

Session on Friendly City: The Way

友善城市：機制

Making Taichung A Barriers-Free City for All International Guests

An Introductory Remark by

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Friendly as Barriers-Free

For years, the United Nations (UN) has been working on protection and promotion of basic Human Rights. Rights to shelter, food, freedom, peace and more are fundamental to human survival and social enhancement. Though not an official member of the UN, Taiwan society was not immune from such global concerns and efforts. In fact, Taiwan not only has excelled quite well in certain categories, but also active contributors to such worldly efforts. In line with the enhancement of human rights, we are here today to address the issue of how to make Taichung becoming a barriers-free city for all international guests and visitors. Friendly-City Taichung means that all disabled foreign guests shall not be handicapped by our ignorance of their basic rights to have a happy life here.

In the past decades, daily needs of those people with disability (correctable or uncorrectable) have received transformative attentions in many societies, especially in the area of retrofitting existing environment to be more inclusive of all users regardless of physical and mental conditions. Ramps and reserved park lots and elevators are some of the obvious examples of such corrective actions.

However, the existing disability framework has yet recognized the needs of foreigners in a foreign land as culturally and phonetically disabled. As a result, complaints about confusing street names and inattentive medical emergency have gone unheard. For most of international guests and visitors, Taiwan is still a place full of living barriers. Can Taichung do something from past lessons of modifying facilities for the

Handicapped? I believe we should and we can, for the betterment of our foreign residents.

1. Taichung City Foreigners' Assembly

First, establishment of a Taichung City Foreigners' Assembly (TC-FA). Ten years ago, a number of Japanese cities began to recognize the needs of foreign residents and decide to do some fixing-up of the legal system. One thing they proposed was the establishment of a formal Assembly made of foreign residents. Membership of the FA (around 20-25) is drawn from the foreigners' community proportionally for a two-year term. The FA would meet four times a year (seasonally and two-days) to hear and decide on recommendations to be sent to the Mayor and in turn to the local Legislative Assembly for consideration and further action. There are roughly 15,000 foreign guests (with 73 nationalities) living in Taichung City, it would be interesting to see a TC-FA in action in the coming future.

2. Barriers-free Taichung

Second, smarter utilization of number and symbol for a barrier-free Taichung. It is often mistaken that English-lization is the only route to a barriers-free environment for all foreign guests. In my opinion, if we can realize the potential of number and symbol, maybe we can spend less and accomplish more. Why so? First of all, numerical symbol and signage in itself is more internationally recognizable than English. Second, it minimizes (or neutralize) the bias toward people from non-English-speaking places. Finally, it is more cost-effective. In order to have a good start, I recommend that street naming system of the city shall be rearranged immediately.

Conclusion

In the last ten years, Taiwan society has witnessed the growth of foreigners, especially in the areas of laborers and marriage. In 1991, the total population of foreigners was a little more than 30,000. Today, there are more than 400,000 foreign residents in every corners of Taiwan. In Central Taiwan (Taichung city and county, Nantou and Changhwa counties) alone, there are more than 74,000 (or 1.6%) people with foreign nationalities. Excluding the laborer category, Taichung City registers the highest number of foreigners (close to 6,000). Among them, people from the United States and Japan are the top two groups.

It is well expected that the growth rate of foreign population is going to rise in the coming future. The issue of barriers-free environment can no longer be ignored by the politics and the general public. Due to a lack of formal mechanism, Taichung's foreigners' community has received too little attention. By recognizing their rights to be heard and their disability to be pampered as early as possible, I believe that Taichung City can be the most friendly city in Asia in the days ahead. It is never too late to get started. Let's act now.