

Japanese city reborn from poisoned pariah to model

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Promoting tourist exchange, rising problem of urban mobility, and the need to redefine the role media were the major topics of the 8th Asian City Journalists' Conference in Fukuoka, Japan.

The annual conference is a platform for Asian journalists to exchange views, share knowledge, and to network.

Titled "Bridging Asia and Kyushu: the Media Link," the latest conference was co-organized by the Kyushu Economic Federation, Kyushu Information Liaison, and UN-Habitat's Fukuoka Office.

In his keynote speech, Wataru Aso, president of Fukuoka Airport Building Co Ltd, talked of strengthening ties among Asian countries, the importance of sustained development, and the need to involve all countries in the region in development and innovation.

First-time visitors to Kyushu are inevitably impressed by its fresh air and pristine environment, little knowing that Kyushu has come a long way to reach this admirable state. Aso talked about the region's environmental destruction as a result of heavy pollution during Japan's economic takeoff, the gradual public awareness and concern, and the subsequent healing process.

Cleanup effort

Kitakyushu, in the northernmost part of Kyushu, was one of the worst polluted cities in Japan in the 1960s, with its conglomeration of heavy industries. As a matter of fact, the now world-known Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning from chemical factories, was first discovered in Minamata, Kyushu, in 1956.

Acutely aware of the damage caused by unbridled economic development, local residents, particularly women distressed by children's birth defects and mental impairment caused by mercury poisoning, took the lead in challenging the local government to fix the mess and make the region safe, by organizing themselves.

The mothers made a documentary film titled "We Need Blue Sky," and their effort helped bring about the first environmental protection law in Japan in 1967.

Thanks to the successful cleanup effort, Kitakyushu today is an eco-model city that showcases its cleanup

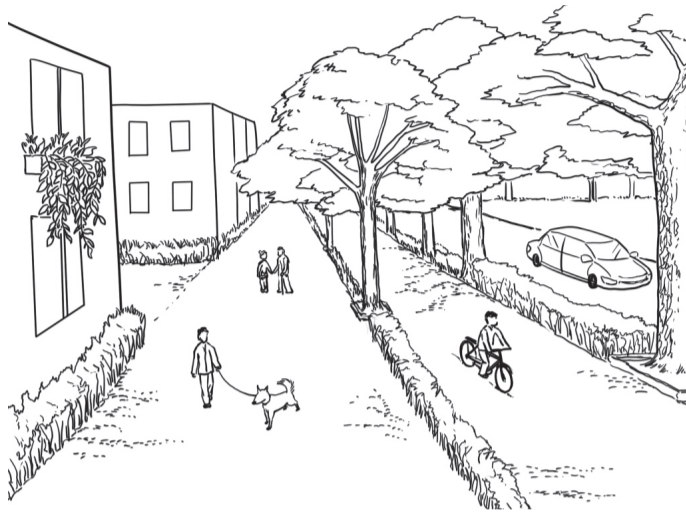


Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily

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experience to cities in other developing countries suffering from reckless growth.

As Aso pointed out, such vicissitudes raised questions about the meaning of development — when it must be achieved at the cost of people's health.

Hopefully, such understanding should serve as basis for building a framework in Asia to confront such problems as global warming.

But Kyushu aspires to become more than an environmentally friendly city and transport hub. It is renovating itself to become a tourist center. Kyushu boasts some of the best food in Japan — among which Mizutaki hotpots and Tonkotsu ramen — and a vigorous pop culture scene: manga, anime, fashion, and music.

Next year will see the opening of a food fair (Food City Fukuoka 2014, March 22-24).

Famed as the gateway to Japan, Fukuoka is advantageously situated in Japan's southwest, and outside visitors like to use the airport conveniently situated very close to downtown. It is just a 10-minute subway ride from the domestic terminal to Tenjin in downtown.

According to Kazuo Iida, director of Asia Strategy Department of RKB Mainichi Broadcasting Corp, for Kyushu to become more than a gateway to the rest of Japan, it needs to discover and develop its unique tourist resources.

During the first seven months this year, the number of visitors to Japan totalled nearly 6 million, including 676,200 from the Chinese mainland, 1,268,200 from

Taiwan, and 1,564,200 from South Korea.

The city needs to make itself more tourist-friendly.

Cynthia Delgado Balana from the Philippine Daily Inquirer cited the language barrier, saying that when she arrived it was difficult to explain the location of her hotel to the taxi driver, since few locals speak another language.

Urban mobility

But that deficiency is more than made up by locals' readiness to help, according to some panelists.

Arun Katiyar from India said that locals are so eager to give a helping hand, that sometimes language does not matter. He said he was jogging along the street and was invited by the locals to help with pounding rice into mochi. Although he remained in the dark about what mochi is after the 15-minute pounding, he was overwhelmed by the warmth of the people.

Like other panelists, Katiyar had a high opinion of local transport.

Visitors from Shanghai would find that there are empty seats on subways and buses and passengers do not fight for them, and there are no advertising screens constantly shouting about KFC's breakfast menu.

Unfortunately, the experience from Fukuoka does not necessarily apply elsewhere.

For one thing, with a population of 1.5 million, Fukuoka is still of manageable size, while many metropolises in Asia have long passed the limits to which a city can reasonably expand.

According to Shanghai's blueprint for 1999-2020, the city's infrastructure development had been based on the projection that the population would reach 20 million in the year 2020. The number of permanent residents reached 23 million by 2010.

Sprawling cities are putting ever higher demands on public transport, healthcare, and education, and take a heavy toll on the environment.

Another priority for urban planners, according to the panelists, is to drastically discourage the use of private cars, and encourage other options of mobility.

Making streets more friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists would alleviate the burden on public transport.

Katiyar, an avid cyclist, hoped there will be dedicated bike lanes.

While some Asian cities are effectively discouraging the use of bicycles, some cities in the West are waking up to the value of cycling as a healthy way of life that relieves stress, reduces the medical burden, and cut emissions.

For instance, in Tel-Aviv, Israel, the city government has built 120 km of bike lanes, which protect riders from motorized traffic. It also reduces traffic jams.

Another option to reduce pressure on transport is to create more pedestrian-friendly roads, so that people can walk pleasantly around for short trips and don't have to wait too long at intersections. Planting trees helps protect pedestrians from cars and sunlight and makes the areas more attractive.

Unfortunately, making walking more comfortable, or less intimidating, is not a priority in many Asian cities because officials have great incentives to build or widen roads and erect elevated highways: infrastructure projects can be hugely profitable.

Discussions of these public policy issues naturally led to the role of the media.

Panelists agreed that media should play a larger role in educating the public about embracing environmentally friendly means of transport, and in persuading officials to give priority to the long-term welfare of the people while formulating public policies.

In a world inundated with information, the media has a unique role to inform the public, and help people interpret, make sense of, and correctly respond to information that is sometimes disorganized, unclear and misleading.

Reforms to show convergence of policy objectives

A GENERAL framework for future growth charted at the recent plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) ushered in a major phase of comprehensive and deeper reforms for the world's second-largest economy.

Since the start of 2013, China's economy and related policies have been a focus of global attention.

A recent HSBC survey showed that China's composite purchasing managers' index (PMI), covering both the manufacturing and service sectors, rose to 52.3 in November from October's 51.8, the strongest expansion in eight months.

Credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's (S&P) also issued a report on the Chinese economy, predicting future economic changes after the third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee earlier in November.

Economic and political developments in the next two to three years were likely to maintain China's current credit rating of AA- on its long-term sovereign debt, as structural economic reforms could reduce risks in the financial sector, the agency said.

Nicolas Baverez, a French economist, wrote in an article published in the daily newspaper Le Figaro that an aging population and the crisis of global capitalism demand that both developed and developing nations rebuild their development models.

China should carry out comprehensive reforms to keep its position as the world's second-largest economy, he said.

According to a statement following a Political Bureau meeting presided over by General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee Xi Jinping recently, China will continue to maintain consistency and stability in its macro-control policies next year.

Many challenges

Many overseas observers noticed China had launched reforms in some key areas, with an increasing convergence of economic achievements and the country's policy objectives.

"Most importantly, economic outcomes are becoming increasingly aligned with the authorities' goals," according to William H. Overholt, a senior research fellow with John F. Kennedy School of Government's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovative at Harvard University. He commented in an article titled "China's New Reforms in Theory and Practice."

"Services already account for more output and employment than industry — the Internet company Alibaba, for example, is empowering both consumers and smaller companies on a previously unimaginable scale — and recent growth has been driven by domestic demand rather than net exports," the article read.

However, as Baverez said in his article, China still faces some huge challenges in its reform process, including its aging population, uncertainty in urbanization, mounting personal debt, imbalanced development, environmental protection and corruption.

(Xinhua)