Interview: Vivian Lee – President & CEO, Linical, Taiwan



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Vivian Lee, president and CEO of Linical Taiwan, documents the affiliate's main milestones since its establishment in 2013, its strategic positioning among the Linical Group as a regional hub, as well as the crucial role Linical Taiwan aims to play in further propelling the impressive growth of Taiwan's R&D-driven biopharmaceutical industry.

The Taiwanese affiliate of the Japan-headquartered Linical Group, a rapidly growing international CRO, was established in 2013. What was the mission you were entrusted with when taking over the helm of this affiliate in 2014?

Prior to joining the Linical Group, I honed my R&D expertise in both the academic and corporate worlds, by notably working as a corporate executive in clinical development for another Japan-based company, Astellas Pharma Inc. Given the Taiwanese affiliate was only established a few months before I embarked on this new adventure with the Linical Group, my first and foremost mission was naturally to develop our Taiwanese footprint from scratch and ensure it rapidly gained the critical size needed to become competitive in Taiwan. This overarching mission obviously stood as a great challenge to me, and it is exactly why I was so enthusiastic about this new challenge! On top of this domestic objective, the Linical Group's vision was to start expanding the company's presence throughout the Asia Pacific region, and the Taiwanese affiliate was set to play a critical role in this regional expansion. As a result, one of my missions was also to build the Taiwanese affiliate as a regional hub for the group, ensuring it would be rapidly ready to service neighboring markets which we are currently planning to enter, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and China. This

ambition notably implied focusing on fully enhancing Linical Taiwan's support and operational capacities, in order to be able to develop our activities in the aforementioned markets as soon as our regional customers would require it.

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Two years after the start of this exciting endeavor, Linical Taiwan has grown from a very small team to become a fully functional organization. Furthermore, the Linical Group recently consolidated its subsidiary in Europe with offices located in Germany, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Croatia and the UK. We can now provide our customers with comprehensive "global one-stop shopping" and a back-end services offering, which ultimately contributed to the rapid development of our Taiwanese affiliate.

How have you been progressing in your mission to develop Linical Taiwan's activities in neighboring countries?

Japan, Taiwan and Korea stand as the Group's core markets in the region, and the Korean and Taiwanese affiliates are directly reporting to the group's headquarters in Japan. Nevertheless, my teams and I were entrusted with a great flexibility when it came to regional business development. Looking at the competitive landscape in neighboring countries, we decided to open a local branch in Singapore in November 2015, which is now under the direct supervision of Linical Taiwan, and I am responsible for the resources allocation, project management and team development of both affiliates.

As the Taiwanese affiliate has been gaining in importance in terms of staff and resources, we are now able to handle projects in Hong Kong too, although we do not hold an affiliate there at the moment. Looking at China, we are making a feasibility study of making a direct entry into China, while the current political situation between China and Taiwan does not prompt us to move toward the realization of this objective in the short term. Nevertheless, as for Hong Kong, Linical Taiwan's teams are already able to leverage Taiwan's cultural and geographical proximity to China in order to conduct specific projects there. In this regard, Taiwan undoubtedly stands as a great gateway to China for the Linical Group and our partners interested in conducting trials in China by leveraging Linical Taiwan's expertise in this market.

Given the affiliate was only recently established, what is the market niche you focus on servicing in Taiwan?

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Given our own competitive advantages, I decided to concentrate our efforts on the thriving local, R&D-driven biotech scene, which gathers an increasing number of ambitious companies primarily targeting the US, China, Japan or even Europe. For these small and medium biotech companies, partnering with Linical Taiwan is particularly interesting as they can benefit from high-quality

services, while fully leveraging the global network and experience of the Linical Group, which holds offices throughout the US, Europe and Asia.

Since its emergence more than two decades ago, the local biotech industry has been gaining in maturity and heightening its ambitions and requirements, as most of them have now established the US or the Japanese markets as their primary targets. Nevertheless, for these emerging companies, building sound partnerships with a reliable CRO partner is now more critical than ever to reach this international objective. On the other hand, I truly believe that contributing to foster the international development of these Taiwan-based innovators stands as a great opportunity for the Linical Group. This is why I personally decided to come closer to the local R&D-driven biotech community and join the Taiwan Research-based Biopharmaceutical Association (TRPMA), which gathers 28 Taiwan-based biopharmaceutical companies. It is very important for Linical Group to contribute to TRPMA, so that we introduce our expertise and capabilities to these local companies which aim to expand into the Japanese market. It is a great opportunity to display how Linical could help them tremendously ramp up their product development timeline in light with this objective.

How would you define Linical Taiwan's customer approach?

The set up of this meeting truly embodies Linical's customer approach: to us, truly understanding the specificities of our customers' needs is absolutely paramount, as we primarily see ourselves as a solution provider. In this way, our added-value goes beyond CRO services as we strive to provide our customers with a comprehensive and bespoke set of solutions to ensure our partners can overcome the challenges lying ahead of their new drug development process, be they related to regulatory requirements and approvals, drug development strategies, or patients enrolment – among many other topics of interest.

At the group level, more than 80 percent of our customers are repeat customers, which is undoubtedly driven by Linical's comprehensive partnership mindset. In this regard, Linical Taiwan is perfectly aligned with the group's philosophy and we strive to nurture this close partnership approach in our daily operations, in Taiwan, and in the neighboring countries we also operate in.

Taking over the helm of Linical Taiwan meant that you have had to design and implement the growth strategy of the affiliate, which stood as a completely new challenge in your career. What are your strategic priorities to drive Linical Taiwan to new heights?

One of my priorities is to develop new strategic partnerships, notably with local CROs implanted in other countries, in order to conduct more cross-border projects on behalf of our Taiwan- or Singapore-based customers. To fulfill this objective, I plan to further grow Linical Taiwan and increase our talent pool in terms of business development and project management, with a focus on regional projects.

From a personal standpoint, it is particularly exciting to see that Linical Taiwan has been able to continuously increase the number of projects we handle without ever compromising on the quality of our delivery. As the organization gains in maturity, I see our people gaining in experience, both in Taiwan and regionally, and remaining exceptionally committed to our growth strategy. Linical Taiwan is still young among the Linical Group, but the team spirit is vivid and very energetic; as its President and CEO, building an affiliate where our staff enjoys working and gets an opportunity to develop itself probably stands as the most important objective I want to fulfill before retiring. Fulfilling this objective will depend on our capacity to continuously expand the number and increase the complexity of projects we are managing on behalf of our customers, while we do not either forget the opportunity to open local affiliates in China and Hong Kong at some point. Finally, I want to ensure Linical Taiwan truly establishes itself as the partner of choice of local, R&D driven biopharmaceutical companies: by leveraging our in-house resources and Linical Group's comprehensive offering and network throughout the world, we can truly contribute to bring Taiwan's biotech products to the world and nurture the regional development of the Linical Group in the meantime.

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