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A Tale of Two Pavilions ^[1]

While the global community has been busy parading at the Shanghai Expo 2010, for Taiwan, simply taking part in the world's fair is meaningful. It has been nearly 40 years since the island has been able to join the global showcase, when the Republic of China last participated at the Osaka Expo in 1970 during a period when Taipei still held official diplomatic relations with Tokyo. In the wake of warming relations between Taiwan and China, both Taiwan and the City of Taipei are hosting pavilions at this year's global gala.

By a long and tortuous route, I left Taipei for Shanghai, where I spent the better part of the week visiting the colossal Expo. The brunt of my focus at this public diplomacy Mecca was directed at Taiwan's contributions to the event. My Expo compatriot was one Cesar Corona, a friend and former colleague from the MPD program who is an Expo expert and CPD Researcher at the world's fair.

On a sweltering Monday afternoon, we made our way over to the giant metal and glass Taiwan Pavilion, organized and constructed by the Taipei World Trade Center and designed by the renowned architect C.Y. Lee- the designer of the world's once-tallest structure, the Taipei 101 tower. The Taiwan Pavilion's theme is "Mountain, Water & Lantern of the Heart", and this is reflected in the pavilion's dynamic design. Representing the "Mountain" theme, there are 888 pieces of stainless steel, etched in floral patterns some 7 stories tall. The mountain creates a giant backdrop for the "Lantern of the Heart," a 16 meter, 130 metric ton globe covered in a million LED light bulbs and serving as the world's largest LED screen.

A recurring notion throughout the Shanghai Expo is a focus on quantity. The Shanghai Expo is on pace to surpass the Expo record of attendance and attract some 70 million visitors; pavilions seem to compete to see who can draw the biggest crowds and hold the longest lines. It is reported that the lines for the Saudi Arabia pavilion lasted up to 9 hours, while other pavilions like Germany's have queues that can last as long as 6 hours. Meanwhile, the VIP entrances have caused a bit of consternation with reports that the well-heeled have been able to cough up a pocket full of yuan to scalpers to bypass the laborious queue. Unending lines have created some ugly incidents at an event predicated on cultural awareness and understanding.

The Taiwan Pavilion took the opposite approach regarding its expo visitation policy, focusing on quality of the visit over quantity of visitors. In chatting with the Taiwan Pavilion's president Walter Yeh, he said the pavilion tries to give all visitors a VIP experience. The Taiwan Pavilion conducts a reservation system that lets visitors get reserved spaces for 40-person group tours complete with cheery Taiwanese tour guides to lead the groups through the 7-story pavilion. There are a total of 4,000 reserved spaces allocated on a daily basis. Thus far, the Taiwan Pavilion has recently welcomed its 300,000th visitor, with an expected 750,000 to 800,000 to visit by the expo's conclusion at the end of October.

The tour began through the “Window of Taiwan” hall that featured small and large screens with the faces of Taiwanese people and images of Taiwan on an etched skyline of Taipei. The tour continued up to the 5th floor for a 4-D presentation in the 720° Sphere Theater. The film offered a 3-D tour of Taiwan’s famous natural landscapes such as Mount Jade, Mount Ali and the Taroko Park, images of unique Taiwanese wildlife, and a flyover of Taipei. Meanwhile, a fourth dimension was added with wind, mist and smell special effects to offer added perspective to the film.

The tour continued outside in the pavilion’s Lantern Lighting Water terrace, where visitors were able to make a wish and launch virtual sky lanterns on the giant LED globe that hangs above a pool of water drawn from Taiwan’s famous Sun Moon Lake with an ornate rose stone in the center of the water. The tour concluded back on the first floor, where the group congregated in a bamboo-woven room, intended to symbolize a connection to the environment. In the final section, a brief presentation of traditional Taiwanese music and a traditional tea-ceremony took place. Visitors were given a gift, a tote-bag with small souvenirs, including a cup from the tea ceremony, to keep as a reminder of Taiwanese hospitality and culture.

After our tour, Cesar and I had the opportunity to speak with the Taiwan Pavilion President Walter Yeh. He spoke of the pavilion’s focus on conveying hospitality as an attempt to communicate the value that Taiwanese place on friendliness. Cesar, a veteran of Expos, commented that the Taiwan Pavilion’s method of hospitality had been one of the best among the many pavilions he had seen in various Expos. Cesar also pointed out that the hosting staff of the Taiwan pavilion was not only cheerful, but the sentiment felt genuine. Cesar further commented that in nation branding terminology, they embraced the brand and did a wonderful work promoting Taiwan through real hospitality.

Taiwan Pavilion President Yeh noted that 90 percent of those visiting the Taiwan Pavilion are from mainland China, and the vast majority have never been to Taiwan. As such, the Taiwan Pavilion serves to provide a different perspective for the Chinese visitors about life in Taiwan. I found these sentiments echoed outside the pavilion when I spoke with visitors emerging from the exhibit. A twentysomething Chinese girl named Jenny commented, “I used to think that the Taiwanese were not friendly, but [the pavilion] made me think they are really friendly.” She also commented that the Taiwan pavilion made her want to visit the island.

Later in the week, I also visited the Taipei Pavilion, which is located in the Urban Best Practices Area of the Shanghai Expo. The Taipei Pavilion, sponsored by the Taiwanese technology corporation Foxconn, is the only city pavilion to focus on two urban best practice areas: Taipei’s innovative waste management system and its wireless broadband network. Visitors were introduced to Taipei with a brief welcome film featuring shots of the city set to an “I love Taipei” rap, as well as greetings from the city’s mayor among the 2,010 other smiling faces. The tour continued with a 3-D film tour of Taipei’s sites, sounds and tastes in a 360° theater. The tour led into a “Taipei of the Future” exhibit with holographs about the municipal city-to-come.

The pavilion tour concluded in an interactive zone that lets visitors learn about Taipei’s extensive wireless network and its innovative plan in waste management that was instituted in 2000 and has reduced household waste by 67 percent, increased recycling by 45 percent and allowed the city to reach its goal of zero additional landfills by the end of the decade. As a current Taipei resident, I have to attest that the recycling program here is rather

comprehensive and impressive. Meanwhile, there is a section that has a fascinating pictorial comparison featuring the developments of Shanghai and Taipei from years passed. Municipal bonds between Taipei and Shanghai are further highlighted in the promotion of the Taipei Flora Expo, which Shanghai will take part in. In addition, there was an interactive screen that features 2010 in smiling faces, which Taipei Pavilion Director Ching-an Chen said helps convey the warmth of Taipei to the pavilion's visitors.

In chatting with the Taipei Pavilion Director, Ching-an Chen, he mentioned that the pavilion has been the most popular in the Urban Best Practices section. He noted that the improved relationship between Taiwan and China has led to an increased curiosity in the Taipei Pavilion. As such, the Taipei pavilion welcomes more than 4,000 visitors a day, and more than 300,000 guests have stopped by.

Expo diplomacy is successful public diplomacy because it helps fill in unknown or misperceived conceptions of the "other". Both the Taiwan and Taipei Pavilions are positive instruments of public diplomacy because visitors to Taiwan's respective pavilions, who are overwhelmingly Chinese, are able to gain a more personal, more substantial view of the island just across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwanese friendliness and hospitality as communicated values on display at the respective pavilions indicate a clear desire on Taiwan's part to take advantage of its thaw with the mainland to reach out directly to the people of China and expose the overwhelmingly Chinese audience to a more positive and personal face of Taiwan.
