

Chinese struggles to grasp freedom

January 6, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

We are still at work on details and haven't clinched a deal, so I cannot know with absolute certainty. I am hopeful, however, that today's will be the first of two columns that continue a discussion begun some time ago on the subject of Chinese students and their experiences here in Taiwan. This offering is more than reportage. We are, after all, on the commentary page.

This week I invited several students from China who have been in courses with me this semester to sit down to share in a free-roving interview, possibly my subject of focus next Sunday. Most of these young people are exchange students with us for only a single semester. They must soon pack up and return to their original universities. The students are considering my invitation and, for now, all I can do is keep my fingers crossed.

For the sake of clarity and convenience, let us agree that "Chinese students" refers here to students from the People's Republic of China. "Taiwanese" refers to persons holding a passport for, and living in the Republic of China, Taiwan.

For today I respond to a splashy article that a competing publication published last month, entitled "View from a Chinese Student in Taiwan." This piece is an interesting interview the "Taipei Times" conducted with Fu Tzun-fong, author of "Taiwan Could be Better" (12-2-12, p. 12). The newspaper pointed out the interview was a condensed and edited version.

Mr. Fu is currently a graduate student in psychology at National Taiwan University. The cover of his book features lots of the color red as background for an unmistakable close-up sketch of Mao Tze-tung. As Howard Cosell might put it at the start of a boxing match, so much for that!

The Fu interview is narrow in focus. Its goal is to probe the graduate student-author's views on political differences between China and Taiwan. Surely the note at the end about its condensed nature is only fair. One wonders what might have been edited out in order to protect Fu and increase his chances of getting his book published in his motherland in the time ahead.

Fu says the background that he and his friends (this is his word, but I am comfortable with it) have brought to Taiwan from China makes it impossible to accept the idea of an independent Taiwan. Speaking of his friends, he says: "They have received two decades of education and the message coming from home and the greater environment is that one must recognize a unified China." My difficulty, of course, is that we find no explanation of the meaning of that doggone, bothersome four-letter word, "must." We also find no attempt to handle "unified." Well, you can't do everything in a single interview.

One of the most interesting comments here is that, although Chinese students cannot tolerate any whisper of independence for Taiwan, "[My friends] are capable of understanding and will spend time trying to understand why Taiwanese want independence." Keep an eye on "why."

Apparently unaware of the irony of "trying to understand why Taiwanese want independence," the student-author acknowledges hurdles he'll have to overcome to get his manuscript into the hands of Chinese readers. Publication would demand "large changes to the content. Because it would have to pass censorship . . . I guess we would have to delete some of the more sensitive parts . . ."

Surely this candid admission points to an obvious cause of Taiwanese desire for independence from China's governance, not to mention an aversion to unity with the country. Is "aversion" too strong a term? Not for me, it isn't.

The closing section of the interview refers to celebrated Chinese dissident Wang Dan's current weekly forums at National Taiwan University. The head of the Chinese student association, says Fu (blushingly?), "has reminded us that we can go and listen to Wang Dan, but once or twice is enough, and we don't have to go every time he gives a talk because it is too sensitive an issue."

Am I allowed a second exclamation point? Whew!

Howard Cosell might have called it a knock-out punch the poor boxer gave himself. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. This column shares an interview with a student from China who has written a book about Taiwan and China and touched on sensitive political points. Does it surprise you that a graduate student, someone still rather young, has written a book like this? What qualities must an author, especially a young one, develop? Do you feel you have those qualities?
2. Politics is pretty much at the center of the interview, and freedom of self-expression without fear is a theme here. "Self-expression" means the freedom for people to possess and talk aloud of their own political and personal beliefs. "Self-expression" includes spiritual, psychological, religious freedom. Do you ever think of the advantages you have in Taiwan, which people in China do not have? Do you ever feel "lucky" to be here?
3. Should students care about political questions?

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