

Supporting the right to freedom of choice

Written by Stephen Hsu 許倬雲
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In terms of the controversy over independence and unification, I once asked my students whether they wanted to be Chinese, Taiwanese or citizens of the 51st state of the US.

Most of the students actually preferred the latter.

It was not that they had forgotten their origins, or that they fawned on foreign powers; rather, beyond the controversy over independence or unification with China, they were simply pursuing the dignity and the value of “freedom of choice” — the very thing that makes us human.

People are able to maintain their dignity when they enjoy freedom of choice, and that is why Taiwan is so proud of its direct presidential elections.

As for the ongoing controversy over the so-called “minor adjustments” to the high-school curriculum guidelines, why should the government regulate the content of history education in our high schools?

Why can we not simply adopt soft curriculum guidelines and abolish the textbook review system, so that teachers at the grassroots level and their high-school students can make the choice by themselves, without interference?

Why does the state apparatus have to trample on the dignity of both teachers and future adult citizens?

Prior to the currently suggested adjustments, was it really appropriate to have curriculum guidelines regulate that the Japanese era in Taiwan be referred to as “Japanese rule” — a term now altered to “Japanese colonial rule.”

Such terminology is of course certain to cause controversy and the result can only be that

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teachers are unable to face the descendants of people who died a martyr's deaths during the Japanese military occupation of their homelands in Wubukushan (霧峰) in Hsinchu City, Baguashan (八角山) and Wushe (霧社) in Nantou County, Taroko Gorge (太魯閣) in Hualien County and other areas across Taiwan.

Likewise, is it appropriate for the curriculum guidelines to substitute the "takeover of Taiwan" in 1945 with the "restoration of Taiwan?" This is an awful term for teachers.

If we call the act a "restoration," then how can we build a relationship with the Taiwanese-Japanese soldiers who fought for Japan in World War II, or the families of the victims of the 228 Incident and the White Terror era?

These kinds of issues are raised repeatedly.

It is analogous to the doubts of scientists in the 19th century about the assertion that water boils at 100°C.

Does that refer to pure water or water with impurities?

Does it refer to water heated in a hot pan or on top of mercury?

Does it refer to water on the ground or high up in the mountains?

Does it refer to water that has started to bubble or water that has bubbled for a while?

Even the boiling point of water is not necessarily 100°C.

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Which historical fact is not floating and full of controversy?

Following the same line of reasoning, there is always more than one truth, because various social activists are behind the related historical events that lie behind the truth.

What those who were oppressed in this nation need is not the sympathy of others. Instead, they need others to listen and to strike up a dialogue so as to find solutions.

The state apparatus should stop smothering people and allow them to speak freely.

It should also adopt soft curriculum guidelines and abolish the textbook review system.

Political forces should withdraw from the campus for the sake of academic freedom.

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Translated by Eddy Chang

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