

The controversial cross-strait service trade agreement has yet to clear the legislature, but it already appears to be having a chilling effect on the publishing and retail industry, generating self-censorship that is detrimental to Taiwanese democracy.

Earlier this week, Eslite Bookstore, one of the nation's biggest and most popular bookstore chains, allegedly refused to put the book *Death of a Buddha — The Truth behind the Death of the 10th Panchen Lama* (達賴喇嘛之死) on its shelves. Co-written by exiled Chinese writer Yuan Hongbing (袁宏斌) and Tibetan author Namloyak Dhungser, the book details findings from the authors' private interviews with Chinese and Tibetan officials that the 10th Panchen Lama, Choekyi Gyaltsen, was killed by poison in January 1989, rather than dying of a heart attack as the Chinese Communist Party claims.

The bookstore chain currently only accepts pre-orders for the book and has so far failed to respond to the more sensitive issues raised by those criticizing it for keeping the book off its shelves.

Amid the incident, some may recall the ruckus back in 1989, when British author Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* made him a target for assassination by Islamic extremists. The Islamist groups said the book defamed the Prophet Mohammed and then-Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and called on Muslims to kill Rushdie and the book's publishers. The threats prompted some of the largest book chains in the US, such as Waldenbooks and Barnes & Noble, to remove it from their shelves.

A number of writers subsequently came forward to condemn the death threats and criticize the bookstore chains for refusing to sell the book.

"To see bookstores caving in like that to demagoguery is horrifying. They exist in honor of freedom of the press. For them to be so cowardly is despicable," US author Laura Shapiro said at the time.

Renowned US novelist and essayist Susan Sontag said that the incident suggested how easy it was to make people afraid, "but if we show fear in the face of this intimidation, all of our

institutions that support a free, literate society are hijacked.”

Indeed.

Eslite, which strives to project an image as a promoter of art, culture and literature, has been touted by the Taipei City Government as a major cultural attraction for locals and tourists alike, but how is the bookstore to be championed as a cultural icon when it appears to compromise the value of freedom of expression?

If this is how Eslite is pandering to Beijing, the question is what will happen when it actually starts operating in China as part of its overseas expansion plan. And if censorship is being exercised now by Taiwan's publishing and retail industry before the cross-strait service trade agreement is even approved by the legislature, one shudders to imagine the level of censorship there may be once the agreement takes effect.

Locus Publishing Co chairman and former national policy adviser Rex How (何瑞雄), for one, has strongly criticized the government for “overlooking the sensitivity in cross-strait issues” and “ignorance and stupidity about China” by signing the trade pact.

As China is notorious for its stringent censorship of the cultural industry, can the public still be guaranteed an independent reading and book-consumption environment free of political interference?

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and his government need to address that and allay public concern, rather than pushing the legislature to approve the agreement without examining the potentially damaging impact it may have on the nation.

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