

A week of good and bad for expats

June 23 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

This past week was rough on foreigners in Taiwan. We took a bit of a beating as far as our image is concerned.

Last Tuesday's news included the story of two foreign students getting arrested for making love in the early hours of the morning in a park in Taichung.

You know how older folks here in Taiwan like to get up at the crack of dawn and join their friends for exercise in public places. Neighborhood schools and public parks become early morning beehives of activity for these admirable exercise enthusiasts.

Police in Taichung received a report at 5 o'clock in the morning last Sunday from senior citizens out for a few simple calisthenics that two people were getting a bit carried away in what is sometimes termed a PDA, otherwise known as a Public Display of Affection.

Police arrived in a hurry and arrested an American lad and a young woman from Brazil for indecent behavior in a public place. Both are students of Mandarin at a school in Taichung. I should mention this was a case involving mutually consenting adults.

For a toned down version, check The China Post, page 15 for June 18. If you prefer a more racy style of reporting, see the Chinese Liberty Times, B 1, also June 18. A comparison of the two pieces, by the way, highlights some of the differences between journalism in Chinese language in Taiwan and journalism in English. What is this drive for reporters in Chinese to make an issue of skin color, anyway? While we're at it, do we really need details on the figure and undergarments of the woman here? Even tawdry affairs such as this deserve a semblance of respect for human dignity.

Thursday's press reported on still another unfortunate incident that recently occurred on an MRT train (TT 6-20-13, p. 2). Again the headlines focused on a foreigner, but this time, not just any foreigner, but an employee of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).

It seems a woman was occupying two seats on a train, one for herself and the other for bags. When an elderly couple stepped aboard at the Chungshan station, a Taiwanese passenger stood up and offered

her seat in assistance. She asked a foreigner nearby to free up one of her seats so that both of the senior citizens could sit down. An argument ensued, and the foreigner apparently flashed an AIT identity card in the face of the Good Samaritan.

This calls to mind the famous words in an Emily Dickinson poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you - Nobody - too? . . . How dreary - to be - Somebody! How public - like a Frog - . . . "

A nearby passenger whipped out a camera and photographed the woman, who for some reason was trying to cover her face. This led to the posting of the photo online and, all too quickly, direct questions on AIT's Facebook page about the incident.

AIT wound up acknowledging the person as one of its employees. The Institute issued an apology and said it is handling the matter internally. That sounds reasonable enough.

So what do these news events offer us? They offer us a reminder that people of all nationalities can and do make mistakes. Personally, incidents such as this also remind me that foreigners sometimes do right in Taiwan. And yet we tend to pay little attention to good behavior. Negative and foolish sells better.

A friend of mine who teaches at National Hsinchu University of Education recently got into hot water for urging the Hsinchu City Government to cancel three firework shows for next October's Double Ten National Day. The shows constitute a blatant waste of public funds, he said, and are a blow against good old-fashioned clean air. Max Gufler is my friend's name. He is a foreigner.

Good old Max issued his public anti-fireworks letter on May 10. Four days later, Hsinchu's Department of Labor began a probe into his work permit. I am happy to say thoughtful observers leapt to his defense. The mayor of Hsinchu has since apologized and, as far as I know, Max is okay now.

Foreigners are not all alike. Some of us are true friends of Taiwan. We call this place home, and want to make it a better home for everybody.

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