

Fresh food demands a corruption clean sweep

Written by James Wang 王健

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Taiwanese really care about their bellies. Everyone has a stomach that needs to be filled — and filled with clean and healthy things. When someone bullies bellies, people are going to get angry. The Ting Hsin International Group (頂新國際) and its owners the Wei (魏) brothers have been doing this and they did not start yesterday.

People have had their fill of Ting Hsin's unscrupulous ways, and its products are now the target of a nationwide boycott.

Unfortunately, corruption in Taiwan is not limited to food. National characteristics such as caring only about one's own problems, sneering at the poor while tolerating the corrupt and worshipping wealth and power have kept the nation mired in corruption, as does the party-state system's aptitude for manipulating these characteristics.

For the nation to renew itself, it must go beyond boycotting Ting Hsin and extend the boycott to corruption in general. For that to happen, the public needs a strong sense of justice and responsibility. When people see lawbreaking and abuses of power, they must be willing to stand up and expose them, appealing to both public opinion and the law.

In the late 19th century, the US was plagued by great inequality of wealth, corrupt politicians, profiteering businesses and exploitation of labor. These iniquities inspired the rise of an investigative journalism movement, involving progressive writers and activists who opened the door for much-needed reforms. This movement was able to succeed because of the strength it gained from people's willingness to expose, journalists' willingness to report and magazines' willingness to publish, leaving no hiding place for the corrupt.

During the three decades of Martial Law imposed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and in the more than 20 years since it ended, the nation has been immersed in authoritarianism and a culture of academic pedantry. During the Martial Law era, people learned to play safe by not getting involved, while timid media outlets avoided sensitive subjects.

Therefore, the basic conditions for a domestic media movement to investigate and expose such crimes have long been absent, but the external conditions for such a movement have now

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matured.

Ting Hsin's use of questionable oils came to light because honest insiders felt compelled to do something about it. The scandal has highlighted issues of corruption, such as collusion between business and bureaucrats, special privileges awarded to businesses with the right connections, and a lack of concern for the public's food safety.

President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration denies allegations that it received NT\$1 billion (US\$32.9 million) in political donations from Ting Hsin, saying that there is no evidence to support such a claim. This will be a big test of the integrity of people in the know in the Ting Hsin group, the Wei family and the KMT.

A billion-dollar deal is not one that can be delivered by one person with a suitcase full of bills. Maybe no one in the KMT has the integrity to tell the truth. However, the Wei brothers profess to be pious Buddhists. If they want to atone for their transgressions, maybe one of them will stand up and bring the evidence to light. That would be a big contribution to the fight against corruption in this country.

The Ting Hsin boycott could be a good chance for Taiwan to make headway against corruption. Only if corruption is cleaned up can there be hope for thorough reform.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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