

International Perspectives

Development of the Therapeutic Recreation Profession in Taiwan

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Abstract

This article introduces the development of therapeutic recreation in Taiwan. Existing professional organizations are identified. The Taiwanese definition of therapeutic recreation is to use diverse recreational activities with meaningful purpose, such as horse riding, chess, play balls, hiking, etc., to help people with imbalanced health conditions. Taiwan has rich resources for recreational activities and leisure services, which satisfy the needs of the general population; these programs rarely accommodate the needs of the populations with special needs. Taiwan has experienced rapid population aging, and the government invests financial resources to build aging care sites and activity centers to provide health-promotion activities.

Keywords

Aging, Taiwan, therapeutic recreation

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A Brief History of Therapeutic Recreation in Taiwan

The profession of leisure and recreation was established in Taiwan in the past 20 years. With rich travel and sightseeing attractions, the Taiwanese tourism industry has developed rapidly. Thus, a large number of recreation service workers were trained to supply the needs of this industry (Lo, Ku, Ma, Chang, & Fan, 2010). In Taiwan, over 150 higher education programs are framed as Recreation and Leisure Studies, but in reality the focus is on Tourism Studies (Tsaur, Wang, Chang, & Wang, 2008). There are leisure education and therapeutic recreation practitioners in Taiwan; however, only a few are trained in the academic system.

The development of the therapeutic recreation profession in Taiwan can be traced back to 2001.¹ The first college-level therapeutic recreation course was offered by the Department of Medical Management at the National Yang-Ming University. After that, other colleges and universities began offering relevant courses. In the academic year of 2013, the number of academic courses reached the highest level with 19 courses from 11 universities offered across Taiwan. However, only the first course was offered by the medical school in 2001, and the other courses were offered by leisure related majors including sports, tourism, psychological counseling, Chinese medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacology, social work, sports psychology, and others. The number is gradually decreasing, and there were only 13 courses from nine universities in the academic year of 2017. Although most of the courses still focus on recreation therapy, there are a few courses related to the leisure education, counseling, dance therapy, and horticultural therapy. The background and expertise of the instructors are in different fields such as leisure studies, counselling, physical education, and horticulture therapy, with only one United States-trained instructor certified as a certified therapeutic recreation specialist (CTRS).

The first organization named the “Taiwan Recreation Association” was established in 2009 by scholars from the Central Leisure Relations Institute. The main purposes of the association are to promote the research development of the recreation therapy profession and to provide recreation therapy services for the society. The members of the association are from interdisciplinary fields such as medicine, leisure, and sport. The association held one international conference to promote recreation therapy, with limited association activities since. Due to this situation, several school faculties, practitioners, and the author established the second organization, the “Chinese Leisure Education and Therapeutic Recreation Association” in 2018. The goal of the association is to promote the relevance of leisure and to cultivate the practitioner of therapeutic recreation services in Taiwan. The mission includes the following intents:

1. Networking among professionals who are interested in leisure education and therapeutic recreation will result in research and promote the development of leisure education, therapeutic recreation, leisure sport and recreational activities, physical fitness, and health promotion in various professional fields.
2. Conducting seminars, study courses, teaching activities, and training activities related to leisure education, therapeutic recreation, leisure sport and recreational activities, physical fitness, and health promotion will formalize and expand the knowledge base.

¹The resource is from the universities course information website: <http://ucourse-tvc.yun-tech.edu.tw/webu/index.aspx>

3. Advocating for leisure education, therapeutic recreation, leisure sport and recreational activities, physical fitness, and health promotion will occur through research and publication.
4. Promoting the meaning of leisure education, therapeutic recreation, leisure sport and recreational activities, physical fitness, and health promotion to develop an understanding of the profession and its roles and functions.

Currently the Chinese Leisure Education and Therapeutic Recreation Association has 58 members from different professions, including leisure and recreation, sport and exercise, social work, occupational therapy, nursing, and horticulture. The association hosts member gatherings with the intent of providing the therapeutic recreation education to all professionals who are interested in therapeutic recreation, particularly for the professionals who serve the aging population.²

Definition of Leisure, Recreation, and Therapeutic Recreation

Leisure, the freedom of choice, is important to individuals in the Western societies, and they are used to investing time and energy in doing it (Kelly, 2012); however, these needs are often dismissed for Taiwanese adults. Particularly, Taiwanese older adults used to view leisure as nonessential, as opposed to work that serves as an essential component in life to fulfill the basic living needs. In addition, many older adults believed that leisure can only be sought after the basic living needs are satisfied. Yeh (as cited in Liu, Yeh, Chick, & Zinn, 2008) proposed a definition of leisure from the Chinese view:

Leisure is recognized as an arena in which an individual deals with two fundamental human concerns, that is, living a good life and pursuing happiness. There is little doubt the importance and consideration of leisure rises whenever our basic and most pressing needs are satisfied. (p. 488)

Inherited from ancient Chinese agricultural society, daily leisure activities are considered to be a short-term rest after a day of farming or hard work (Wu & Lin, 2004), and often are discouraged because of the stereotypical connotation of idleness. Although the contemporary generation agrees with the concept that leisure is a major purpose of life along with the transmission of Western culture, many young people consume speedy, false, or meaningless leisure (Lee, 2016). To change the understanding of leisure from hedonic and conspicuous consumption to meaningful engagement in life, Lee proposed the Buddhist concepts of “mindfulness” and “slow movement” as solutions for this paradigm shift. The benefits of leisure as the balance of physical, psychological, social, and cognitive functioning is the central point of this position. With evidence of leisure benefits, leisure is considered as an important health-promotion lifestyle, and as a result, it has successfully attracted the attention of Psychosomatic Medicine (Lee, Lee, Chen, & Lyu, 2019). The focus on meaningfulness and health coincide with therapeutic recreation in Taiwan, as the Taiwanese definition of therapeutic recreation is to use diverse recreational activities with meaningful purpose, such as

²Updated information will be posted on the Facebook of Chinese Leisure Education and Therapeutic Recreation Association: <https://www.facebook.com/cletra2018/>

horse riding, chess, play balls, hiking, etc., to help people with imbalanced health conditions (Kuo, 2002). However, there is still a lack of focus on people with disabilities. Few studies have investigated leisure needs of populations with disabilities, and few leisure services or interventions are available. Although Taiwan has advanced medical services, not many medical professionals recognize the importance of leisure and recreation for people with special needs or disabilities.

Therapeutic Recreation Practices Including Settings and Clientele

Taiwan is a small island, yet home to a natural environment and cultural sites. Diverse recreational activities are provided in indoor and outdoor settings. Indoor leisure services and commercial recreation such as singing on the Karaoke television (KTV), shopping at the mall, eating out, making crafts, and watching a movie or drama are very popular, and most Taiwanese see these as daily leisure activities (Lin, Ting, Lu, Hsu, & Wang, 2015). Outdoor recreation sites such as mountain trails, national parks, and forest areas are typically managed by governmental or nonprofit organizations (Lin, Chuang, Chen, & Yang, 2016). Several recreational farms run by private companies also play an important role for public leisure (Cheng, Liu, & Lin, 2011). While Taiwan has rich resources for recreational activities and leisure services that satisfy the needs of the general population, these programs rarely accommodate the needs of those with special needs.

There are a few recreational programs and activities in a variety of alternative therapies for populations with special needs, such as horticultural therapy (Chen & Ji, 2015; Hsieh, Lin, & Huang, 2015; Wen, 2018), music therapy (Hsiao, Chen, & Meng, 2017; Shen & Yu, 2016), animal-assisted interactive therapy (Chen, 2015), adventure therapy (Lin & Lin, 2013), dance/movement therapy (Chuang, Chen, & Wu, 2016; Lee, 2001), life review therapy (Li, Hsu, & Lin, 2014; Lin & Li, 2013), therapeutic exercise (Yang, Lin, & Hu, 2011), and forest therapy (Lin, 2017). These therapies may not share the same fundamental theories of therapeutic recreation and leisure philosophy, but we share the same skills and techniques to provide treatments. In general, therapeutic recreation serves children with developmental disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder and cerebral palsy), youths with risk behavior, adults with psychiatric disorders, and frail older adults with degenerating diseases (e.g., Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease). These services are delivered in a variety of settings such as in the community centers, day care facilities, hospitals, special schools, prisons, and nursing homes.

Future Directions

Taiwan has experienced rapid population aging, and as a result, Taiwan is now classified as an "aged society" by the World Health Organization criteria. Thus, the government invests financial resources to build aging care sites and activity centers to provide health-promotion activities. However, the lack of recreation therapists who can work in these settings is a major constraint. Although there have been several returnees who earned their master's degrees in therapeutic recreation and CTRS certification in the United States, they were not successful finding relevant employment in Taiwan: There are no job titles that are equivalent to leisure therapists, recreation therapists, or therapeutic recreation specialists in any institutions or facilities. Thera-

peutic recreation services are provided by professionals such as music therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, and horticultural therapists. These professionals have their own certification/license. Although most of the treatments are still not able to be reimbursed by national health insurance, these treatments can be served as self-funded projects in some medical institutions. Recreational services are delivered by nursing staffs, social workers, and caregivers for older adults or people with developmental disabilities. Music therapists and dance therapists work with psychologists to provide comprehensive services for people with psychiatric disorders.

Future priority areas are promoting health benefits of leisure and recreation to the clinical practitioners and providing more effective evidence-based interventions for the people in need. In addition, informing the wider public about therapeutic recreation, establishing a professional certification and education system, and creating jobs in the aging care facilities and medical institutions are future directions in Taiwan.

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