

Politicalization of Chi's death wrong

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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When news of documentary filmmaker Chi Po-lin's (齊柏林) unexpected passing in a helicopter crash broke last weekend, it is no exaggeration to say that the hearts of nearly everyone in Taiwan were saddened by the loss of a man who had literally risked life to capture the nation in all its glory.

However, as the nation mourned the acclaimed director, eyebrows were raised when the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) made an unprecedentedly poor decision by saying that Chi was “an outstanding KMT member.”

In addition to the blatant attempt to link the filmmaker's name to the KMT, Central Policy Committee director Alex Tsai (蔡正元) even went so far as to post Chi's party membership number on Facebook in an apparent bid to provide evidence that he was a member.

This is poor judgement, even for a party that has proved itself on countless occasions to be out of sync with mainstream values. The KMT should have known that there is a fine line between opportune political promotion and callous publicity stunts.

Equally apathetic are online discussions about Chi's ethnicity. A discussion thread on Professional Technology Temple — the nation's largest online academic bulletin board system — appeared shortly after Chi's death. Netizens were eager to verify rumors of Chi being the descendant of a so-called waishengren (外省人), a term referring to people who fled to Taiwan with the KMT regime in 1949.

Some expressed their surprise that Chi, whose works had elevated him onto a pedestal as a staunch lover of Taiwan, could be the child of a waishengren.

The connotation of this astonishment is problematic and is at the root of Taiwan's political polarization, as it suggests that only so-called benshengren (本省人) — literally “people from this province” — are capable of — or programmed to — “love Taiwan.”

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Those who cling to this assumption are likely oblivious to the fact that a sizable proportion of the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are actually of waishengren backgrounds, as are some reputed academics who have been advocating for the nation's interests.

The continued differentiation of waishengren from benshengren is not only sheerly discriminatory, but also poses a serious impediment to the formation of a unified Taiwanese nationalism in the face of growing Chinese suppression of the nation's international space. It makes people who have grown up in Taiwan or identify with it as their home feel like outsiders.

Such differentiation might have its historical context, but it has become as pointless and politically incorrect as distinguishing Hakka from those of Hokkien ancestry. Whether one truly "loves Taiwan" should be determined by their words and deeds, rather than their race, ethnicity or even nationality.

Earlier this month, Taiwanese also mourned the death of Father Jerry Martinson, a US Jesuit missionary who lived and worked in Taiwan for 50 years and was best remembered for his dedication to education. Hardly anyone would question Martinson's love for this nation of 23 million people.

In contrast, the KMT's response to Beijing's successful attempt to poach yet another of Taipei's few diplomatic allies this week showed anything but the party's concern for Taiwan and its national interests.

Instead of standing united behind the government in its lambasting of China's pocketbook diplomacy, the KMT blamed Panama's severance of diplomatic ties on what it called President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) ideology-oriented handling of cross-strait relations.

The trend of politicizing issues that should transcend politics is unfortunate and could prevent people from evaluating issues solely on their merits.

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