

PROFILE: Resilient cultural campaigner pushes for local language studies despite illness

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Union of Education in Taiwan chairperson Cheng Cheng-iok holds a high-school Chinese textbook while speaking at a meeting in Taipei on Feb. 21.

Photo: Chen Chih-chu, Taipei Times

Despite having cancer, 68-year-old Union of Education in Taiwan chairperson Cheng Cheng-iok (鄭正興) said he would continue urging the Ministry of Education to keep mandatory local language courses for the upcoming junior-high school year.

Born in 1946 in Cieding (枋寮) in what is now Greater Kaohsiung, Cheng became a junior-high school teacher after graduating from Chinese Culture University's history department.

"I felt first-hand how education under the Chinese Nationalist Party [KMT] was greatly oppressing the local culture," Cheng said in a recent interview, adding that it was this realization that made him dedicate himself to pro-localization movements in 1986, after he turned 40.

However, Cheng's first contact with the dangwai (黨外, or "outside the party") opposition movement was in 1977, when Yang Ching-chu (楊慶堃), a novelist known for stories that portrayed the lives of workers, ran for legislator.

Since that year, Cheng said he has worked in every election there has been, including the former post of national representative, legislators and even as part of the team working for Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Peng Ming-min (彭明敏) during the nation's first direct presidential election in 1996.

Due to his long-time affiliation with the dangwai, Cheng was been embroiled in the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979. Also known as the Formosa Incident, it began as a mass demonstration organized by *Formosa Magazine* for International Human Rights Day on Dec. 10, 1979, in Kaohsiung that ended in violent clashes between demonstrators and police. After clashes that

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day, the government pursued opposition leaders and charged them with sedition.

Although Cheng was not jailed over the Kaohsiung Incident, he was put under surveillance, with police visiting his home every month.

Cheng said the visits continued until former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) took office, adding that during this time he owed much to friends, as he had been informed three times that he was being fired from his job.

Despite others using the comment “Male Taiwanese crabs have no cream” (男台灣螃蟹沒奶油) in jest, alluding to what is considered a lack of Taiwanese culture, Cheng said that such views are wrong.

“The chefs, thugs and the temple ceremonial formations are what form the ‘common’ culture, but Taiwanese still have much to boast about from their ‘elegant’ side,” Cheng said, mentioning musician Chen Su-ti (陳蘇璽) and former DPP chairman Lin I-hsiung (林錫山) as representatives of what he considers elegant Taiwanese culture.

However, Cheng said that these culturally rich people are being sidelined, which serves as an impetus for him to try to rebuild the depth of Taiwanese culture under the nation’s democracy.

“We are calling on the Ministry of Education to list local languages as a mandatory course for junior-high school students to learn the language of their own culture,” Cheng said.

Cheng has written more than 1,500 short stories that are set in Greater Kaohsiung, mainly around Cieding (旗蔴地), Cishan (旗山) and Zuoying (左營) districts.

“You can only be proud of your culture when you understand the environment around you and the little stories that are passed from generation to generation,” Cheng said.

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Cheng used the example of an Aboriginal taxi driver to demonstrate his point. Cheng said he once rode a taxi driven by an Aboriginal man and learned that the driver felt inferior because his family had traditional ear piercings.

“The practice stemmed from the story of an Aboriginal warrior who had brought back foxtail millet seeds in his ear holes during a flood and saved the lives of his tribe,” Cheng said. “One must understand their own history to be dignified.”

Despite being diagnosed with three types of cancer, Cheng said he is optimistic about his condition.

“I hope to be smiling when the time comes,” Cheng said, adding that since he is a follower of Buddhism, he views life to be as light as a gust of wind blowing by or a flower petal dropping to the earth.

Cheng said he taught his children not to feel sadness when he dies, as it is a natural occurrence.

“Taiwan is part of my life and I never regret my dedication to the nation,” Cheng said, adding that he feels honored to have met with friends’ respect and thanks, and considers himself to have led a full life.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2014/08/13](#)