The Trans-Pacific Status Seekers across the Straits: American suburban status United Taiwan and China

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Abstract

Disregard the divided national status, this paper explores in more depth the role status plays in the transnational process of suburbanizing Taiwan and China. It describes how the social homogenous American suburb is becoming the most influential force within new developments in Taiwan. It records the stories of astronaut engineer families and these new "model developments" and how status objects like lower density suburbs, homogeneity¸ segregated and gated enclaves removed from existing city centers have arisen in Hsinchu, Taiwan and Shanghai, China.

Keywords: Environment and social interaction, Cross-cultural research, Cultural landscape, Design interface

1.0 Introduction

Under the world-wide-known one-China policy, people of Taiwan and China have been expressing various ways to read the national status of China and Taiwan. Name a few, one nation two areas, one nation two legal systems, one nation two interpretations, and so on. No single solution could please people both sides of the Taiwan Straits. However, disregard the incongruity of the national status, this paper investigates the consensus of the ideal home style and dream home status that shared by high-technology elite groups of both Taiwan and China. That is, the American suburban single detached houses.

How, why, and where has the American suburb impacted local communities across the Pacific Ocean? To answer these questions, this paper addresses the trans-Pacific status seekers (Pickard 1959 and 1960) and suburbanization phenomenon from a transnational migration aspect (Lee 1998, Lubman 1999, Levitt 2001, Lima 2001, Amesfoort 2002). It focuses on the transnational migration of high-tech engineers and their families who shuttle between high-tech centers, i.e., Silicon Valley (America), Hsinchu (Taiwan), and Shanghai (China) (Chang 2006). They transplant American suburban-type communities to those high-tech centers in Asian societies. These new suburban communities end up developing into the prestigious "Silicon Valley" status that local residents pursue in their societies.

Based on interviews and historical materials, this research examines the trans-Pacific suburbanization phenomenon with two stories. One is in Hsinchu Taiwan; the other is in Shanghai China. Both projects explain how high-tech families perceive their community life and how others perceive high-tech transnational community life patterns. The conclusion reveals the link between the trans-Pacific suburbanization phenomenon in Hsinchu and Shanghai, while it calls for the design professional's attention to protect local cultures and community lifestyles.

The Trans-Pacific Status Seekers

In the early 1960s, Vance Packard questioned the idea that American society was a "classless" society in his popular book, The Status Seekers. He declared that there was no doubt that the American classless society was a myth (Ibid., 13-14) and pointed out ten changes in the national economy that affected the class structure in the United States (Ibid., 17-23). The last change noted in his top-ten list was: 'The mass production of homes, with the attendant growth of homogeneous suburban communities'. Packard probably never imagined that, four decades later, the change from small towns, "as a scale model of all society" (Ibid., 23), to homogenous suburbs in the United States would turn out to be the single most influential driving force that has impacted many local communities in the Pacific Rim, especially high-technology communities in China and Taiwan.

Traditionally, Chinese and Taiwanese prefer to live in cities and enjoy convenient urban lifestyles. Only farmers or families who are not doing well might reside in the rural areas or small towns. Taiwan and China had never experienced the suburban social change. Researchers first became aware of the suburbanization of Taiwan and China in the late 1990s. Fancy real estate signage stood along the way toward high-tech science parks. Many of the projects were targeting the high-tech personnel and their families who had been drawn

to the unexpectedly successful Hsinchu Science Park in Taiwan, and Zhangjiang Science Park in China.

The success of the high-tech industry has created the high-tech legacy in Taiwan. The local society perceptions about high-tech engineers are high income, American education, and green card status. Young generations dream either to become a member of the Hsinchu Science Park or to marry a high-tech engineer who works inside the Hsinchu Science Park. According to the Hsinchu Science Park web site, there were 145,537 high-tech employees at the end of 2011. Indeed, there are about 39,307 engineers who hold Doctoral or Master degrees (Hsinchu Science Park, 2011).[1] Generally speaking, one fourth of this group and American educated engineers. They and their families are the so-called 'astronauts' who have homes in both Hsinchu and Silicon Valley, and shuttle back and forth between high-tech centers across the Pacific Rim.

The astronaut families have created the trans-Pacific migration phenomenon that intertwines with the high-tech legacy. Local Hsinchu real estate developers captured the potential trans-Pacific housing market immediately. Developers, both in Hsinchu and in Shanghai, have quickly learned that images of suburban American communities represent a prestigious social status for local residents and other high-tech families. Local developers collage "High-tech", and "Silicon Valley" to name the development projects (Fig. 1). The majority of the communities are gated with single detached houses, and, as Packard criticized in American suburbs, extremely homogenous.[2] Language symbolizes the Silicon Valley status. Therefore, creating a "bilingual" environment is *the* crucial marketing strategy. All the homeowners, mostly between their late thirties and late forties, share similar socio-economic backgrounds that are either high-tech engineer families or professionals working in the related industries.

Figure 1 The real estate signage with fancy names stand at roadside in Hsinchu.

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[1] http://www.sipa.gov.tw/file/20120413164749.pdf log in November, 25th, 2011.
[2] Due to a couple of kidnap crimes occurring in Taiwan, high-income people want to live in secure gated communities.

2.0 Trans-Pacific Suburbanization

As American dream homes (Martinson 2000), the transnational Americanized suburban communities have been mushrooming for more than a decade and have lead to the suburbanization in the Hsinchu Region. Since 1990, the transnational community phenomenon has led to proposals to build more than two dozen American-image subdivisions in the surrounding area of Hsinchu Science Park. Half of the proposals have already passed government review; others are in the process. According to the Taiwanese central and local governments' annual reports, over 700 ha. of land will be developed (Leu 1997; Yang 1998). [3] This article focus on two cross Taiwan Straits developments: The Majestic Silicon Villa in Taiwan and the Tangchen Hao Zhai in China.

The Majestic Silicon Valley Celebrity's Villa, Hsinchu, Taiwan

The Majestic Silicon Valley Celebrity's Villa (henceforth, the Da-si-gu) is the most famous high-tech community in Hsinchu Region. It won the top-ten model community award in 1995 issued by the Environment Bureau (China Times (Hsinchu), 1995, 21st September). More importantly, all the local design and planning professionals recommended it as the most important project to do this research. They claimed: "Many high-tech engineers who moved back from America live there."

The Model Gated Community Representing the Silicon Valley Status

The Da-si-gu is a hillside suburban community located in Chunglin Township, in the Hsinchu County. Chunglin was an agricultural Hakanese town. Today, the gated Da-si-gu community containing "Americanized Taiwanese skyward" houses (Fig 2) plus recreational facilities has become the symbolic community form for high-tech families living outside the Park. Helen, Laura, and Joni are housewife interviewees living in Da-si-gu. They all have American residential experiences and they all agree that Da-si-gu is very similar to their American homes (Martinson 2000, Low 2003). The only issue is landscaping. They insist that Da-si-gu is a perfect community, if only more trees are added. (Fig. 3)

The Da-si-gu is a highly exclusive community, walled and patrolled by guards and protected with a guarded gate. Hsinchu residents do not have access to social networks with the high-tech families living inside the gate of the Da-si-gu. Inside the gate, the building types of Da-si-gu include 30 single detached houses, 108 duplex houses, 98 town houses, and a 9-story high-rise apartment. In terms of the public facilities, Da-si-gu provides a community center, a swimming pool, two tennis courts, baseball fields, and a large central open space for the residents inside the Villa. There is also a grocery store supplying daily needs for the residents.

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[3] 1996 Annual Report, the Ministry of Interior; 1993 Annual Report, the Housing Authority of Provincial Government (Leu 1997. Yang 1998). My field interviews revealed that some of the initial developers had financial crises and ended up going bankrupt. Those projects may be sold and transformed to other investors hoping to make a profit. However, these second investors may declare bankruptcy and sell the projects to get a third agent. The process can go on and on and certain developments may end up not being built at all.

Figure 2 Americanized skyward houses are the dominant forms in Da-Si-Gu community.

Figure 3 Da-si-gu residents perceive their community is very much like America, but just needed more trees.

Dick, a resident and HOA (home-owner-association) chairman, addressed the social issues. He thought that the American style house design allowed everyone to drive their cars into their garages without passing any public spaces. The consequence was that the Da-si-gu residents not only seldom talked to each other, but also did not know who their neighbors were. Some of the residents rarely opened their front doors. Even worse, "If you knock on their door, they won't answer you. The community security guards have to call them for you first. Otherwise, they will call the police to kick you out."

Residents mostly arrange their socializing by phone. If one was not in the network, s/he might only learn what happened in your community through newspapers. Helen stated, "Our community has lots of activities, but I never heard about any until I read them in the local newspaper one day. I know we have a housewives' club, kids groups, etc.., but I don't have any idea what they are doing, because I don't have time to participate in their activities."

Language is a pride for the community. Dennis, an on-site manager of the Da-si-gu, states: "Our Da-si-gu is a *real* bilingual community…. I don't even understand what they are talking about. I feel as if I am in another country every weekend, when all the teenagers and kids play in the central open space". Indeed, there were always two groups of kids playing in two open fields in Da-si-gu during weekends. One was the English speaking, football group

in the major green space. The other spoke Chinese and played basketball opposite from the main grass field. The situation is a reflection of the divided social networks.

American community experiences vs. Da-si-gu community participation
Most Da-si-gu residents were Americanized high-tech families and upper-middle-class residents. They appreciated that their American community experiences helped them build the Da-si-gu "community" together. From their perspectives, American suburban experiences taught them to participate in all kinds of community activities. They contended that, for example, they were all concerned about public issues much more than other local Taiwanese people; their upper middle class neighbors were much easier to communicate with than local Hsinchu residents; they recycled their garbage. They were also proud of their community organization that makes the Villa one of the nation-wide model communities.

However, Dick provided an opposing viewpoint. From his understanding of serving as the chairman for the community, the American suburban experiences carried by residents did not contribute at all to the community building process. Local families who consider Da-si-gu their only real home created the animated community atmosphere. Most residents with American experiences eventually did not care about public issues and were very detached from the community. Dick stated that only those who decide to make Da-si-gu as their permanent home are willing to participate in community events. Most engineer families that moved back from the US formed a very exclusive network. Their kids, ABC (American born Chinese), can play together, since they can communicate in English.[4] In addition, they are mostly churchgoers. Through language and religion, they have become an alienating sub-subculture.

For relationships with local Hakanese communities in the Chunglin area, Dick admitted, "Our community doesn't have a good relationship with local people in Chunglin." He elaborated that local Hakanese are people with a very industrious culture. Hakka locals do not like people living in the Da-si-gu, because locals think the Da-si-gu residents lead a life of luxury. As a chairman of the Da-si-gu, Dick felt it was his responsibility to make amends between the two communities. He tried to coordinate a "do-it-ourselves" cultural festival, hoping that the Da-si-gu could invite local Hakanese kids to perform together with the Da-si-gu kids. "Then, we can bridge the cultural differences by enjoying some fun times together. I think we need to actively establish some public relationships with them."

The Tang-chen Luxury Mansion, Shanghai, China
In the summer of 2001, I experienced the trans-Pacific Silicon Valley status when I traveled to China and visited the newly developed the Zhongguancun Science Park in Beijing and the Zhang-Jiang Science Park in Shanghai (Rosenthal 2003). The newly developed suburban communities surrounding these science parks have proven that the trans-Pacific suburbanization is flowing from Silicon Valley to Shanghai and Beijing in China.

The Tang-chen Luxury Mansion project (henceforth the Luxury Mansion) in Poudong New District was considered the most prestigious real estate development by locals. Many

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[4] I also observed this situation on-site.

transnational migrants and high-tech engineers have established their Shanghai home there. The project is located across the street from the main entrance of the Zhang-Jiang Science Park. It is a golf resort model that consists of million dollar ($US) single-family detached suburban houses surrounded by a 36-hole golf course containing two 18-hole courses (Fig.4).

Figure 4 Tang-Chen Luxury Mansion creates a new prestigious status by combining golf courses and single detached homes in the Podong New District, in Shanghai, China.

One golf course, designed by an American designer, carried a wild and naturalistic style. A Japanese designer laid out the other course with an oriental flavor. The project consisted of 700 single-family dwellings that were constructed in 2 phases (Fig.5). The homebuyers of the first phase that was completed in 1995 and 1996 were predominately residents from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. The second phase of homes was completed in 1999 and 2000 after the Shanghai economic boom. Therefore, the majority of these homebuyers were local Chinese businessmen who had established their companies in Shanghai. Additionally, there were international businessmen who had settled their career in Shanghai and decided to live in Luxury Mansion

"This is a United Nations," said Jenny, the manager of the Luxury Mansion. According to her, the residents of Luxury Mansion include CEOs of Coca Cola and GM Auto, along with top-level managers and senior high-tech engineers of the global cooperatives located in Shanghai, especially the Zhang-Jiang Science Park. These families are global citizens who have migrated from different countries such as America, India, Brazil, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, as well as from different provinces in China.

I asked Iris the relationship between Luxury Mansion and the rural communities in the Poudong New District or Shanghai local area. Iris proudly explained,

We create many job opportunities for local people. All the Luxury Mansion residents hire "Ah-Yi" (female servants) to do house keeping work. Ah-Yi can live with us, because there is an Ah-Yi room in our housing design. We hire local people and help the local economy. I feel that we contribute to the local society greatly! (Chang; Zhang, field notes, 2001)

Figure 5 One single detached house might cost US$ 700,000 to 2,000,000 here, while the ordinary Shanghai resident's annual income is between US$ 100 to 250.

3.0 Conclusion
The lessons we learned from the status seekers across the Pacific Rim

The stories shared above are examples of trans-Pacific status seekers who are creating a new prestigious status within their society by transplanting the form of American suburban communities to different societies in Asia. The form of American suburban communities embodies the desires that those local communities wish to pursue within themselves. Suburban-gated housing developments announce the first wave of class-based community living that never existed in local societies in Taiwan and China after World War II. Community planners and designers should be aware that the class-based gated communities might become an unhealthy status object that local residents want to pursue. As a consequence, the residents with homogenous economic status are gathering in the particular communities.

Without any doubt, "enclaves of wealthy homogeneity", "sterile cleanliness" and "conspicuous consumption", are the actions and ideals that the trans-Pacific communities embrace the most. The Da-Si-Gu and The Luxury Mansion both serve as very good examples. The gated communities, the exclusive social networks, and the form of Americanized Taiwanese skyward houses represent the prestigious Silicon Valley status that the trans-Pacific communities want to show off. In terms of the local communities, they want to live in similar gated communities and try to fit themselves into the "American dream" that they create from their imagination of what America is like. More importantly, "the shame of poverty", "the allure of moving away and up", and "bigness" are impulses shared by both local and trans-Pacific communities. The Americanized skyward houses that both groups desire contain much more space than the 'normal' urban apartments. This architectural phenomenon shows that both local and trans-Pacific communities pursue "bigness" and escape from "the shame of poverty". More importantly, the form of an "Americanized"

118

skyward house creates a virtual path "of moving away and up", from local Hsinchu or Shanghai, to the United States, which symbolizes the status that these communities seek.

It is an urgent need for community planners and designers to invent new strategies to face these rising transnational challenges. Public education that emphasizes "inclusive heterogeneity" and "dirty enough to be happy" are the two basic strategies that are crucial for local communities, local governments and, especially, those high-tech residents who live inside these gated communities. Different housing development models, i.e., eco-village, cohousing, and other alternative patterns should be introduced to local societies. More importantly, community designers should listen to the local voice and work with local residents, then, develop symbolic forms that embody multiple cultural experiences.

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