

Global aspirations or healthful perspiration

An essay on form and function in East Asia

There is hardly a commercial center in East Asia where you cannot find posters that include the images of Western models. Whether it is cigarettes, clothing, shoes, perfume, skin care, food, or automobiles the Western image remains an important allure for young and even many older East Asian consumers. Though many Western residents of East Asia are likely flattered and comforted by this phenomenon, there are hidden dangers that lie beneath the surface for both sides.

Consider for example the adult outdoor training ground where I work out on a regular basis. No, there are no posters of Western models, nor even Western images; the signs are posted in both Chinese and English. Upon first sight, however, one has the impression one has stumbled on a piece of the modern world -- a part of the world often called Western by many East Asians. Perhaps not unjustly....

On these grounds are 13 stations each with a different bench or apparatus corresponding to a different set of exercises. Completing the course according to the posted instructions leaves one with the feeling of having exercised one's entire body. To the best of my knowledge, I am the only one who uses the grounds for that purpose. In contrast, I have seen an occasional runner, cyclist, walker, or passer-by performing a specific exercise and then moving on. Children playing ball, tag, and other games are a common nuisance, as they are accompanied by non-exercising parents who place their children's athletic future over that of their adult foreign guest's current physical and emotional health. Exercise is a great non-alcoholic, no nicotine stress reliever. Large groups of people exercise and chat at a single station for many tens of minutes and never move to another. This can also be said of certain individuals, whom I have seen spend an entire 30 minutes at one station. Since I began using the grounds on a regular basis two years ago, I have had to ask worshippers, picnickers, and loungers to relocate to another equally good spot, so that I might use the benches and the apparatus attached to them in the manner prescribed by the grounds' creators. Indeed, maintaining a steady rhythm uninterrupted by would-be users is more of a challenge than the exercising itself. The nearly complete absence of other dedicated aerobic users while I am there tells only part of the story, though.

When I first begin using the grounds at the beginning of each season there is almost no one present. Within two weeks the grounds gradually become crowded by the motley list of semi-, pseudo-, and occupying nonusers described above. How does one explain this phenomenon? Either few are using the grounds in the first place, or people suddenly shift their time schedules to better conflict with mine. Is it that I breathe life into an otherwise misunderstood playground for adults, or is it that I am a Westerner making use of a "Western facility" on someone else's non-Western home turf?

Whatever the reason, most foreign residents of East Asia pay taxes to the same government that native residents pay, and the public facilities used by either are paid for by both.

Certainly it is not the case that there are no facilities set aside for children, picnickers, worshippers, and lounging passers-by in the same park. Moreover, people actually have to go out of their way to arrive at the grounds, as they are located far from the park's entrance.

Perhaps worse, any effort on the part of the park management is at best temporary, partial, or both. It is not a matter of providing those for whom the grounds were designed the protection they require to utilise the grounds safely; rather, it is a matter of how the grounds are utilised by most. Any authority perceived as defending a sole foreign user's right to use the grounds in the prescribed manner, could also be perceived as privileging that foreigner over native users. One way to get around this dilemma might be to train native users about the proper use of the facilities. In this way there would be both native and foreign users to defend, and local authorities could no longer be accused of neglect towards their "own" citizens. To expect that we live in a global society where everyone who pays taxes and abides by local laws and customs should be treated the same appears to be asking too much in nearly every society.

In the end East Asian city planners and urban consumers appear to share something in common: the purchase and importation of "Western goods" that appear to have no place in their own culture. For the entire year that I taught at a renowned Hong Kong university never once was the triple-deck diving tower that presides over the pool area in use! The diving tower and the adult physical training ground near my residence are expensive public accoutrements paid for by Hong Kong taxpayers and their working foreign guests. Both lure and deceive unknowing Westerners. Both cheat local taxpayers. Is this one of the keys to an emerging economy's economic and financial success?

East Asians tend to view physical exertion as the domain of hand laborers and youth destined to become such. In Hong Kong black is *in* on a hot sunny day, not because black clothing absorbs heat, and it is not hot enough already! Then, is it because black often matches the color of one's own and others' hair? Or is it that black hides evidence of perspiration? Not a few Hong Kong women hide from the sun under a parasol, as did many of their colonial predecessors.

So why do Hong Kong's city fathers spend Hong Kong tax dollars on the purchase of outdoor physical training equipment? Surely not for the purpose of giving adult office workers the chance to drench themselves in sweat on a regular basis. For if it were, I would not feel so alone and frustrated in my pursuit of good physical and emotional health.

R. A. Stegemann
Word count: 1039
New Territories, Hong Kong
(revised 03/11/25)