

Transitional justice must be taught

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Students at Hsinchu Kuang Fu High School at the weekend triggered controversy by wearing costumes resembling Nazi uniforms and wielding swastika flags at a campus cosplay event, prompting shock and condemnation from the Israeli and German missions in Taipei, with the Presidential Office and the Ministry of Education also quick to denounce the event and chastise the school for administrative negligence.

The incident was certainly deplorable, as it was utterly inappropriate for the students to take lightly a traumatic part of human history — when millions of people in Europe were persecuted and killed by the Nazis — by thinking that they could treat the Nazi uniforms and symbols as mere “decorative elements” in their “creative design.”

However, among the government agencies and educators who rushed to fault the school and its students for their ignorance about one of the most abominable crimes in human history, are they themselves doing any better?

Taiwan has its own tragic past, too, when tens of thousands perished as the result of the brutal and bloody 228 Incident instigated by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) autocracy under Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) that ushered in the White Terror era.

To this day, many relatives and friends of the victims of that political oppression still do not know why their loved ones were killed, or where their remains might be.

Yet, look around now and despite the atrocities committed by Chiang and his regime, statues of the main instigator of the massacre are everywhere, in places such as school campuses, railway stations and public parks, not to mention the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei — more than 25 hectares are devoted to Chiang with a 76m-tall monument sitting proudly at its center.

There are also streets that bear Chiang’s name, figurines and other souvenirs that portray Chiang as a “benevolent grandfather,” and the ubiquitous presence in daily life — his image on the NT\$10 coin.

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How do we expect youngsters to grasp the meaning of the Holocaust, transitional justice and universal human rights when statues of a dictator still stand on virtually every campus?

Taiwanese have been educated in a system controlled by the party-state and as such, quite a large proportion of the nation's educators grew up during the White Terror era and therefore followed an autocratic curriculum. As a result, it is little wonder that ignorance and distorted values are widespread, as educators have little understanding of the true nature of transitional justice.

The poisonous stain of authoritarianism remains in many parts of everyday life in Taiwan and the incident at the school exposes just how little transitional justice has been implemented, despite Taiwan touting itself as a flourishing democracy that values human rights.

"The responsibility of the education authorities is to teach students that peace and the values of a pluralistic society are not easily won, and free thinking must be built on justice and respect, not to leave them free to use improper words and deeds," a Presidential Office statement said in response to the incident. "The incident has shown an urgent need for education about transitional justice."

It is hoped the incident at the school will serve as a catalyst for the government to start putting more emphasis on transitional justice in the curriculum, implementing transitional justice from the bottom up.

Failing to do so would suggest that the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is no different from that of her predecessor, former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) — good at talking the talk, but failing at walking the walk.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2016/12/27](#)