Taipei: city of displacement is an interesting and insightful book about the cultural politics of public space in a postcolonial East Asian city. Combining thorough investigation of historical material and long-term observation of contemporary urban spaces, Joseph Allen presents a brilliant spatial reading of historical and present-day Taipei. As Allen mentions in the book (p. 186), the theoretical framework of his study is primarily informed by Lefebvre, Harvey, and Hayden, whose works usually see space not as a backdrop for social and historical events, but as a type of agent actively engaged in these events. Similarly, Taipei focuses on how the visual representation of public spaces in Taipei supports the construction and reconstruction of ideology, especially the ideology of Taiwanese national identity.

The picture of Taipei Park on the front cover—which shows the juxtaposition of a neo-classical museum built by the Japanese colonial government, a Chinese pavilion built during the post-WWII period, and a skyscraper built in the post-martial-law
era—accurately reflects the key subject of the book. In fact, the chapter on Taipei Park occurs in the middle of the book. This implies that the Taipei Park case study is central to all other material in the book, including maps, photos and films, city gates and roads, museums, and statues, and thus deserves close examination. In the Taipei Park chapter, Allen offers a detailed description and interpretation of selected spaces in the park that exist physically or psychologically namely, Tianhougong (the temple of an important Chinese goddess), the Taipei Club, two memorial arches, a music pavilion, a gay park, and the Tudigongmiao (Earth God shrine).

According to Allen, before Japanese rule, Tianhougong was located in the center of Taipei and was extremely important to the local Han population during the Qing dynasty. The Japanese destroyed the temple and began constructing Taipei Park because “the ruling powers regarded this religious space as part of the [Ching] colonial core, which needed to be neutralized by its quick secularization” (p. 95). The first colonial building constructed in this neutralized zone was the Taipei Club. It was a privileged site for the colonialists and a center for promoting physical education and public sports, which were “part of a larger Japanese effort during the Meiji period to form a new civil society, both in the Japanese homeland and in the new colony” (p. 100). Unlike Tianhougong, the memorial arches erected during the Qing dynasty were not demolished. Instead, they were relocated from their original sites to Taipei Park. This is because the Japanese somewhat admired elite Chinese culture and sought to preserve Chinese cultural objects. However, because the memorial arches contradicted colonial and modern construction projects, they were preserved inside Taipei Park, “where they would be relatively safe—safe from modernization efforts, but also safely displaced, away form a position of power in local culture” (p. 104). With its European style and its function to host Western classical and military music
performances, the music pavilion in Taipei Park was significant in the colonizers’
cultural “transplantation” program (p. 104).

If the analysis of these sites in Taipei Park reflects the cultural strategies deployed
by the Japanese ruling powers, then the discussion on the gay park and the
Tudigonmiao depicts the spatial tactics employed under the post-war rule of the
Nationalist Party (Guomindong). Since the 1960s and 1970s, despite (or because)
homosexual relationships being seen as deviant in public discourse, Taipei Park was a
primary meeting place for the gay population in Taiwan. This caused an ironic
situation where the most private activities occurred in the most public and visible
place in Taipei. Similarly, the Tudigonmiao was not an officially documented site in
Taipei Park, but it was an important religious center for the local neighborhood. After
a petition by local residents, the city government recognized the temple as the
February 28th Peace Park Fude Temple in 2003. Above all, Allen demonstrates that
the meanings and functions of Taipei Park have changed over time and have also
differed among groups at the same time.

Allen’s concept of displacement is central to the book. While many texts on cities
(including those on Taipei) favor metaphors associated with palimpsests, such as
scripting in and scraping away, to describe the change in form and meaning of an
urban landscape, Allen’s displacement metaphor uniquely reflects the situation in
Taipei. Displacement first refers to the migration of people to Taipei during various
periods. What makes this concept more significant is its use in illustrating political
power changes and their cultural strategies. For example, during the Japanese colonial
period, the Japanese introduced colonial modernity to Taipei, discarding existing Han
settlements and cultures. When the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, the ideology of a
unified China came to the center, replacing Japanese cultural artifacts and their visual
representations. In this situation, the symbols of the Qing dynasty represented the power of the ruling class. When martial law was lifted, a localization movement occurred and people adopted Japanese colonial cultures to distance themselves from the People’s Republic of China and the Nationalists. Using the concept of displacement, Allen offers a more comprehensive explanation for the peculiar relationship of urban development and cultural development in Taipei.

As someone from Taipei, I was impressed (and at times surprised) by Allen’s broad knowledge of Taipei’s people, history, culture, and urban texture. This book sees Taipei in such innovative ways that it makes a local feel like a stranger in their own city. It is essential for those who are interested in the urban development of Taipei and general visual culture of the city. However, while the book provides a sound interpretation of the relationship between national identity formation and urban space production, it gives limited attention to other significant social factors, such as gender and class issues. This lack of gender and class consideration is also reflected in the book’s front cover. The Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Building is shown in the background of the cover. However, the connotations of this huge office tower are barely mentioned in the book. A critical reading of the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi building is crucial for understanding Taipei’s urban development and its urban politics during the post-martial-law period.

The skyscraper is the headquarters for a company with a name that combines Chinese and Japanese. This can be seen as a strong symbol of economic colonization by the former colonizer in Taipei’s post-colonial condition because it is located directly in front of the most important gateway to Taipei City, Taipei Main Station. This impression is reconfirmed by the designer of the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Building—Guo Mao-Lin, a Japanese trained architect and close friend of former
president Li Deng-Hue—claiming that the color of the building was inspired by his memories of Sakura in Japan. As well as reading the text of the of Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Building, it is also necessary to read its context, that is, to see it as an indicator of the transformation of the Shin Kong company.

Established in the 1950s, the Shin Kong Corporation was a major textile producer in Taiwan. In the early 1980s, it gradually transferred its investments from the textile industry to the service industry. It established Shin Kong Insurance and began a joint venture with Japanese corporation Mitsukoshi to operate department stores in 1991. At the same time, it gradually closed many of its Taiwanese textile plants. In 1988, it closed its main textile plant in Shilin, Taipei, which incited fierce protests from retrenched employees, most of whom were female. Immediately after the closing of the Shilin plant construction began on the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Building, with help from the government to maximize floor space. This building was the highest building in Taipei until the completion of Taipei 101 in 2000.

Reading the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Building in this way is important because national identity is only one of many aspects of social struggle in Taiwan. Without considering the other aspects of social struggle, the issue of national identity may obscure other types of urban politics and prevent other ways of imagining identity and community. This is currently occurring in Taiwan. Political debates usually focus on dualisms such as Chinese vs Taiwanese, Blue vs Green, and North vs South, while social and economic justice issues are hardly on the political agenda and no vocabulary exists to voice these concerns. If Allen’s intention is to increase consciousness of displacement in Taiwanese culture, this cannot be neglected.
Despite these limitations, *Taipei* successfully explores unseen aspects of Taipei. It is worth reading for anyone concerned with the relationships between urban public spaces, identity formation, postcolonialism, and Taipei.