Exploring the Sustainable Development of Contemporary Tainan From the Perspective of Tainan Prefecture Urban Development During the Japanese Colonial Period

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule from 1895 to 1945. This 50-year period significantly influenced Taiwan's subsequent development in humanities, economy, politics, education, and infrastructure. This paper focuses on Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period. The Governor-General of Taiwan promulgated the Tainan City Improvement Plan in 1911 (Meiji 44), transforming the city's street network from the Qing Dynasty. Subsequent urban planning initiatives in 1929 and 1941 further expanded the city's boundaries and laid the foundation for the core area of modern-day Tainan. This paper explores the roots of the city's vitality by examining Tainan's geographical environment and urban development from the Japanese colonial period to the present through a fieldwork methodology grounded in the "phenomenon–hypothesis–verification" research approach. Furthermore, it investigates how government agencies promote sustainable urban development, and how they collaborate with local organizations to leverage local and human resources through placemaking initiatives to seek sustainable development. This research seeks to integrate these diverse perspectives to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the city's evolution and to provide valuable insights for those working towards sustainable urban development worldwide.

Keywords: Tainan prefecture, sustainable urban development, city

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Introduction

In 1895, following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing government of China signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki with the Empire of Japan at Maguan Port in Akamagaseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture (now known as Shimonoseki Port). Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the Qing government was required to recognize the independence of Korea and to cede the Liaodong Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Penghu Islands to Japan.

Prior to 1895, Japan had no experience as a colonial power. Over the subsequent fifty years of rule, Japanese colonial governance in Taiwan underwent three major phases: the Early Colonial Period (1895–1919), the Period of Assimilation under the Extension of the Home Territory Policy (1919–1937), and the Kominka (Japanization) Movement Period (1937–1945). After the end of World War II, the infrastructure, political systems, economic structures, and cultural influences left behind by Japan profoundly shaped Taiwan's subsequent development. This case has become a distinctive example in the history of global colonialism, prompting renewed examination, reassessment, and scholarly debate across various fields.

In terms of local governance, after several administrative reforms, the system was reorganized in 1926 into five prefectures and three subprefectures: Taihoku Prefecture, Shinchiku Prefecture, Taichū Prefecture, Tainan Prefecture, Takao Prefecture, Taitō Subprefecture, Karenkō Subprefecture, and Penghu Subprefecture. According to the official website of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, *Tainan City Reader*, published in 1939, recorded:

> …Tainan Prefecture covers an area of more than 350 square li, with a population exceeding 1.34 million. It is divided into the two cities of Tainan and Chiayi, and ten districts: Xinfeng, Xinhua, Zengwen, Beimen, Xinying, Chiayi, Douliu, Huwei, Beigang, and Dongshi. … As the administrative office governing the entire prefecture and promoting its development, Tainan City may therefore be regarded as the heart of the prefecture.

Taiwanese literary figure Ye Shitao (1925–2008) once remarked: "Tainan is a place suitable for dreaming, working, falling in love, getting married, and living a leisurely life." Tainan, widely regarded as Taiwan's ancient capital and historically known as "Fucheng" (Prefectural City), marks the point at which Taiwan first connected with the wider world. Since 1624, Tainan has successively been governed by the Dutch, the Kingdom of Tungning under Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), the Qing Dynasty, and Japan. After World War II, in 1949, the government of the Republic of China relocated to Taiwan. Over four centuries, successive regimes overlapped and interacted, each leaving its imprint on the urban landscape. Some traces gradually faded, while others endured. As a result, numerous historic streets and monuments have accumulated over time. The distinctive character of old houses within neighborhood districts, revealed while strolling through streets and narrow alleys, forms a highlight of the cityscape and shapes the unique charm and spatial lineage of Fucheng as a historic port city.

Among these historical periods, the Japanese colonial era stands out in particular, as the construction initiatives undertaken by the Taiwan Governor-General's Office were especially significant in reshaping Tainan's urban space.

Beginning in 1911, when the Tainan Prefectural Office announced the "Tainan Urban District Plan and Determination of Its Boundaries" (archived by the National Museum of Taiwan History), a series of urban planning measures were gradually promulgated and implemented.

These initiatives included: (1) the planning of streets, blocks, and the overall road network, (2) the designation and planning of the railway station's location, (3) the planning of roadways and waterways connecting the urban center with Anping Port, (4) the installation and development of a sewage system; and (5) the spatial configuration of parks, roundabouts, government offices, and residential districts. Each of these infrastructural projects has exerted a lasting influence and laid the foundation for contemporary urban planning and development in Tainan. On this basis, the present study takes Tainan City as its focal subject and examines the urban spatial system, functions, and structural mechanisms formed during the Japanese colonial period in relation to present-day patterns of construction and development. By integrating historical narrative with field research methods, this study analyzes and observes Tainan's geographical environment as well as its street construction from the colonial era to the present. It seeks to explore the roots of urban vitality and to investigate how governmental institutions and local organizations mobilize cultural and natural resources to drive sustainable urban development. According to Lawrence Stone (1979), narrative is defined as "the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order, focusing the content into a coherent story, even if it contains some subordinate episodes." Historical sociologists further argue that narrative entails identifying events within the continuous flow of time and recognizing their cascading consequences, much like a waterfall in motion (Abbott, 1992; Griffin, 1993). Alfred Schutz (1991) likewise emphasized that the historical sciences bear a crucial task: in order to explain and reconstruct "history," scholars must determine which events, actions, and communicative practices should be selected from the totality of past social reality.

The Concept of the City and the Perspective of Sustainability

"City" refers to a settlement characterized by a dense population, developed economic activity, comprehensive infrastructure, and the integration of administrative, commercial, cultural, and social functions. The origins of cities may be traced back to early human mobility, when people gradually clustered in particular locations, forming the embryonic structures of urban settlements. In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (《說文解字》), under the "Earth" (土部) section, it is stated: "A city (城) is that which contains and gathers the people." Within the traditional Chinese worldview, the concept of *tianxia* (天下) functioned as a cosmological and territorial entity, understood as the domain under royal authority. Beginning with King Wen of Zhou, the emphasis on kingship served to consolidate loyalty among clans and the broader populace. The *Zhouli* (《周禮》), specifically the "Kaogong Ji – Jiangren" (考工記·匠人), records:

> When craftsmen plan a capital, it is a square nine *li* on each side, with three gates on each side. Within the capital are nine north–south avenues and nine east–west avenues, each broad enough for nine carriage tracks. On the left stands the ancestral temple; on the right, the altar of soil and grain. In front lies the court; at the rear, the market.

This passage is widely regarded as one of the earliest urban planning theories in China. It conceptualizes the city as an integrated entity that requires institutional design, spatial arrangement, and hierarchical order for governance. Here, "guo" (國) refers to the capital of the Son of Heaven or a feudal lord; "zu" (祖) denotes the ancestral temple; "she" (社) refers to the altar of soil and grain; "chao" (朝) indicates the three types of court assemblies; and "shi" (市) signifies the various markets. The term "jing tu" (經塗) describes the principal thoroughfares running north–south and east–west. Similarly, the *Wu Yue Chunqiu* (《吳越春秋》) states: "Construct the inner city walls to protect the ruler; build the outer walls to safeguard the people." This perspective treats the outer city walls as a material expression of the state,

demonstrating how institutional order was embodied within physical urban space. Accordingly, a true "city" required land, walls, courts, markets, and inhabitants in order to fulfill the purposes of security, defense, production, and habitation. The establishment of markets further presupposed a settlement of sufficient scale. Former Academician of Academia Sinica Xu Zhuoyun (2005) described the urban landscape of the Eastern Zhou period: workshops were located near official residences and palaces; markets gathered in the morning and dispersed at dusk; larger shops sold jewelry and precious metals, while smaller vendors operated street stalls; and the marketplace served as a space where knights-errant, opportunists, scholars, and cultural elites mingled. Thus, the city stands as a significant symbol of human social development. It functions not only as a center of economic activity but also as a crossroads where culture, politics, and social life converge.

Accordingly, scholars such as Jacobs (1969), Soja (2006), and Kostof (2005) argue that a city differs fundamentally from a clustered village settlement. Rather than being merely a concentration of dwellings, the city constitutes a form of collective habitation endowed with institutional authority, economic accumulation, and dense networks of social relations. It is typically regarded as a purposively constructed entity shaped by political intention and socio-economic organization. Weber (1986) defined the city primarily in economic terms. In his view, the distinction between a settlement and a city lies in the presence of a commercial environment, defensive structures, markets, autonomous courts or legal systems, and a degree of municipal autonomy. Only under such conditions can citizens form a genuine civic community. During the Japanese colonial period—the central focus of this study—the urban planning concepts implemented by the Taiwan Governor-General's Office in Tainan embodied many of the characteristics described above. Through the policy of urban reform (*shiku kaisei*), the colonial administration sought to demonstrate its governing capacity over the broader social and environmental order under the symbolic authority of the Japanese emperor. Infrastructure systems—including railways, road networks, sanitation systems, and the construction of the Anping Canal and port facilities—were developed in tandem with monumental government buildings, wide and straight tree-lined boulevards, and traffic circles. Together, these elements articulated a new spatial configuration of the modern city, intended to manifest Japan's fulfillment of what was framed as the "responsibility of the metropole" (Oguma, 2020).

With the intensification of globalization and urbanization, contemporary cities are confronted with multiple challenges, including population density pressures, resource depletion, environmental pollution, and social inequality. Against this backdrop, sustainable development has emerged as the normative ideal toward which modern cities aspire. In 1987, Norway's first female Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, presented the report *Our Common Future* at the United Nations. Published by the World Commission on Environment and Development, the report defined "sustainable development" as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition introduced an intergenerational ethical framework that continues to guide global policy discourse. Sustainable development has since become one of the most significant global issues of the twenty-first century. In 2015, the United Nations announced the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," which established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these, Goal 11 specifically addresses sustainable cities and communities, aiming to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Spatial Imprints of Tainan From the Dutch Period to the Late Qing Dynasty

From 1624, when the Dutch entered Anping in Tainan under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company, until 1895, when Taiwan entered the Japanese colonial period, a total of 271 years elapsed. During this time, the urban space of Tainan Fucheng underwent three major historical phases: Dutch rule, the Kingdom of Tungning under Zheng Chenggong, and Qing administration. Throughout these successive periods, Tainan served as Taiwan's foremost center of politics, economy, and education. During the Dutch occupation, Fort Zeelandia functioned as the political and economic nucleus as well as a military stronghold. It also served as an intermediary trading hub linking the Dutch with China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. As Dutch settlers and Han migrants gradually concentrated in the area, a township began to take shape. Within this emerging settlement, three principal east–west streets were formed: the northern Narrow Street (present-day Zhongxing Street), the central Broad Street (present-day Xiaozhong Street), and the southern Church Street (present-day Yanping Street). These early spatial arrangements reveal how maritime trade, military defense, and cross-cultural interaction collectively structured the initial urban morphology of Tainan.

In 1625, the Dutch began constructing a new township named Stad Provintia, equipped with residential quarters, warehouses, and a hospital (Wang, 2017). From this point onward, the Dutch authorities encouraged Han migration, and Japanese merchants who came for trade also settled in the area. As a result, the population gradually increased and formed a concentrated community (Zeng, 2023). Because the settlement was located along the coast, the earliest development of Tainan's streets took shape along an east–west axis, while north–south streets emerged later as the population clustered and expanded. Stad Provintia was initially planned according to an eight-block grid pattern, forming an east–west thoroughfare (present-day Minquan Road) intersected by a north–south street (present-day Zhongyi Road). During the Qing administration, the cross-shaped street layout established during the Dutch period became the structural foundation for further expansion. As the coastline gradually receded, multiple layers of cross-shaped blocks were developed. Roads extended outward in the four cardinal directions, giving rise to the four wards of Zhenbei, Xiding, Ningnan, and Dong'an. The street system formed during the Qing period later provided the groundwork for urban planning under Japanese rule. Within the former Qing walled city, a checkerboard-style road network evolved, while radial roads extending from circular roundabouts were introduced as connective nodes. Together, these spatial elements constituted the embryonic form of the present-day street pattern in central Tainan (Chen, 2024).

Tainan's Urban Space During the Japanese Colonial Period vs. Contemporary Tainan

During the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, Tainan Fucheng established eight city gates: Dadong Gate, Xiaodong Gate, Daxi Gate, Xiaoxi Gate, Danan Gate, Xiaonan Gate, Dabeimen Gate, and Xiaobeimen Gate. These eight gates were aligned with the principal north–south official road, connected westward to maritime routes, and extended eastward toward upland settlements opened through agricultural reclamation. Although the eight gates functioned as entry points from all directions, mobility at the time primarily depended on walking or sedan chairs, while goods were transported by manual carrying, shoulder poles, or ox carts. For safety considerations within the city, ox carts were generally restricted to areas outside the walls or to relatively open spaces within the city. Once inside the gates, roads were typically narrow, winding, and irregular in form. Moreover, at the western edge of the Tainan plateau, the terrain was low-lying, and a considerable portion of the land consisted of newly reclaimed coastal flats. Rainwater and wastewater within the city flowed westward into drainage channels and harbor

waterways, generating adverse environmental conditions (Ko, 2022). In 1911 (Meiji 44), the Taiwan Governor-General's Office promulgated the Tainan Urban Improvement Plan (*Shiku Kaisei*), implementing a comprehensive reorganization and reconstruction of the road network within the former Qing walled city. Subsequent plans in 1929 and 1941 expanded the urban planning boundaries and further formalized Tainan's municipal development, thereby establishing the spatial prototype of today's core urban district. Public health improvement was one of the principal motivations for undertaking urban reform. Regarding the Tainan Urban Improvement Plan, in 1910 the colonial government issued the following directive to the Tainan Prefectural authorities:

> …Within the internal urban district planning, street blocks should, as far as possible, be maintained in rectangular form. However, for the convenience of urban transportation, the railway station and the site of the imperial statue should be regarded as the central hubs of the city, from which a convergent street system should be established to connect these two points. … Judging from the existing pattern of urban development, the western district is suitable for commercial activities, whereas the eastern district is appropriate for residential use. Therefore, the western district shall be planned as a densely utilized commercial area, while the eastern district shall consist of larger and more spacious blocks for residential purposes. In addition, land designated for public facilities should be allocated in the largest possible parcels, and large parks should be planned on both the northern and southern sides of the city. (*Explanatory Report of the Tainan Urban District Plan*, 1910)

This planning logic marked a decisive transition from the organically evolved and defense-oriented spatial structure of the Qing walled city to a rationalized, hygienic, and functionally differentiated modern urban framework.

The "central hub" referred to above was the Taishō Park Roundabout, while the "imperial statue" commemorated Kodama Gentaro (1852–1906), the fourth Governor-General of Taiwan. The "railway station" referred to the first-generation Tainan Station. In 1908, the completion and operation of the Taiwan Trunk Railway marked a milestone in colonial infrastructure development, and Tainan Station became the gateway to the prefectural capital (Ko, 2022). Furthermore, the planned "large parks" were organized with the Taishō Park Roundabout as the core. Additional roundabouts were constructed in the northeastern, southeastern, northwestern, and southwestern districts of the city. These four roundabouts functioned like satellites encircling the Taishō Park Roundabout. In addition, seven radial roads converged at this central node, forming the administrative and spatial nucleus of Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period. This comprehensive urban planning scheme was completed in 1934 and established a transportation and administrative network linking the two cities and ten districts under Tainan Prefecture, thereby consolidating its regional centrality.

With the convergence of seven radial roads, the centrally positioned Taishō Park Roundabout became the spatial nucleus of the city. At the time, Taishōchō-dōri (present-day Zhongshan Road) and Suehirochō-dōri (present-day Zhongzheng Road) functioned as the principal urban axes. Along this axial structure, Meiji Park in front of Tainan Station was connected to Taishō Park via Taishōchō-dōri; from the roundabout, the route extended westward along Suehirochō-dōri directly to the Anping Canal. Through this design, railway, roadway, and waterway systems were effectively integrated, enabling smoother and more efficient flows of people and goods within Fucheng. Taishōchō-dōri served as the main thoroughfare linking Tainan with other regions of Taiwan and acted as the primary gateway into the city's core district.

Suehirochō-dōri, directly connected to the canal and port facilities, became the principal corridor for the movement of personnel, commodities, and international exchange. Consequently, the Japanese authorities developed this area as a commercial district. Key establishments such as the West Market, the Industrial Bank, and Hayashi Department Store were constructed there, consolidating its status as the commercial center of colonial Tainan (Ko & Tseng, 2021).

Sustainable Development in Tainan

This study adopts a fieldwork-based observational approach, conducting site visits to Tainan's historic urban core, the development zones surrounding the Southern Taiwan Science Park, the Anping port area, historic districts, and temple-centered spaces. Through close observation of the city's everyday operations and lived practices, the research seeks to understand the mechanisms through which sustainable development in Tainan has been formed and sustained.

First, field observations conducted in the Southern Taiwan Science Park and its surrounding areas indicate that industries such as optoelectronics, integrated circuits, precision machinery, biotechnology, and green energy have formed one of Taiwan's most significant TFT-LCD industrial clusters. The influx of population and spatial expansion generated by these industries have accelerated the development of residential zones, educational institutions, and daily service facilities. However, no evident spatial rupture appears between these newly developed districts and the historic urban core. Through on-site tracking of transportation routes, it becomes clear that both commuting flows and logistics corridors continue to rely upon arterial road systems and railway nodes originally established during the Japanese colonial period. This observation confirms that the historical transportation framework provides the structural foundation for contemporary industrial operations and urban spatial organization. It has enabled Tainan to maintain structural stability while undergoing processes of industrial transformation and spatial expansion.

Second, field investigations conducted in the historic urban core and around major temples reveal that religious institutions such as Grand Matsu Temple, Beiji Temple, and Anping Kaitai Tianhou Temple function not merely as religious sites but as central nodes of local society. Folk belief activities centered on Mazu, Wangye deities, or local guardian gods generate periodic large-scale gatherings through rituals, pilgrimages, and temple processions. These cyclical congregations stimulate marketplace economies and diverse culinary cultures, forming a distinctive component of Tainan's sustainable development model. Temple-front markets, night markets, and historic commercial streets, such as Shuixian Temple Market and West Market, operate through small-scale, localized economic practices that support numerous micro-enterprises and household livelihoods. Tainan's signature foods, beef soup, bowl rice pudding (*wan guo*), shrimp rolls, and *danzi* noodles, extend beyond mere culinary consumption. They embody local memory and cultural identity. This economic model, which integrates cuisine, social interaction, and cultural narrative, contributes to tourism development and demonstrates how culturally oriented networks can sustain urban resilience through community-based economic activity.

Third, observations conducted in historic districts and areas of renovated traditional houses reveal that streets such as Xinmei Street, Zhengxing Street, Yongfu Road, Snail Alley, and Shennong Street exhibit a pattern of cultural and creative industries characterized by diversification and strong local embeddedness. Following renovation and adaptive reuse, former residential buildings have been transformed into cafés, design studios, independent

bookstores, and exhibition spaces, attracting young entrepreneurs to establish businesses in these areas. Field observations indicate that many operators emphasize the “story of the space” and the “historical atmosphere” as central motivations for their entrepreneurial activities, rather than focusing solely on economic profit. This culturally oriented economic model, grounded in historical memory, transforms heritage sites and traditional houses from objects of static preservation into dynamic spaces of social and economic activity. Through this process, the conservation of historic architecture becomes intertwined with contemporary creativity and community-based cultural production.

Fourth, field observations conducted along the Anping Canal and surrounding port areas reveal that this waterfront space has undergone multiple stages of governance and functional restructuring. The Anping Canal, excavated during the Japanese colonial period, originally served as a vital shipping corridor connecting the urban center of Tainan with Anping Port, facilitating the circulation of people and goods. However, with changes in port conditions and transformations in transportation modes, its shipping function gradually declined. Certain sections experienced sedimentation and reduced utilization. In recent years, the municipal government has implemented waterfront rehabilitation projects, landscape enhancement, and public space redesign, thereby transforming the canal area into a recreational and tourism-oriented public domain. It is important to note that the canal’s present spatial configuration is not a natural continuation of its historical function, but rather the outcome of deliberate policy intervention and urban redevelopment planning. On-site observations indicate that pedestrian pathways, sightseeing boat services, dining facilities, and nighttime lighting installations have reactivated the waterfront, restoring its public character and generating renewed economic value. This transformation does not represent a simple extension of historical infrastructure. Instead, through processes of re-governance and functional restructuring, the canal has acquired a new role within the contemporary urban context, illustrating how inherited spatial assets can be repositioned within a sustainable development framework.

Fifth, in terms of cultural economy and spatial revitalization, Tainan’s strategies for the adaptive reuse of historic monuments and districts demonstrate a distinct cultural dimension of sustainable development. Sites such as Chihkan Tower, Fort Zeelandia, and Wutiao Harbor Cultural Park function not only as preserved cultural assets but also as actively revitalized spaces. Through exhibitions, cultural performances, themed markets, and guided tourism programs, these heritage sites have been transformed into dynamic platforms where cultural preservation and economic benefits form a mutually reinforcing cycle. This model demonstrates that historical assets are not obstacles to development; rather, through institutional design and public participation, they can be converted into resources for urban innovation. In this process, historical spatial order is reinterpreted in contemporary terms as cultural capital, which in turn supports the growth of tourism and creative industries. Such a development pathway highlights how heritage conservation, when integrated with participatory governance and economic strategy, can contribute to a sustainable and culturally grounded urban future.

Conclusion

This study takes the urban planning of Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period as its historical point of departure. By integrating field investigation and historical narrative, it explores the formation mechanisms underlying contemporary sustainable development in Tainan. The findings indicate that the roots of Tainan’s urban vitality lie in a dynamic developmental pattern shaped through the interaction between inherited spatial structures and

contemporary public governance. The transportation integration system, urban axes, and public infrastructure established during the Japanese colonial period constituted the institutional framework of Tainan's urban operations. Contemporary industrial transformation and spatial expansion have not dismantled this framework; rather, they have reconfigured functions within it, enabling the city to maintain structural stability and economic resilience amid global competition. Field observations further reveal that networks of folk belief and temple-centered marketplace activities form an important foundation of social capital, reinforcing local cohesion and economic circulation. The revitalization of historic districts and adaptive reuse of traditional houses demonstrate how historical assets can be reinterpreted culturally and transformed into contemporary resources for innovation. The regeneration of the Anping Canal further illustrates that historical infrastructure has not been preserved in a static manner, but instead has been repositioned and reutilized within new urban development contexts. In conclusion, the case of Tainan offers both theoretical and practical insights into how historically layered cities can pursue sustainable transformation under conditions of globalization. Future research may advance theoretical development by engaging in comparative studies of historical cities across different national contexts, thereby deepening understanding of the relationship between historical evolution and sustainable urban development.

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