Busan’s foreigner programs and policies: a study on the effectiveness and responsiveness of the foreign population in Busan on citywide programs

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Abstract

South Korea has been trying to become more foreigner friendly. The country has embarked on new policies geared towards making foreigners lives more convenient, comfortable and easy. This has been done by adding quadrilingual signs in subways, tour guides, foreign language helplines and even creating the Korea Foundation for international activities. The purpose of this paper is to analyze what the city of Busan is doing for foreigners, especially concerning the local activities of the city and the cities own international activity foundation the BFIA and to determine the overall effects of Busan city’s changes as seen through the eyes of foreigners living, working and visiting the city of Busan. The paper sets out to prove that first foreigners are not informed well about the cities foreigner programs including the BFIA programs and secondly that the programs that are available are not the types of programs foreigners want or need in the city of Busan.

Introduction

Busan, South Korea’s second largest city has embarked on a foreigner friendly policy. Despite this, it seems most foreigners in Busan are either not using or not being connected properly to the services provided by the city and its entities. Busan is home to over 40,000 foreigner born residents, but its main outlet, the BFIA, is not reaching the correct audience of foreigners in Busan. While South Korea is claiming to be more decentralized governmentally, to focus on local issues better, they are still bound by a sense of nationalism that does not accept outside influence. This closed frame of mind creates a great deal of inefficiency and waste of taxpayer monies and resources. Without proper knowledge many of these programs can lead to failure, alienation and disenfranchisement of the foreign population at large.

According to Sohyun Lee (2012) South Korea’s multi-cultural projects, though well funded, lack efficiency and are redundant. Even most Korean NGOs are completely dependent on the government for funding. The only criteria for running a program
are to satisfy the governmental requirements to keep said funding, nothing more. In Lee’s case study, one organization had arranged a Tagalog language class to empower migrants living in the area. However, the organization hired an inexperienced Filipino to teach along with 4 teaching assistants that could not speak Tagalog. In what she states as, “(T)he problem of redundancy and inefficiency of staffing would be averted by the presence of a single trained Tagalog teacher” (Lee Sohyun 2012, pg34) is exactly what many programs in Korea are seeing, both governmentally and non-governmentally run. In a recent article in the Korea Times the government is not only unorganized but almost completely out of touch of the difference between the different foreign groups in Korea. When asked about a specific program, the recently elected legislator Jasmine Lee (Korea’s first foreign born legislator) told the story of how a community that had a large population of ethnic Chinese foreigners requested a foreign language teacher they, “(E)nded up receiving a Mongolian language teacher” that did not speak Chinese. This “…showed that the government dispatched the teacher without even doing the very basic research on the students’ needs (Lee, Tae-hoon 2012). As the government has the financial power to make programs they see as necessary in today’s changing Korean society, their rigid rules and out of touch procedures are hindering any progress.

After checking the research on foreigners living in Busan and even interviewing one of the heads of the BFIA there is in fact nothing that is being done to find out the foreigners living in Busan’s (or Korea for that matter) wants or needs when coming up with programs geared towards foreigners. When the BFIA or the city decides on a program they do one of two things, they simply apply for government aid through the national government to run one of the programs that has been set up geared towards multi-culturalism and foreigners, or they simply make one up on their own without any research. They do not even perform exit surveys to ask the participants in their programs what they think of the program or if they liked, disliked or think there should be improvement upon any of the programs. There is also no system of performance management to ever go so far as to see how many people attend or don’t attend the free government programs. This lack of oversight with the foreign community and the programs that affect them directly needs further study.

Due to this lack of research or direction I have designed a citizen survey (in several languages) to go out into the city, ask the foreigners in their own language how they feel the city is reaching out to them. This survey is designed to see whether the respondents are even using the current city services or for that matter if they even know about them at all.

The purpose of this research is to take the information collected from the data to managers of city governments throughout South Korea and particularly the city of Busan in hopes that they can use the information in being able to assess their programs and provide a direction in their program creation. Once they have the information to decipher perhaps the city can understand the needs of its foreigner population and serve them better. Since all city run programs are geared towards multi-cultural families of those married to Korean nationals, the focus of the study will be centered around the BFIA and its activities (as described later).