

Mayor of Irvine, California, apologizes for political gaffe

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The mayor of Irvine, southern California, apologized this week to Taiwanese officials after one of her staffers signed a sister-city agreement in China last month formally disavowing the existence of Taiwan.

The sister-city agreement with Xuhui District in Shanghai, signed late last month, included promises not to send official city delegations to Taiwan, not to fly the Taiwanese flag and not to play the Taiwanese national anthem or attend National Day celebrations.



Photo: Nearly 200 Taiwanese Americans stage a demonstration before the Irvine City Council.

It also banned the use of the terms "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" and stipulated that Irvine recognize "that there is only one China."

The gaffe, which first came to light two weeks ago in a blog on the Orange County Register Web site, has embarrassed Irvine, angered some 10,000 Taiwanese who call the county home and threatened a sister-city relationship with Taoyuan, Taiwan.

Terri Giles, executive director of the Formosa Foundation, said Irvine's staff made a mistake in signing the agreement, but said the main fault lay with the Chinese officials.

"This is China interfering with domestic issues and clearly making a non-political issue a political issue," Giles said. "Unfortunately I think the [Irvine] mayor got caught in this crossfire."

The president of the Irvine Sister Cities Foundation, James Dunning, is also questioning the agreement.

Mayor Beth Krom has said she was unaware of the controversial language until two weeks ago, although the city delegation returned from Shanghai on June 2.

Krom said she signed a routine sister-city agreement at an official ceremony in the Xuhui District and was unaware another employee had signed a memorandum that contained the hot-button language. The employee, who was new to her position, had no authority to sign the document and it is not binding for the city, Krom said.

Krom mailed a letter to Xuhui officials last week explaining that the memorandum portion of the agreement was unacceptable because "it appears to constrain the relationship between the city of Irvine and the city of Taoyuan."

In addition to its sister-city relationships with Xuhui and Taoyuan, Irvine also has agreements with Hermosillo, Mexico, and Tsukuba, Japan.