

## Taiwan's long walk to freedom of expression

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏勇

Saturday, 11 April 2015 05:24

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Tuesday was the anniversary of the martyrdom of freedom advocate Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄). On the morning of April 7, 1989, New Taipei City Deputy Mayor Hou You-yi (侯友宜) — acting on orders as then-head of the Taipei City Police Department Criminal Investigation Division — led a team into the offices of Freedom Era Weekly to arrest Deng, who had always supported freedom of thought, a cause he had long before sworn to fight to the very end for.

Rather than allowing himself to be taken into custody, Deng chose self-immolation. He was 42 years old.

Hou was later promoted to head of the National Police Agency during the tenure of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), and when New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫) took office, Hou was his deputy. Hou has been unstinting in his service of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government.

During the 1980s, Deng made major contributions to three major political reform movements: The lifting of martial law; the creation of a new constitution; and the establishment of a new nation. Having championed the 228 Justice and Peace Movement and helped to break the spell of the party-state, he had come to be seen as an “activist philosopher.”

By choosing to take his own life, he demonstrated his resolve to pay the ultimate price to keep him from a denial of freedom. His sacrifice was a huge contribution to the development of democracy in Taiwan.

Deng was not a member of the Democratic Progressive Party, but through his Freedom Era Weekly he fought for his idea of a collective of free people.

“I am Deng Nan-jung,” he said, “and I advocate Taiwanese independence” — words that exemplify perfectly his commitment to his vocation.

While he is no longer with us, his spirit lives on. His eulogy says it so well: The flames that

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engulf shall not destroy.

Last year, Yilan County and Tainan took the lead in designating April 7 as Freedom of Expression Day, organizing various events to illustrate the significance and values of freedom and liberty. This year, Freedom of Expression Day is being extended to other cities and areas, including Kaohsiung, Yunlin County, Taichung, Pingtung County, Chiayi County, Changhua County and Taoyuan. Even more cities and counties are set to designate April 7 as Freedom of Expression Day.

Thought can only blossom when freedom of expression exists, and only when this is allowed to happen is the development of a vibrant culture possible. Freedom of Expression Day has about it the idea of a cultural festival. The events for this year's Freedom of Expression Day included concerts and lectures on the theme of advocacy.

The concerts were about music's ability to liberate the body; the lectures about promoting profound introspection; and interwoven into this, the spirit of the Sunflower and Umbrella movements — born of the passion and commitment of young people in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

During the KMT-imposed Martial Law era, it was the Taiwan Garrison Command that enforced the law, casting a shadow of oppression over the nation. That role is now played by China.

Many artists and people working in the arts live with Beijing looking over their shoulder, finding it difficult to be faithful to themselves in how they express their ideas. In the past, the struggle was to wrest back stolen freedoms; now, it is to protect those freedoms, and make sure they are not stolen again. Different times, different decades, but Taiwan retains a duty to freedom and liberty.

While commemorating Deng's martyrdom of 26 years ago, we must not forget to continue to march along the path to freedom.

*Lee Min-yung is a poet.*

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