

Taiwan's troubling loss of credibility

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Many of us who care about Taiwan and its people have to be feeling concerned about the battering our national image has been taking of late.

Just what information are people of other lands getting about us? What comes to mind when they hear or see the name "Taiwan"? The fact of the matter is, of course, that information about Taiwan that is buzzing around the world is more or less the same as what we receive about ourselves here at home.

Consider what occurred this week in an English newspaper many ex-pats respect very much, the International Herald Tribune (IHT). The IHT rarely casts a direct eye upon Taiwan in its news reporting or commentary. If we make print there, it is because of a perceived or actual link to China, not because of our own identity.

But there we were this week on the front page. Taiwan! The paper's Tuesday's edition offered a thoughtful look at the present situation of ex-President Chen Shui-bian. Quantity alone says something. The article was 19 paragraphs in length, and a third of them appeared on page 1 (IHT 7-23-13).

Most of the article summarizes the political career of Mr. Chen. We read of his historical significance as our only president thus far from a party in opposition to the Kuomintang (KMT), the shaky hold he maintained on his office in the waning days of his administration, the size of the fortune he and his family pilfered, the corruption, blah, blah, blah. For better or worse, the whole story was there in the good old IHT.

When I first read the article, I asked myself, "Is this the kind of publicity Taiwan needs?" Then the question changed to, "Isn't dishonesty still the main theme of most of our news stories?"

The IHT piece centers much on the question of Mr. Chen's loss of credibility. Just how serious are his medical problems, anyway?

Not surprisingly, the article refers to the shooting incident on the eve of the 2004 elections. "Despite any concrete evidence ... [many critics] concluded that he had staged the shooting. Now they wonder if his health is really all that bad" (IHT 7-23-13 p. 4). Readers will recall questions that surfaced recently

in local newsprint as a response to hospital reports of a suicide attempt. Was Chen really fighting with the urge to end his life, or was it a matter of more shenanigans?

Only a fool could read the Chen piece in this week's IHT and not connect the dots. The terms "dishonesty" and "loss of credibility" are troubling Taiwan and our image more today perhaps than ever before.

We may have already heard all we want to hear about the death of Corporal Hung Chung-chiu, but we simply cannot let the story die now. The charges of missing or blacked out film footage, of sloppy or deliberately deceitful record-keeping, of the bumbling and pratfalls that spell "cover-up" surely will not vanish like smoke in the wind. How many more bows and apologies and "We'll get to the bottom of this" promises from higher authorities can the people of Taiwan take?

And yet, sad to say, there is more.

Before the Hung story captured media attention, the uproar was all about the findings of the Transparency International (TI) 2013 Global Corruption Barometer. It is yesterday's news that the survey pegged Taiwan as "one of the most corrupt nations in the world" (TT 7-12-13 p. 1). The study claimed that as many as 36 percent of the 1,000 Taiwanese asked paid a bribe in the past year in seeking assistance in the public service sector.

The story of Chen Shui-bian and his credibility problem really isn't much different than the narrative that seems to be following us everywhere now. I love this country and want to stay here, but I've come to believe we as a culture have a cancer growing in our belly. It is increasingly impossible to deny that, like the country of my birth, Taiwan is spiritually sick.

Deceit and a resulting hemorrhage of credibility appear to be as deeply woven into our national fabric as are rice and soy sauce. We must face this ugly truth, and do something about it.

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