

Allow youth freedom of expression

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 10 January 2014 11:59

Taiwan has come a long way since the Martial Law era. The public would not enjoy the freedom of speech and democracy it does today without the sacrifices made by democracy pioneers such as Freedom Era Weekly editor-in-chief Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄), who set himself ablaze on April 7, 1988, in defense of freedom of expression.

It is therefore both comforting and encouraging to see young people take a stand, as National Cheng Kung University's student body did last month when it voted to name an area on campus "Nan-jung Square" (South Banyan Square, 南榕廣場) in honor of Deng, an alumnus of the school, as well as the school's symbol of a banyan tree.

However, the school administration rejected the name and said that just because "Nan-jung" garnered the most votes, it did not mean the name would be used for the square, because it might carry negative political connotations.

In an open letter issued on Thursday last week to faculty and students, university president Hwung Hwung-hweng (洪耀星) cited Article 6 of the Education Basic Act (教育基本法) and said the school should remain politically and religiously neutral.

To avoid disruption on campus, the school's infrastructure should not be entangled with political activities or ideology, he added.

While Hwung's statement might sound reasonable, it is not.

Deng's tragic death planted a seed of democracy in the hearts of Taiwanese. His pursuit of "100 percent freedom of expression" later paved the way for a social movement that called for the removal of Article 100 of the Criminal Code, which allowed charges of sedition to be filed against those suspected of plotting to overthrow the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime.

Why is a name selected to honor the universal value of freedom of speech, for which Deng laid down his life, considered to have "negative political connotations" that might disrupt the

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campus?

Hwung should take a closer look at a map of the university campus.

There are several places with names strongly reminiscent of the former authoritarian KMT regime, such the Kuang-fu (光復) and Tzu-chiang (蔣經國) campuses. There is even a Chungcheng Hall (中正堂), an obvious reference to Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石).

If Hwung is serious about retaining “political neutrality” on campus, he should take the lead in ridding the campus of all names with strong links to the previous authoritarian regime and its agenda of “retaking the mainland.”

Young people today are often accused of being apathetic and indifferent to the world around them. Some have even chided them for enjoying the sweet fruit of democracy hard fought for by democracy pioneers without thinking of how they might contribute to and solidify those democratic achievements.

Rather than brushing aside students’ opinions, the university administration should be proud of them for displaying depth and understanding of the nation’s democratization while remembering the blood, sweat and tears shed by democratic pioneers.

After all, is this not the purpose of education — to inspire young minds to stand up for and act upon the values they believe in?

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/01/10](#)