

## How Sunflower becomes personal

March 30, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Two points arise when I consider foreign reaction to the latest twists and turns in democracy, Taiwan style. One is closely linked to media coverage. The other touches on various meanings of “the personal” in our lives.

The reality of “media” hangs in the air of Taiwan today like a glaring, flashing light. Awareness overseas of events as they unfold here in the Sunflower Student Movement is obviously inextricably connected with media coverage of those events.

But the personal take also matters. Many of us following the narrative of the student demonstrators may not be of ethnic Chinese or Taiwanese background. Taiwan, however, long ago became our adopted home. What is happening “downtown” gravely affects all of us in Taiwan. One need not be a citizen of the country or a holder of an R.O.C. passport to care.

Partly to push my pen along before I sit down to write for this space on Sundays, I occasionally follow a local news story in the International New York Times. I did that last Tuesday, and found what I was looking for.

Page one featured a small color photo of burly police officers in heavy gear as they muscled students through a throng of photographers. One of the students was a female, and she was weeping. The male student beside her hugged her closely to his side. The tag-line: “Taiwan protest crackdown.” The words that followed included “riot police,” “forced students protesting” and “Taipei” (3-25-14).

Page 3 inside featured another picture nearly as wide as the page itself. It was a rough one. The description beneath it read: “The police used a water cannon Monday near government headquarters in Taipei on demonstrators who were angry over the way a trade agreement moved through the legislature.” The picture shows helmeted police and a giant blast of water as it hurls through the air at its target, a crowd of students standing there, waiting to get mowed down.

The article was 19 paragraphs long. That is a lot of ink. While acknowledging that “many” of the demonstrators oppose the proposed agreement between Taipei and Beijing, writer Austin Ramzy perceptively reported.

“The most fundamental objection, though, they say, is the way in which the deal was moved through

Taiwan’s legislature. Members of the Kuomintang [KMT], the governing party, forced the motion through to the legislative floor without a promised item-by-item review.” It is common knowledge that this sleigh of hand required all of 30 seconds.

The article briefs presumably mostly foreign readers on the closer ties between the two governments that President Ma Ying-jeou has pushed in his administration, and includes mention of the 197 (US \$) billion that currently flow in trade between the two sides of the strait. Ramzy neglects to say Ma is the chair of the KMT. Well, a mute point, perhaps. Still, rhetoric in the air between student leaders and the presidential office has now taken on an ad hominem, at times vitriolic tone that is worrisome.

I spoke above of the personal in all of this mess. A friend wrote this week of her concerns for me (for me?) in the context of my words on page 4 here. “Sometimes I wonder how ‘safe’ your political interest and involvement is, considering that part of the world . . . I do wonder if you are ‘safe’ expressing your beliefs in so open a forum.”

I admit the image of Mad magazine’s Alfred E. Neuman’s “Who, me worry?” did flash through my mind. I then quickly reminded my friend that we are Taiwan, not China.

One reason I stand with the students expressing non-violent discontent with the way the government rammed the Taipei-Beijing bill through - - despite earlier pledges for line-by-line transparency and mature debate - - is precisely because we are Taiwan. Taiwan calls itself democratic. Much, if not all of the controversial treaty might well be the ticket to ride for Taiwan and its future. The right to make that decision belongs to the people and not to a particular political party. The bad apple in the bushel is not the trade deal in itself. It is the despicable way the thing was foisted upon the people. That is what irks, and irks badly.

And that is why the students are upset. I am upset, too. Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

### **Talking points :**

1. The international press is following closely the events associated with the Taiwan students occupying the legislature, the entire "Sunflower Student Movement." What imagine of Taiwan do you think foreigners may have?
2. Some people feel what happens inside a country should only concern the people of that particular country. (China says this.) Other countries are willing to accept 'outside' viewpoints of their "inner" news events. What are the advantages and disadvantages of listening to 'outside' views?
3. Taiwan people living in the United States and Europe are following the story of the "Sunflower" students, too. How do you think they feel about all of this?

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