debating the Suhua Freeway since 1990

Hualien, historically known as *Huilan*, is located in the eastern coastal region of Taiwan.³ Huilan literally means, "The gulf where waves linger", particularly referring to the Qixingtang gulf (Figure 1). This paper alternates between "Hualien" and "Huilan." They refer to the same place. Adjacent to the Pacific Ocean, Hualien has been known for the sublime cliff landscape of the Suhua Highway.⁴ Geologists (Lin et. al. 1998) have identified the Hualien region as a complex transition of the boundary between the Eurasian and Philippine Sea Plates (Figure 2). The unstable structure and dynamics of the region's geology have been creating seismograms and landslides for centuries. As such, the construction of road systems has always been very complicated for Hualien's coastal region. The Suhua Highway was a one-lane road built in 1932. In 1990, additional construction expanded the highway into a two-

² The methods include: (1) historical document reviews, (2) interviews – semi-constructed interviews and in-depth interviews, and (3) participatory observations. Firstly, in terms of historical document reviews, we examined information of both printed and online news about the Hualien area, along with events surrounding and specifically regarding the Suhua Freeway, i.e., EIA reports, historical documents and the media coverage. Secondly, applying semi-structured interview methods, we spoke to eight participants between November of 2011 and March of 2012. The eight participants consisted of young students studying in Taiwan and Hualien community leaders, policy makers, and business owners (Bed & Breakfast, souvenir shops, grocery stores, some of whom are also environmental activists). The participatory observations mainly inspect the eco-tourism business and the EIA protests.

³ Historically speaking, Huilan has been characterized as a diverse cultural region with mixed types of inhabitants. Before the 19th century, Huilan was called Kilai and served as a home for Austronesian peoples including the Atayal, Bunun, Pangcah or Amis, and Pingpu, with linguistic and genetic ties to other Austronesian ethnic groups including inhabitants of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Polynesia, and Oceania. The first group of Han Chinese migrants arrived in Huilan in the early 19th century. They were the so-called Minnan Han group. The Hakka Han also arrived in the late 19th century. Several other Han peoples landed after World War II, when the KMT government relocated to Taiwan after the Chinese civil war in the 1949.

⁴ As the largest county in Taiwan, Hualien occupies the middle section of the mountainous eastern coast of Taiwan. Only 7 percent of the land within Hualien is considered as liveable plain, eighty-seven percent is mountainous, while the remaining six percent consists of rivers.

lane road, and two-way traffic officially started.⁵ However, over the years it has been frequently damaged by typhoons and heavy rains. According to Mr. Lee's report (2007), the road was damaged and reconstructed 84 times between 1994 and 2006. Locals also call it the Death Highway. One recent accident occurred on October 24, 2010. About 12 groups of Mainland Chinese tourists were trapped on the Suhua Highway due to its collapse. Altogether, 23 tourists went missing. The worst case involved a large tour bus carrying 19 Mainland Chinese, which fell from the highway into the Pacific Ocean at the 112.8 KM marker.



Fig. 1. Huilan was called Huilan, referring to "The Qixingtang gulf where waves linger".

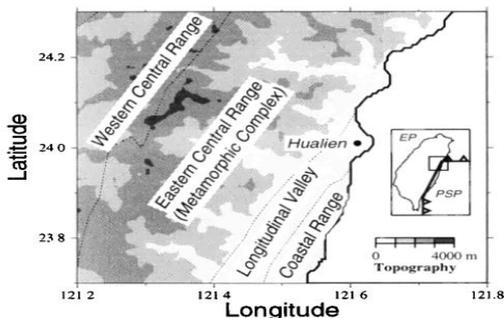


Fig. 2. Simplified geologic and tectonic provinces in the Hualien area of eastern Taiwan are shown. (cited from Lin et. al. 1998:90)

⁵ Information regarding the Suhua freeway policy, EIA and construction in this section and the section followed come from the sources list below:

1. United Daily News compiled: http://mag.udn.com/mag/news/storypage.jsp?f_ART_ID=312609
2. Yu-Hao Lee, 2007, "Do we really need a Suhua freeway?" <http://www.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=2939>
3. Shu-chuan Zhu, 2010, "Suhua Freeway - the Preface," <http://e-info.org.tw/node/60656>
4. Taiwan Environmental Information Center. 2012. The Suhua Freeway series. Taiwan Environmental Information Center 2012 [cited April 10 2012]. Available from <http://e-info.org.tw/taxonomy/term/1539>.

For decades, under the abovementioned environmental and geological backdrop, locals and environment groups have been battling about whether there should be a new freeway connecting Huilan and the northern Taiwan, the construction of which would be severely damaging to the ecologically sensitive coastal area in that region. Locals think the sublime quality of ocean landscape and the rich biodiversity of the ecosystems are what characterize Huilan for both Huilan locals, other Taiwanese and international tourists who are attracted to the place. On the other hand, environmental groups think that these unique landscapes also prevent physical or monetary access from the outside.

In 1990, the Taiwanese Executive Yuan first included the Suhua Freeway in the Island Ring Freeway system. The 1998 version of the Suhua Freeway proposal suggested that the 85 kilometer highway would go through 17 environmental sensitive areas and 11 major fault lines along the east coast of Taiwan.⁶ The confrontations addressed earlier have occurred since 2006. As Huilanese and Taiwanese citizens continued debating the Suhua Freeway proposal, in 2010, President Ma decided to rename the Suhua Freeway as the Suhua Alternative Way, scaling down the engineering project in order to avoid certain critical environmental problems during the DEIA reviews. Nine months later, the DEIA was again conditionally passed. Environmental groups nationwide called the day the darkest day in Taiwan's environmental history.

In addition to the national level elite arguments over the Suhua Freeway, these disagreements also occur among groups of friends or even within families. As a Huilan native, Henry is a college student in Taipei. His father runs a hardware store in Huilan. Henry states, "Every time I return to my Huilan home, my dad is always busy with work. He makes little money and is overworked. I know he is unhappy about my petition against the Suhua Freeway. However, if the highway comes, we will sacrifice our quality of life even more.....this is my thought."

The prospect of bringing more tourists and people to Huilan via the Freeway raises ambiguous feelings about the pros and cons. Henry's father hopes that his hardware store can get more business if more people come to Huilan. Amen, an Amis native, runs a grocery store. He stands outside his storefront and looks at the road as fast trucks speed by. He worries that if more visitors come, there will be more 7-11 stores on the streets in his neighborhood.

"They all like to go shopping in 7-11. No one would come to my mom and pop grocery store anymore. Only trucks come by my store."

⁶ The construction would take ninety months and cost more than three billion US dollars. Ten years later in February 2000, the Taiwan Environmental Protection Agency conditionally passed a portion of the Freeway proposal that gave the green light to go ahead with preparation for construction. During the changes of the government ruling party from KMT to DPP after the 2000 presidential election, the Suhua Freeway proposal still received the full support of DPP President Chen Shui-bian and his Cabinet. However, more than three years later, the project was not ready to launch. Since according to Taiwan Environmental Law the EIA's decision expired after three years, the delay led to the expiration of the permission given in 1998. The project then went through a second run of review called a Difference of the Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) in order to regain permission to start construction.

On the Suhua Alternative Way: Resort Services or Gourmet B&B Hosts

Industrial developments and economic revitalizations are the fundamental questions behind the debate of the Suhua Freeway. Starting as the mountain homes of six aboriginal tribes centuries ago, Huilan was a hunting grounds. When Han Chinese gradually migrated there at the turn of the 20th century, Huilan slowly moved into its agro-forest phase. The most dramatic change occurred in 1970s when the cement industry moved in to develop the stony mountains and cliffs along the coastal line of Huilan. From that day forward, the coastal highway of Huilan was often filled with a mix of tourist buses, cars and heavy-load cement trucks. In addition to agriculture and domestic automobile-based tourism, the cement industry provided decent employment-and increased income for locals.

Tourism stop 1 – resort developments

During the two decade long battle over the Suhua Freeway, local Huilan industries have gradually shifted from cement mining to tourism. Certainly, agriculture has always been the foundation for Huilan local economy, but the emerging tourism industry was also emphasized and encouraged by the governments. To support the “Moving Eastward Policy” in 1990, the Council for Economic Planning and Development prepared Huilan and Taidong as new locations for resort developments, high-technology industries and large-scale BOT tourist developments.

Tourism, especially mass-tourism models, led Huilan into a new chapter. Giant tour buses carry groups of visitors in and drop them off to stay in luxury resorts or 5-star hotels. This detached resort-type tourism has soon become the major goal for local politicians to request central governments’ supports. Since 2000, dozens of projects have been proposed and more than 2000-hectare land has been waiting for development. More importantly for politicians, an freeway into Huilan would determine the success or failure of the resort-oriented mass-tourism model.⁷

Tourism stop 2 – bed and breakfast alternatives

Still, resort developments do not represent all narratives stemming out of the emerging Huilan landscape transformation. Personalized bed and breakfasts also open up different choices for visitors. On the coast of the Qi-Xing Gulf is a purple-colored wooden structure standing near the sea called the Wilderness Farm (Figure 3).⁸ The Wilderness Farm is a well-known gourmet restaurant with bed and breakfast service owned by Mingmei, an Amis aboriginal native.

Mingmei’s Amis family has run local goat farms for generations. About ten years ago, Mingmei decided to start a restaurant business with special goat milk, coffee, and meat courses on the menu. The food received good feedback via Internet weblogs. Later, Mingmei started a bed and breakfast service. Sleeping on a wooden bed and listening to the ocean

⁷ For example, Huilan Ocean Park (45 hectares), Idea Vila Resort (250 hectares), Fenglin Leisure Park (650 hectares), Pinglin Leisure Farm (750 hectares), Ruisui Tourism District (27 hectares), Yuli Changliang Tourism Centre (586 hectares) and so on.

⁸ <http://www.hua-lien.com/yuanyeh/home.htm>

waves lingering in the Qi-Xing Gulf, she wants her guests to gain a full sensory experience. Mingmei's B&B is booked by both Taiwanese and foreign guests year-round. Sometimes, companies rent the entire building for their annual meetings or retreats.



Fig. 3. The Wilderness Farm is one of the most well known restaurants on the coast of the Qi-Xing Gulf, where there are many purple-colored wooden structures standing near the sea.

Business models akin to Mingmei's Wilderness Farm led the new trends for the middle-aged as well as young Huilaneses. More than three hundred B&Bs were actively running in the region April 2012.⁹ Most of the B&Bs are operated by Huilan residents or people new to Huilan's tourism industry. More than two hundred urban-rural migrants (henceforth, U-turners) have emerged in the Huilan coastal and mountainous landscapes because of the high-quality environment and remote lifestyles. Some of them are retired professionals. Others are thirty-some to forty years old.¹⁰

U-turners have recognized ecotourism-oriented development as the future for Huilan. They express worries rather than hopes for the on-going Suhua Alternative-or-Freeway development. They also feel that they have to stay in Huilan for a while and identify themselves as a Hualianese. Ben, a U-turner, said, "One has to know the authentic Huilan first [before] he/she will dedicate [his/herself] to Huilan." Ben believes that U-turners like himself prefer culturally based and environmentally sensitive development models. The ongoing Suhua project could not resolve the dilemma, and will only create a more complicated crisis. Currently the small-scale eco-tourism B&Bs and mass-tourism resort developments are coexisting in Huilan. The two models divide Huilan local cultures and environments along different paths. More importantly, the two models would bring different numbers of tourists and would demand different traffic capacities for Huilan roads.¹¹

⁹ house.netete.com

¹⁰ <http://www.hua-lien.com/yuanyeh/home.htm>. These U-turners mostly relocate to Huilan for three reasons. First, they are interested in agricultural life and want to develop their own farms. Secondly, they or members of their family need clean and healthy environments to recover from illness such as cancer, asthma, strokes, etc. Third, they want to develop ecotourism-related businesses including restaurants and B&B, surfing centers and outdoor sports shops, aboriginal cultural tourism, and so on.

¹¹ Ironically, neither one would depend on increased highway accessibility. On the one hand, the mass-tourism models based on Mainland Chinese tourists provides a strong base for a tourist economy however, the highway transportation does not suit their preference. Since the October 2011 bus accident, Mainland Chinese tourist groups,

Vista Point: overlooking the Jaringan Ekowisata Desa in Bali, Indonesia

To this point, we have argued an influx of tourists overflowing Huilan would not be the ideal model for future developments. Bali in Indonesia has meandered through both mass-tourism and eco-tourism during the now world-famous history of its tourism development. The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (TIES, 1990). The ecotourism model was not what Bali had pursued in the beginning. The local Balinese realized that they (Bali natives) were marginalized by the mass-tourism development in the beginning of the 21st century, especially in the wake of the 2002 bombings. Research shows that, compared to the 1990s, the mass-tourism model has “successfully” brought more than two-and-half million arrivals to visit Bali (Byczek 2011, 83). The two millions of visitors per year challenged the island’s capacity as well as the declination of the so-called “Balinese-ness” (Kebalina). The first bombing in 2002 prevented rapid mass-tourism growth for Bali after 2002. Meanwhile, elites, local leaders and community actors join in effort to initiate a movement known as Ajeg Bali (Bali Erect).¹² (Picard 2003 and 2008; Reuter 1999, 163).

As part of the Ajeg Bali trend, Jaringan Ekowisata (JED) is a community-based ecotourism village-network initiated by four villages in 2002. The JED network nurtures local identities and supports community autonomy. Dukuh Sibetan and Tenganan, are located in Karangasem Regency. With a similar population to Huilan, Karangasem is the eastern regency of Bali. This regency is both mountainous and adjacent to the ocean. Here, the famous Mount Agung erupted in 1963 and killed 1900 people. Comparable to the diverse ethnicity of Huilan, Karangasem hosts various religions. The harmony among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians generates hybrid religious and cultural practices and festivals. Practicing rituals and ceremonies plays an essential part in the everyday lives of the locals. In the case of Tenganan, villagers have carefully preserved the adjacent tropical forests. Villagers apply their sustainable environmental management laws because they need a wide variety of plants for their regular rituals and ceremonies. The layout of Tenganan’s community is in the style of a Bali Aga (original Balinese) village. Outsiders are welcomed to visit and enjoy Tenganan by trekking in the surrounding forests, strolling on the traditional streets and learning the craftsmanship of weaving. However, the secret of the unique double-weave technique used by the locals is forbidden to outsiders. In addition, outsiders, including Bali people from other villages, cannot stay overnight in the village.

as the major tourist population of Huilan, have switched from buses to trains. Local newspapers even complain that the souvenir shops purchase all the train tickets ahead of time, occupying seats for Mainland Chinese tour groups. This has made it difficult for local residents and Taiwanese travelers to purchase train tickets (Hsieh, 2012). On the other hand, tourists and backpackers staying in B&Bs with environmental concerns would not be fans of the Suhua Freeway construction.

¹² Dating back to the Dutch Colonial Era, the Ajeg Bali movement addressed issues regarding how outsiders had arrived on Bali’s shores and gained the control of local societies and resources. Scholars have criticized that attempts by outsiders to dominate resources and override local cultures have been the common case among Pacific islands such as Hawaii, Tahiti, and so on.

Despite these few limitations, outsiders can learn about local cultures, religions, biodiversity and a different way of life during their village stay (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Outsiders can learn about local cultures, religions, biodiversity and a different way of life.

According to the JED website, about 450 visitors with high educational backgrounds have visited the four villages during the past 10 years and 70% responded positively about their experiences. Quantitatively, only 10 tourists visit each village per year in this ten-year period. The community-based JED might not serve as the economic means for Bali villages. However, qualitatively speaking, the four villages have been through internal transformations. In order to allow foreign outsiders to poke around their villages and stay at their homes, villagers negotiated different behavior rules and general attitudes among residents. In terms of craftsmanship learning, villagers collectively agreed which skills could be shown to outsiders as well as determine how fees for such learning would be charged. More critically, for the cultural and religious practices, villagers have to autonomously identify three issues: (1) what to show, (2) how to show, and (3) how and who would explain what was shown in what language. There are numerous discussions, negotiations and modifications of rules and regulations. The JED communities agree to practices in each village, while an equally challenging issue, for participants to handle along the way would be reaching consensus on distribution of ecotourism income.

Arrival

In retrospect, this article has departed from the battle over constructing or banning the Suhua Freeway in Taiwan. It arrives at the Bali Island JED model to serve as an alternative for Huilan. The two-fold application process functions as the threshold: (1) participatory plans for public transportation management, and (2) educational programs for local cultural identities and environmental knowledge. The former is based on bottom-up processes that regulate public trains, buses, flights and other means of transportation with the “Huilan Resident First” consensus. That is, residents with household registrations in Huilan book public transportation tickets with guaranteed quotas and time slots. Others have to obey the rules to plan their trips based on the availability of trains, buses or flights. As for educational programs for local cultural identities and environmental knowledge, we suggest integrating cultural and environmental NGOs and community-based associations with different levels of

school systems. Local residents can only make thoughtful choices about building an freeway to return home or preserving the ecology for the generations to come after they obtain a comprehensive understanding of their own homes and culture.

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