

How to evaluate rallies and violence?

December 16, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

Local news events continue to crop up which give us valuable opportunities to contemplate the role of civility in both public and private lives.

Taipei's media world had barely finished reporting and commenting on the "scandal" of a local university student scolding Taiwan's Minister of Education in the national legislature, when still more courtesy-related news hit the headlines last week. I speak of course of the shouting and shoe-throwing at President Ma Ying-jeou in the course of a human rights award ceremony several days ago.

I was a part of the commentary on the student incident, offering in this space last Sunday a sampling of student views about the meltdown in the legislature ("Students disdain student leader" 12-9-12 p. 4). I'd like to gently point out, however, that I had proposed a softer and more general title for that piece. I wanted to entitle the column, "Students respond to protests with interesting words." This is not to quibble with my editor, but to state a fact.

Last Sunday's quotes here showed student reactions to earlier student demonstrations in response to public plans for alleged "monster media" in Taiwan. The quotes also shared strong student disapproval of steps the Ministry of Education had earlier taken to discourage student dissent. That column touched on issues well beyond the single topic of courtesy.

One more thing: It is only fair today to salute the student for his public apology last weekend as for the attitude he had earlier exhibited. Amen on all that. Let's move forward now, albeit with continued worry about "monster media" in Taiwan and elsewhere.

But moving forward is less than easy with the shoe-throwing story.

So, tell me, is this just a coincidence? A student lands in hot water with a call to check his courtesy quotient and then, 48 hours later, demonstrators heckle the president and throw objects at him, including a shoe?

This is a "both and" question. The two incidents are not, of course, related. The ages and backgrounds of the Ma hecklers, their sympathizers, and the

shoe-thrower this week are different than the age, personal background, and cause of the student. We perhaps admire him and his fellow demonstrators (I do, at least), and are ready enough to cast a forgiving eye upon his verbal, but youthful folly.

Yet at the same time, given the lack of civility that has characterized politics in the United States and other countries in recent years — and speaking candidly of our local scene — these incidents of a loss of cool, a disdain for common courtesy, a lack of basic manners are indeed a part of the same piece of fabric. Sadly, the tendency for verbal violence and abusive public gestures seems more and more a mark of our times.

I am sure I am but one of thousands of educators in Taiwan who have observed a gradual but steady shift in an understanding of the meaning of courtesy on our campuses. I suspect this holds as true of our high schools as it does for our universities. The prevalence of bullying in school life, and the United States has seen its fair share of that evil, is only another piece in the puzzle. Shootings on American campuses (and in shopping malls) have in recent years shamed a society supposedly renowned for being a tolerant melting pot of people of diverse races and political views. Some may typify those events as anti-social, criminal, and violent, and argue they are of a different ilk entirely than the more gentlemanly topic of manners and politeness. Well, okay, maybe.

But sometimes nastiness, ugly behavior, and violence are a matter of degree. A loss of courtesy in a culture and a creeping increase in public violence display the same sad weaknesses in human nature.

As in good Steve Jobs-like fashion we become increasingly enamored of our technology and increasingly adept at communicating hither and yon via cyberspace, is it possible we are becoming hardened as human persons and less aware of the feelings, needs, and pain of the people around us?

I want to answer "no," but am not sure I can.

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