

The value of academic honesty

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All sorts of important news stories broke last week here in Taiwan. They include the passing of a much admired physician, a massive protest march before the presidential palace, monumental changes in the military judicial system, and Manila's eagerly awaited publication of its report on the May 9 incident.

Perhaps the most shocking story of the week was the sudden demise of the new Minister of National Defense, Andrew Yang.

The brevity of his term in office, six fast days, was the stuff that puts a fellow's name in the Guinness Book of Records. It is yesterday's news, but disappointing, even painful news for me personally, that Professor Yang's fall was rooted in an act of plagiarism.

Now, some have been talking of the plagiarism exposure as a nearly perfect act of political manipulation by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The mistake Mr. Yang made back in a publication in 2007 turned out to be a golden opportunity for the opposition party to embarrass the Nationalist Chinese Party (KMT) and the military of the R.O.C. and, perhaps most directly, to attack President Ma Ying-jeou.

Since his resignation, local media have been rife with charges that the more serious edge of the story was in-fighting within Taiwan's military establishment itself over the initial appointment of Mr. Yang. (See, for example, The China Post [8-8-13, p. 1], "DPP urges Ma" [TT 8-8-13, p. 3] and virtually all of A 5 in the Chinese "Liberty Times" [8-7-13]).

Many splashy news stories here in Taiwan carry an ironic twist, and this is one of them. The book containing the plagiarized article that stabbed Professor Yang in the back — are you ready for this? — is entitled "Prepare for D-Day."

We might benefit from an evaluation of the Chinese title. "Prepare" isn't exactly a blooper here, but I'd have preferred something closer to "Moment of Decisive Battle." Check the Chinese title, and you might agree. Well, the moment sure came for Professor Yang, and the battle ended in a decisive loss.

What bothers me, and bothers me greatly, is how some seem to be downsizing the importance of the plagiarism. I cannot grasp how anyone in the professions of journalism or education can do this. Since the folks to whom I refer are Chinese and Taiwanese, and personal friends who have won my admiration, I should add, my bafflement leads me to ask if we've hit upon a cultural conflict. Honesty may be a high value, even a virtue, in some cultures, but not in another culture.

News reports were that Professor Yang unabashedly admitted to hiring a "ghostwriter" for his D-Day (CP 8: 7: 13, p. 1). The definition of this kind of writer is self-explanatory. For a fee, you buy the words of a writer. You buy them like you buy a bowl of noodles. The words, like noodles, then "belong" to you. To use the words of a ghostwriter and to claim they are yours is to cheat, to plagiarize. It is as simple as that.

This newspaper editorialized on the issue with words such as "the mistake was unintentional," and "he (Yang) may have resigned because of a 'small' glitch to his academic integrity ... " (CP 8-8-13, p. 4). The same edition speaks off the opinion page of Yang admitting "to being negligent in failing to spot the controversial part of the article written by a research fellow ... before publishing it under his name" (p. 16). What in the world is going on? Why this sanitizing, this pretending, this cotton candy?

If the man published the words under his own name, he did it intentionally. He didn't know someone had betrayed him, but was he an honest academic in calling his piece in "D-Day" his own?

Friends of mine have urged me to focus not on the dishonesty here, but on the wider machinations of Taiwan's political life. I am sorry, but I cannot do that. Others have the right to handle the wider picture if they wish.

I deal with students and colleagues every day who struggle with the temptation to plagiarize. How can I, and other educators in this land, defend the value of academic honesty in the presence of young friends and others, when at the same time, some of our highest officials and leading media appear to trivialize it?

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