

Elevating Nursing Image

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The novel “Lost Horizon” describes a mysterious kingdom, Shangri-La. Did it ever exist at all? Could the heavenly town of Suzhou (Jiangsu, China) be the fantasyland depicted by author James Hilton? As our boat drifted leisurely upon the moat, the temperature was close to zero degrees Celsius and the frosty air was chilling to the bone. The willows were swaying on the shore as the boatman narrated the history of the ancient Suzhou canal with affection. The city walls of the canal stood still in peace. It appeared that they were reminding the tourists of the intertwining karma in the past. Inside the boat cabin, doctors, nurses and volunteers from Taiwan were enchanted and awed by the magnificent scenery.

The town of Suzhou is often called as the “Venice of the Orient” because its alluring beauty is as poetic as a painting. In an ethereal place like this, we were not only moved by the scenery, but even more touched by the beauty of kindness within the local medical volunteers. The local volunteers joined us during this end-of-the-year free clinic. Our hosts were so warm and hospitable that they arranged a scenic boat ride just before the day of our departure. Along the waterway throughout Suzhou, we enjoyed the scenery in and around the Tzu Chi conservatory. Adjacent to the old canal, the willow branches teetered to wave at its admirers; the slender limbs beckoned and praised for the love legacy that remained in Suzhou.

During the daytime, the moat water was muddy and the building walls were crawling with colorful walls and tiles. We were told that the scenery at night was uniquely different. Our team leader proposed that we revisit this ancient city in the evening to experience its beauty from a different perspective. One can't help but wonder the boat dwellers' the way of life under the moonlight. As the evening end our journey in Suzhou, we all look forward to an opportunity to our next encounter. We made a promise to one another to meet again next year in China to continue our work and love that we have planted on this land.

While a promise to meet next year in a foreign land is romantic, it is best to

seek the moment to cultivate blessings diligently everyday. Soon after returning to our regular jobs, we all registered to participate in another free clinic for our nation's centennial celebration. It was held at Chien Ching Elementary School in the Wan Rong township of Hualien. The medical team from the Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, medical students, doctors and nurses from the Tzu Chi University, and the College of Technology all attended the event. They made good use of their summer and winter vacations to take part in this meaningful activity. On that day, Hualien's unpredictable weather scattered rain through the chilly air. The cold front brought the temperature down to twelve degrees Celsius with no sight of sunshine. Despite the cold weather, medical and nursing staff as well as all other volunteers worked together to serve the people.

Seeing how doctors, nurses, and volunteers contributed their time and effort reminded us of the Suzhou free clinic not long ago. When we were there, we discussed with the local volunteers about their problems such as personnel shortage and the need for better quality. These are the primary issues in modern nursing as they stretch beyond physical boundaries. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) recently published the result of a survey on the current predicament of nurses around the world. The survey discovered that there is still plenty of room for improvement concerning the working environment and the level of satisfaction among nursing professionals. The result of the survey about nursing professionals in Taiwan is rather embarrassing. This problem has been around for many years and yet there seems to be no viable solution in sight. One of the issues that trouble nursing is the public's view of the profession. Often times the nursing staff is misrepresented and this deeply affects nurses' professional image.

A recently published book, *Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nursing Puts Us All At Risk*, was nominated as the book of the year by the American Journal of Nursing. It was also awarded an International Award for Nursing Excellence in Public Print Media by the Sigma Theta Tau International, the Honor Society of Nursing. This book depicts how nursing is stereotyped by television and news media. And how the image shaped by the media, influenced the real-life circumstances of the nursing profession in general. The book tries to re-introduce the de facto nursing profession to the general public. Moreover, it breaks down the twisted image of the nursing profession characterized by the opinionated media.

Popular TV series such as "Grey's Anatomy" and "ER" are two of the more

popular series in Taiwan. They are also discussed at length as to their influence on the image of nursing professionals. Of course, the book authors Sandy Summers and Harry Summers encourage people to take action to rectify false and biased broadcasts.

This book has received a lot of attention since publication. The ratings and responses are controversial as well as favorable. Some readers believe that TV series are nothing more than entertainment and shouldn't be treated seriously. However, with a large audience watching the series, the erroneous depictions can undoubtedly influence the public's impression of nursing. When people perceive nurses as the fictitious way TV series portrays, then would the Nazi's propaganda, "if you repeat a lie many times, people are bound to start believing it" becomes a reality?

By the same token, the lack of respect and admiration toward nursing coupled with the failure to display the glory of nursing have contributed to the shortfall of nursing as a whole. This book also points out that there is a huge gap between what nurses really do and how they are perceived by the public. This is a direct and fundamental reason that leads to the shortage of available nursing staff.

The minds of the general public are easily swayed by the media. The disparity between the real and superficial may likely influence nurses' willingness to stay on the job. Our school system acts largely in accordance with social expectations. It strives to mold students into "good nurses" who are equipped with special characters. On the other hand, we're still unable to alter how the media views the nursing profession. How do we define the image of ourselves as nursing professionals and show it to the general public? Shouldn't we think over our own biases and prejudices, which in turn damage the image of the nursing profession?

After experiencing two free clinics (one domestic and one international) in a month, I am deeply moved by the fact that medicine has no boundary. The volunteers, without regards to their country of origin, all shared one common goal – to deliver health care to the people in need of the service. The reality of nursing is far away from media depictions, and many nurses' effort and kindness goes without being reported. Perhaps it is time that the media start paying attention to the topic, and help to enhance the dignity of this profession.