

Civic Diplomacy and Deepening Taiwan's Democracy: Lessons learned from Formosa Salon

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To invoke changes towards higher standards, civic diplomacy relies on collaborative networks, led by civic society, to envision sustainable futures and generate knowledge to solve specific problems (Yi and Hayes, 2015). One of the positive changes we expect is deepening democracy. To achieve such a goal, it is vital to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues. This article will introduce how Formosa Salon, a group of (mainly) Taiwanese people in the United Kingdom, has strived to create a safe and inclusive space for people to understand and further engage in a wide variety of social issues, including social movements and democracy outside Taiwan.

The establishment of Formosa Salon can be dated back to the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan in 2014. Several people (mainly Taiwanese students) protested in central London to demand that the Taiwanese government rescind and renegotiate the Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services in March 2014. After the demonstration, these people continued to hold events (such as workshops, seminars and study groups) under the name Formosa Salon to discuss public issues. They have organised over 120 events so far. The topics included, but were not limited to, issues surrounding the Sunflower Movement and its related concepts (such as neoliberalism and free trade agreements), Taiwanese history (such as the 228 incident and white terror), Taiwanese culture (such as indigenous music and cultures), social welfare (including national health insurance and homelessness), environmental protection (such as climate change), labour rights, and gender equality, etc.

Topics related to social movements and democracy in different contexts (such as Hong Kong and China) have also been discussed. These events are opportunities for participants, not only Taiwanese students or workers but also people from various backgrounds, to learn from each other and further build up networks to support each other on an international scale. They invited Dr Petula Ho Sik-ying to talk about the research project "The Young Girls' Heart" which addresses gender issues during and after the Umbrella Movement. They also invited Brian Hioe, an editor of New Bloom Magazine, to share his reporting experience in Hong Kong.

Around one hundred participants, many of them overseas Chinese, came to listen to and further challenge Mr Wang Dang's perspective of the relationships between Taiwan, China and the United States. Researchers focusing on the history and theology of Hong Kong were also invited to share their studies.

Although Formosa Salon, generally, does not record the number of participants in each activity, it is still reasonable to say that it has encouraged people in public discussions around social issues. The online Facebook group for Formosa Salon, its primary platform to promote activities, now has over 2,300 members. Based on my four-year engagement in Formosa Salon, its promotion has been quite successful because we have seen 30 people participate in each activity on average. On some occasions, the number of participants has been much higher. For example, about 80 to 100 participants registered with Formosa Salon to attend London Pride each year from 2016 to 2019.

This kind of group, for people to meet and exchange ideas around social issues, is critical. It facilitates mutual learning and fosters collaborative networks to strive for long-term sustainability, such as deepening democracy, among participants from various backgrounds in terms of expertise and nationality, in a bottom-up approach. Based on my interviews with those who have participated in the activities held by Formosa Salon, participants say that they acquire new knowledge in each activity, broadening their horizons thanks to the diversity of the topics covered. They enjoy the sense of openness - everyone is welcome to listen to and further express opinions on any particular public issue. One interviewee told me that through attending these events, he "satisfies his eagerness to learn". Another interviewee stated that "I learn new thoughts, practices, or concepts throughout the processes [of discussion and engagement]".

However, Formosa Salon has been faced with several obstacles. The first is how to attract more people to engage in such discussions. Those who have been taking part, or organising, Formosa Salon activities, are likely to be those who care about social issues already.

Furthermore, some interviewees told me that they only invite those who have previously shown an interest in social issues in their peer groups to participate in the activities held by Formosa Salon. However, this strategy may not reach people who show little or no interest in public issues. Hence, this strategy may risk failing to achieve the goal of Formosa Salon, to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues.

Besides, organisers must choose topics for public discussions from the perspectives of potential participants. It does not mean that organisers have to self-censor by avoiding the potentially "sensitive" subjects. Nevertheless, topics should not only be interesting to organisers themselves. One interviewee told me that one of her friends found the topics "not interesting at all" when she tried to promote Formosa Salon to her friends (she failed to talk this friend into showing up). Organisers must come up with a feasible strategy to persuade those who have not engaged in social issues to exchange their time and efforts to engage in public discussions. This could be done by identifying the values that appeal to the people they want to involve in public discussion.

Although Formosa Salon has some obstacles to overcome, I believe that their experience and achievements still have implications for those who also aim to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues. Moreover, they have initiated and nurtured collaborative networks among researchers and activities interested in social issues not only in Taiwan but also in areas which include Hong Kong and China. Creating such a safe and inclusive space for mutual learning and support is critical, and Formosa Salon has strived to do so for nearly seven years without a leader, command structure, formalised membership, or steady financial resources. Their long-term efforts and future possibilities should not be overlooked.

Reference

Yi, K. & Hayes, P. 2015, "The Implications of Civic Diplomacy for ROK Foreign Policy" in *Complexity, Security and Civil Society in East Asia*, eds. K. Yi & P. Hayes, Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, the United Kingdom, pp. 319-392.

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