

INTERVIEW: Deng Nan-jung widow resists comparisons to suicide bomber, teens

Written by Taipei Times

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The anti-change, conservative forces in Taiwanese society have never gone away and have prevented democracy from taking root in the seemingly democratized nation, former Presidential Office secretary-general Yeh Chu-lan (葉楚傖) says.

The widow of democracy activist Deng Nan-jung (鄧南仲), who has recently become the center of media attention following a controversy over naming a plaza at National Cheng Kung University, made the remarks in an interview with the Liberty Times (the Taipei Times' sister paper) on Saturday.

The university angered students after its School Affairs Committee and teacher representatives on Wednesday overrode a decision reached by 3,500 students and faculty members in a vote in November last year to name a plaza on its campus "Nan-jung Square" (South Banyan Square, 南園廣場) in honor of Deng.

Participants in Wednesday's meeting voted 70-21 in favor of not naming the plaza at all.

The uproar snowballed after revelations that during the meeting, history professor Wang Wen-hsia (王文夏), drew a comparison between Deng and Islamist bombers as well as to love-troubled teenagers who commit suicide by jumping off buildings.

Wang on Friday apologized twice for her remarks, but insisted she only made the comparisons to encourage young people to "work hard and treasure life while facing life's challenges" rather than resorting to "such radical acts."

Deng launched the dissident weekly magazine *Freedom Era* in March 1984 to seek "100 percent freedom of speech" in the media.

He committed suicide by self-immolation on April 7, 1989 at the age of 43 as heavily armed police attempted to break into his office, where he had been barricaded for 71 days after he was charged with sedition for printing a draft "Republic of Taiwan constitution" in 1988.

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“It is evident that Wang knows little about Deng or the true meaning of a famous saying: Life is dear, love is dearer. Both can be given up for freedom,” Yeh said.

Yeh said by comparing Deng to people who commit suicide, Wang has proved that she “has absolutely no idea how valuable our pursuit of universal values is.”

As a history professor, Wang should tour the Deng Nan-jung Memorial Hall, located in Deng’s former office, to learn about the real reasons the activist isolated himself, founded the magazine and fought for the freedom of expression at the expense of his life, Yeh said.

“It is vital that future generations have an ‘accurate perception’ of the nation’s historical events,” Yeh added.

She also expressed regret that Taiwanese are living in such a polarized society, where political parties are plagued by divisions and people are confronted with confusing national identities and inconsistent standards of basic values.

“That is why my definitions of freedom and rights are much different from yours [Wang’s],” Yeh said.

To “really finalize” the democratization process in Taiwan, individuals are required to mutually understand one another, work out their differences, and strike a consensus on the meaning of basic values, Yeh said.

Yeh said Taiwanese democracy still remains fragile, as evidenced by the controversial naming of the square at the university.

“Although the decisionmaking process of the university’s School Affairs Committee was

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democratic, its resolution to overrule a majority decision by students still proved how vulnerable and powerless the latter are in the face of authorities,” she said.

Yeh said another example is the Referendum Act (公投法), which is described by many as the “bird cage” law because it has created a referendum system so structurally flawed that leaves the government plenty of room for maneuver.

Yeh said her daughter, Deng Chu-mei (鄧淑美), exemplified the younger generation’s spirit of tolerance by extending an invitation to Wang and the school’s other historians to visit the Deng Nan-jung Memorial Hall and calling for mutual understanding among “all inhabitants of the island.”

“Taiwan may appear rather democratic in the eyes of some youngsters because, once they turn 20, they are entitled to cast the votes that decide who becomes president of the country,” she said.

“However, the naming incident could risk reducing young people’s interest in participating in public affairs as it showed that democracy is vulnerable to manipulation,” Yeh added.

Yeh called on the younger generation to join the discussion on the events involving her husband, while urging Wang to conduct some soul-searching for making remarks that could undermine the nation’s democratic achievements.

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