

The pretty singers of empty songs

Nov 3 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

Allegations against Ms. Lien Hui-hsin concerning her ties to a questionable nutritional supplement and diet pill stir thoughts on a number of topics.

Presumably readers need no reminder that Ms. Lien is the daughter of prominent Nationalist Chinese Party (KMT) leader Lien Chan. Mr. Lien defines the meaning of a political heavyweight with or without a diet pill, if you'll pardon my saying so. Currently the honorary chair of his party, Mr. Lien is a former premier of Taiwan, former vice-president, and former chair of the KMT. He was a presidential candidate twice, in 2000 and again 2004.

Politics, oh politics. This diet pill brouhaha attached to Mr. Lien's name carries a punch fully capable of distracting the local body politic from a list of problems far more important (at least for most of us) than what in many cases are ordinary and manageable weight problems.

Local media have stumbled over one another in covering the story. First came news on the health front after Taipei City's Department of Health confirmed the presence of the drug citilistat in a weight-loss product called Wellslim Plus +. Citilistat, "a lipase inhibitor designed to treat obesity," has not been approved for use in Taiwan (TT 10-30-13 p. 1). Well, citilistat may be harmful to one's health, but this I do not know. I do know that "Wellslim Plus +" is a very catchy name. I bet the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) wishes it owned the copyright for it.

Then came reports that, in apparent conflict with earlier denials, Ms. Lien holds a position in the firm that manufactures Wellslim Plus +, and not just any old position, but something called chief executive officer, CEO for short.

No, not so fast, please. Ms. Lien soon explained that the CEO title was made of papier-mâché. She said she was only lending her name to the company, Geneherbs Biotechnology Co., and not getting a dime for her generosity, by the way. She appeared to be saying her job was simply promotion, period.

This is one of those "Yes, it seems so" and "I never knew, no" news stories that have become so popular in recent months on our local scene.

Ms. Lien cannot disagree. She must agree that her diet medicine contains an illegal drug. To this charge she must say "yes."

Like "Small S," however, the embattled spokeswoman for Top Pot Bakery who two months ago denied knowledge of artificial food flavorings in products she endorsed as completely natural, Ms. Lien claims innocence by virtue of ignorance. "I never knew," she says.

Regrettably, we lack space to talk in detail of Chang Chi Footdstuff Factory Co. and Flavor Full Food Inc and the NT \$ 1.85 billion and NT \$ 460 million fines they have respectively drawn recently for shenanigans in the manufacture of cooking oils (TT 10-27-13 p. 1 and 8).

Not all cases of tainted food products are the same. Plot lines do vary, but troubles related to truth in advertising, compliance with regulatory rules, and concerns for the health of consumers blend well with at least one aspect of the Lien Hui-hsin controversy. Celebrities who are also heavy-duty investors in the products they promote (Ms. Lien has reputedly invested \$ NT 15 million in Geneherbs Biotechnology Co.) all seem to sing the refrain that they see no evil, know no evil, and so, do no evil.

Rather than get lost in colorful political trivia, we should be asking deeper questions here.

Is it really advisable for most of us to be using any kind of monkey business at all in the form of drugs or manufactured supplements to control our weight? What is wrong with ordinary self-discipline, some common sense about food and fat, and added exercise in our lifestyles?

Also, isn't it time now for celebrities who promote products, and who earn real money for making those promotions, to take responsibility for the quality and assorted repercussions of these products?

We consumers also need to face our responsibilities. We should question more critically the claims that "dai yen jen" or "spokespersons" make for their companies. Some of these folks are little more than pretty singers of pretty, but empty songs. (Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column discusses the controversy of Lien Hui-hsin, daughter of famous political leader Lien Chan, serving as a spokeswoman for a weight loss medicine that contains an illegal, not fully tested drug. Do "dai yen jen" (spokesperson) of products influence you?
2. In your opinion, are people in Taiwan more enthused about weight loss medicine and other health-related "additives" and vitamin supplements than people in other countries?
3. Do young people "worry" the right amount about their physical appearance, or do they tend to be TOO WORRIED?

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