

The question of how far Taiwanese universities are willing to go to ensure access to Chinese students was raised again this week after the Ministry of Education criticized the handling of complaints from some Chinese students and their parents about two schools.

At issue was the way the University Entrance Committee for Mainland Chinese Students had passed along a complaint from China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) and the way Fu Jen Catholic University and National Cheng Kung University, the subjects of the complaint, responded.

The TAO apparently told the committee that it had received multiple reports that a Fu Jen professor was trying to "instill their personal ideology" in their students, and it wanted the committee to reduce the school's quota of Chinese students. It said it had received similar complaints about Cheng Kung. The committee then asked the schools for an explanation, which resulted in Fu Jen forwarding the committee's message to its departments and reminding them to focus on the "learning environment" of Chinese students.

What seemed to upset the ministry the most was that the committee and Fu Jen cited the TAO in their messages, and the intimation that it, not Taiwan's government, could control schools' enrollment quotas for Chinese students.

The problem is that academic topics are at the heart of the Venn diagram of Chinese students, academic freedom and Taiwanese university finances, but those topics do not exist in an isolated bubble, and universities, both public and private, already have a history of self-censorship when it comes to Chinese students.

Two years ago, the ministry discovered that at least half of the nation's 157 universities, including Fu Jen and Cheng Kung, had signed letters of agreement with their counterparts in China promising that Chinese students would not have to face the mention of issues such as "one China," "one China, one Taiwan" or Taiwanese independence in their classes, or have to take part in political discussions.

The universities said that the demand for such letters increased after President Tsai Ing-wen

Universities are risking integrity

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(陸委會) took office in May 2016, but most denied that such letters could be seen as endorsing Beijing's "one China" principle. Some claimed that such letters were simply aimed at helping Chinese students pass review procedures to gain permission to study in Taiwan, while others vowed to uphold academic freedoms, democratic values and freedom of speech. Fu Jen said it "had no jurisdiction" over documents signed by its individual departments to promote cross-strait exchanges.

Basically, the universities were trying to have their cake and eat it: It is impossible to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom while telling faculty members — and non-Chinese students — what they can talk about in class.

The ministry also appears to be living in something of a bubble by trying to pretend that it alone is responsible for the enrollment of Chinese students in local institutions. While it can set the enrollment quotas for each college or university, Chinese authorities can refuse to allow students to attend certain schools or to study in Taiwan at all.

Ministry statistics showed that from 2011 to 2016, the number of Chinese students rose from about 12,000 to almost 42,000. Earlier this month, it said that Chinese accounted for more than 29,000 of the 126,997 foreign students enrolled last year. While that was still the largest segment of foreign students at 23.9 percent, it was 5,000 fewer than in 2017.

That should come as no surprise, as in May 2017, China cut the quota for new admissions to undergraduate programs in Taiwan from 2,136 to 1,000.

Faced with Taiwan's low birthrate, local universities have targeted the Chinese market to fill seats and ensure their financial survival. However, they, and the government, are deluding themselves if they think that they can uphold their academic integrity while pandering to Beijing's whims.

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