

Students disdain the student leader

December 9, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

It is not necessary to offer a complete chronology of what led to the dramatic confrontation last week in the national legislature between a student activist from Tsinghua National University and the Minister of Education. A quick sketch might however be useful. First came the vigorous protests these recent weeks of the student activist group Youth Alliance Against the Media Monster. Many of us presumably sympathized with the concerns of the Alliance that the massive buy-out of media enterprises and the subsequent reshaping of our local media scene were not in the best interests of the country.

Members of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) manipulated the situation to object to the planned media take-over for a variety of sound ethical, social and political reasons. Then, with something of a Muhammed Ali shuffle in the ring, they placed the student from Tsinghua in the spotlight in the legislature and, my gosh, handed him a microphone. We've seen the photos and read the spate of words in reaction to how he spoke. We know of the student's scolding of the Minister of Education and of his name-calling.

We know also, however, of the actions the Ministry of Education (MOE) had earlier taken against the students, of the ministry's contacting of the protestors' universities and the submitting of their names to the schools. We know the MOE asked the universities to "show concern" for the protestors.

Three days ago, I asked students in my 20th Century American Short Stories course for written reactions to all of this. They were free to either respond or not respond. "No names," I said. "I don't want to know who you are." The students, by the way, were a good mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

There were 75 in that classroom. Only 38 chose to respond to my invitation. I cannot not wonder why so many normally articulate students were so silent. My respondents expressed general condemnation of the student leader for his perceived lack of courtesy.

"It would have been better if he wasn't so rude,"

wrote one. "Instead of scolding (the minister) in front of so many media, he could have shown more respect." Still another stressed the importance of propriety over passion: "I believe he had a point, but my first reaction was 'He is an extremely disrespectful person.' Even if he is concerned or passionate (about the proposed media take-over) it is still basic to show essential etiquette (the word underlined) and manners." One student wrote of shared responsibility. "It's not proper to scold anyone. However, some of the legislative representatives should be honest to the public and apologize for their words. Some used fierce words against the students." One respondent pointed to the injustice the student leader was addressing. "Although it was impolite behavior, it could have been a sign of feeling toward the MOE." Carrying the argument farther, another voice defended the tough student stance: "This is just the way any protest has to be, brutal and strong. It seems the only way the voice of the people can be heard is in a violent way. The 'concern' letter (to the universities of the demonstrators) implies the minister 'truly cares' (but) we all know, sorry about the language, this is bullshit. Even a child of 10 understands if a teacher says parents should show more 'concern' for them. It's only a lie ... they want to oppress the voice of students."

Of the 38 respondents, 17 strongly supported the rightness of the protests before the day of the meltdown in the legislature. I was surprised that 5 voiced opposition to any student protests whatever on the question of possible changes in Taiwan media. "I wonder how many of the protesting students get true, unbiased, complete information," wrote one respondent. "This so called 'monopoly on the news' is what we hear from other people or the media. How many of the protestors have media experience?"

Shockingly to me, one dismissed the importance of the issue entirely. "Who's going to buy the media? What will the new company be like? I don't find these questions important or so critical. It makes no difference to me."

Who owns the media is not a critical question? Oh me, oh my.

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Talking points:

1. This column focuses on the student activists who are protesting the possible buy-out of most of Taiwan's media by the group of media enterprises formally known as NEXT. Are you worried about Taiwan's media being under the direct control of a small group of businessmen, about 1/3 of them with direct ties to the Beijing government?
2. The Ministry of Education contacted several universities that had students among the protestors and asked the administrators to 'show concern' for the students. The Ministry also sent names of some of the protestors. Are you concerned about this?
3. The column quotes students at Fu da talking about politeness. These students condemn the student protestor from Tsinghua who scolded the Minister of Education in public and called him names. What can we learn from such a situation? How do you feel about seeing words of Fu da students on page 4 of the China Post?

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