

UP FRONT WITH WANG YU

Professor Mab Huang has been promoting human rights education in Taiwan since taking up his teaching position at Soochow University, Taipei, in 1994. Since sharing his experiences with CRF in January 2000,¹ Professor Huang helped to establish the Chang Fo-chuan Center for the Study of Human Rights at Soochow University in December 2000, and now serves as the Center's director.

Wang Yu: It's a pleasure to meet with you again to talk about your work in promoting human rights education. Specifically, we'd like to learn more about the human rights center at Soochow University. What is the purpose of the center? What are some of its activities and achievements?

Mab Huang: It's a great pleasure to meet you here in Taipei and to tell your readers what my colleagues and I have been doing since our interview four years ago. I think I can say we've gained some experience and confidence in our work. Of course, we're still at the very preliminary stage and have a long way to go, but we are moving along.

The situation, politically and socially, has changed quite a bit in the past four years. When I spoke to you last time, the Presidential election of 2000 was fast approaching. (You always come at the right time; the Presidential election of 2004 is only half a year from now.) After the Democratic Progressive Party won the election on March 20, 2000, the new administration quickly declared its commitment to governing in accordance with international human rights standards. You could say we took advantage of the situation to gather support for the Center for Human Rights at our university. The university's Governing Council approved setting up the Center in December 2000. Nine faculty members from the Political Science, Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology Departments and the Law School initiated the motion and served as Board members, but now we have colleagues from other research insti-

tutes and universities joining us as teaching or research fellows.

The purposes for setting up the Center can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. To help promote human rights research in Taiwan: For many decades, human rights research has been neglected, both in universities and research institutes. The Center seeks to facilitate the development of a human rights culture by encouraging research in human rights, peace and development.
2. To help plan and implement human rights education: The Center has been helping to plan and implement human rights education that is urgently needed not only in schools, but also for the general public. The Center is actively engaged in training teachers and preparing teaching materials, especially for primary and junior high schools. It also helps produce documentary materials for the general public.
3. To help train human rights NGO workers: Human rights NGOs in Taiwan have been a powerful force in pressuring the government to make new laws as well as in promoting and protecting the rights of less advantaged groups such as women, indigenous people and foreign laborers. The Center works closely with many NGO groups, and in a modest way aims at providing them with some training. I say in a modest way because many of the NGO workers are very knowledgeable and we at the Center have learned much from them.
4. To help promote broader and deeper international exchanges by sponsoring international visits, conferences, lecture tours and election observer teams.

Briefly, these are our purposes.

WY: Apparently you and your colleagues have been keeping very busy. Now, why did you choose to name your center for Chang Fo-chuan?

MH: Professor Chang Fo-chuan was an outstanding political scientist and the first Chairman of my Department (1954-1958) when Soochow University resumed its operations in

Taiwan. (Soochow University was found in Suzhou, China by Christian missionaries around 1900. Suzhou has its own Soochow University, and the two schools have established fairly close liaison.)

Professor Chang is well known for his studies in human rights theory and history, and his essays collected in *On Freedoms and Human Rights* are still widely cited. That's why when we set up our Center in December 2000, we decided to name it in his honor.

WY: You referred to training teachers and preparing teaching materials. Isn't that what you and your colleagues have been doing for many years?

MH: Yes, we've been doing this since 1998. But under the new administration, the pace has quickened. The Ministry of Education set up a committee on human rights education, and invited some colleagues and me to serve on it. The Committee is divided into four groups: the first coordinates planning and research projects; the second oversees teachers' training and teaching materials; the third is responsible for promoting human rights in the general public through documentaries, film festivals and so on; and the fourth promotes an environment conducive to human rights education in the schools, for example by developing more humane disciplinary rules and remodeling buildings for easy access by handicapped students.

Over the past four years we've held workshops in many cities to train teachers and administrators, and courses on teaching human rights are offered in teachers' colleges on a selective basis. A Web site managed initially by a team from the Taipei Municipal Teachers' College, and now by the National Taiwan Teachers' University, provides teachers with lesson plans, reference books and articles, as well as human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights covenants, and so on. Teachers can access the Web site easily and post comments and inquiries. In these projects my Center has played only a supporting role, with our colleagues in the teachers' colleges doing most of the hard work. Almost all of the financial support for the workshops and the Web site comes from the Ministry of Education and various municipal Departments of Education.

WY: Who provides funding for your activities?

MH: My university gave the Center some support, providing offices, basic facilities and equipment, as well as full- and part-time assistants. The Ministry of Education supports our undergraduate human rights program and many of our conferences.

WY: What about your undergraduate human rights program?

MH: My university will offer an undergraduate human rights program next fall (September 2004), and if things go well, we may initiate a human rights MA program in two years. Professor Jau-hwa Chen from the Philosophy Department is in charge of the undergraduate human rights program, which

requires 24 credit hours during the sophomore through senior years for the equivalent of a minor program. We have consulted the programs of many universities, especially those of the University of Chicago and Columbia University. The curriculum is divided into two parts: core courses dealing with basic human rights concepts, theories, history and laws, and elective courses such as human rights in literature, science and technology (for example, DNA technology and the protection of human rights, health and human rights, etc.) and the rights of indigenous peoples. Quite a few courses will be team-taught by our faculty and NGO activists, and we will encourage our students to spend a month or two as interns in NGOs. For our MA degree program, we plan to encourage our students to apply for internships with international NGOs in Geneva, London and New York City.

One more thing. The Ministry of Education has requested that we open our undergraduate human rights program to students from other universities and colleges, and through e-learning to all teachers' colleges. We're just beginning to talk to other universities and colleges that are interested in our program. It seems that technically it can be done, but the planning and coordination will take a lot of time and effort.

WY: What is your assessment of the visits and lecture tours your Center has sponsored over the past few years? Do they really contribute to human rights education in Taiwan?

MH: Yes. Take last year, for example. We held an international conference on the rights of Taiwan's indigenous peoples, focusing especially on the rights to work and the physical safety of women and children in indigenous communities. The turnout exceeded our expectations. More than one hundred people took part in the two-day conference, including government officials, scholars and experts from Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Then there was a conference on the role of women in Taiwan's democratic movement, cosponsored by the Feminist Scholars Association, which reexamined the role of women under political persecution. Three guest speakers were invited to share their experiences. All were victims of political persecution, having lived through decades of authoritarian rule, and are still active in social movements or NGO activities. Finally, a third conference on peace studies promoted peace research in Taiwan, with papers on conflicts between ethnic groups, the sexes and social classes in Taiwan, the U.S. and the U.K., and the world-wide movement against the Iraq war.

As for this year, we've already scheduled an international conference on human rights education from April 19-25. Scholars and experts from the U.K., U.S., Japan, India, France and Hong Kong will advise school administrators and teachers on how to improve their work. And in September we'll hold a third conference on teaching human rights, peace and development. As in the past two years, about thirty faculty members from universities and colleges throughout Taiwan will be invited to present their syllabuses and share ideas and experiences. We've found this exercise very useful.

WY: And your lecture series?

MH: Through the years, many scholars, experts and NGO activists have lectured at our Center. They include distinguished foreign experts and scholars from institutions such as the International Institute for Democracy in Strasbourg, the Human Rights Court of the Council of Europe, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague, the National Human Rights Commissions of New Zealand and Canada, South Africa's International Peace Research Association, the Italian Helsinki Committee, Columbia University, Harvard University and the University of Ulster, North Ireland.

Another group of people who have lectured at my Center are Chinese democracy and human rights activists based in the U. S., Europe and Hong Kong. They include, among others, Mr. Wang Dan, Mr. Li Qiang of China Labor Watch in New York, the poet Bei Ling and you.

A third group is NGO activists in Taiwan. They include representatives from the Awakening Foundation, a women's rights group; the Judicial Reform Association; the Taiwan Association for Human Rights, the Gay Rights Group and others. They tend to be women in their early thirties in charge of the day-to-day operations of their organizations. Our students really like them and learn a great deal from them.

WY: Is your Center the only one in Taiwan? What about the law schools? Are they offering courses in human rights?

MH: I'm embarrassed to say that my Center is the only institute in Taiwan specifically concerned with research and teaching of human rights, and that the law schools are not very interested. I'm hard pressed to explain why, but many factors apparently play a role. Perhaps the lingering, pernicious influence of traditional cultural values remains a problem. The fact that Taiwan lived through long decades of authoritarian rule surely has not made advocacy of human rights any easier. The isolation of Taiwan from the international community has also hurt. A more sinister, yet more practical explanation is that since knowledge of human rights is not required for the examination to become lawyers or judges, law schools simply ignore it. Nevertheless, with both the National Bar Association and the Bar Association of the City of Taipei as well as NGOs paying more and more attention to human rights, the law schools are clearly being left behind. Sooner or later they'll have to catch up.

WY: Are you optimistic about the future of human rights education in Taiwan? And do you think that what you and your colleagues have been doing could have any influence on developments in mainland China?

MH: I'm fairly optimistic, if that's the right word. It's difficult to imagine that Taiwan would ever return to the authoritarian rule it has just lived through. The people would not allow it; they are far more educated and rights-conscious than before. However, I don't anticipate that progress in human rights education will be easy and swift, and plainly we need more financial commitment. For example, it will be costly to set up a database, or to provide adequate training for teachers. But

we're plodding along. For the foreseeable future the government will remain our most important source of financial support, as Taiwan's foundations and business community have not yet learned how to contribute to human rights education. There are moments of tension working with the Ministry of Education bureaucracy, but on the whole they are quite supportive. The trend, apparently, is to integrate human rights education with peace studies and gender equality education, as well as teaching respect for life and the environment. It will be a new kind of civic education, perhaps, not the traditional kind that teaches obedience to authority and narrow nationalism. The Human Rights Committee in the Ministry of Education has begun to discuss it, and a consensus is being wrought.

What influence can we have on developments in China? I remain of the opinion that China is under severe pressure from both within and without to come to grips with rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights. I don't expect what we've done to have a direct impact on what the governing elites in China think and do. Nevertheless, I tend to think that what we've done in Taiwan will stimulate and encourage intellectuals and professionals in China to think and act more boldly, thus putting more pressure on the Communist Party to relax its control and allow civil society and NGOs more space to move.

WY: Thank you for letting me take up so much of your time.

MH: My pleasure. Have a safe journey back to New York.

1. See "Bringing Human Rights into the Classroom: a Taiwan Experiment," *China Rights Forum*, Spring 2000, inside front page.