

Students rally to 'freedom' cause

The reaction on HKU's campus to the Robert Chung affair and the associated public fallout has been immediate, loud and clear, Yenni Kwok reports

The recent controversy about academic freedom is quite possibly the biggest drama that has faced Hong Kong students since that of Tiananmen Square in 1989. At stake is the reputation of their institutions and therefore the value of their studies. It has invited much public debate, not only about the independence of Hong Kong campuses, but about how far the students have gone or will go in their protests and demands about this matter.

Though staff are clearly involved, the strongest reaction has come from the students. "The staff have more limitations than the students," said Chris Lo Wai-ming, spokesman of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, which has been involved in recent protests with the University of Hong Kong (HKU) Students Union. "Many work on a contract basis, and because the vice-chancellor signs their contracts, they are afraid they will not be renewed."

The students have no such worries. On July 14, HKU pollster Robert Chung Ting-yiu revealed that his vice-chancellor was the third party who, he said, had delivered the message that Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa was unhappy with Dr Chung's polls on his popularity and the Government's performance. Within hours, the university's students staged a protest demanding the vice-chancellor, Professor Cheng Yiu-chung, step down.

When Professor Cheng flew home from Britain a few days later, nearly 20 students from the HKU Students Union and the federation were involved in a chase which began at the airport, where they waited several hours for his arrival, before they pitched camp overnight outside his home.

Professor Cheng finally spoke to them the next morning for five minutes through the gates of his residence. A caller to a radio programme commented that his performance was worse than that of former premier Li Peng when he received students during the Tiananmen rally in Beijing.

Nevertheless, such persistence had not gone down well with some members of the public. In a letter to the South China Morning Post, a reader lambasted the students and compared their behaviour with that of the Red Guards. During a press conference held by the students union, an unidentified man accused them of being sensational and disrespectful to their teacher.

"I don't think our actions are similar to the Red Guards," said Gloria Chang Wan-ki, president of the students union. "Based on this issue alone and the attitude of Professor Cheng, there is enough reason for him to resign from his post. He lacks the initiative and the intention to protect academic freedom. Given his past history, surely he needs to bear the responsibilities."

In 1996, Professor Cheng ordered the clean-up of June 4 slogans in support of the

Tiananmen students, which were painted on university property, and he also refused to allow the "Pillar of Shame" statue to be erected on campus after the handover.

The students scored victories in both those cases. They repainted the slogans and the statue is now standing in front of Haking Wong building, which houses the students union office.

None of their current demands have been met. Professor Cheng was reluctant to hold a dialogue with the students, or to relinquish his post. The university council also ignored their demand to have the Legislative Council investigate the fiasco.

The students have stuck to these demands but not threatened any further action. "If Professor Cheng has no initiatives, we cannot do anything," said Ms Chang. Instead of militant action or violence, the students have resorted to mischief. Last week they lampooned the characters embroiled in the Robert Chung controversy in a play acted out on the campus grounds.

The Chief Executive was portrayed as the "Ignorant Emperor Tung" and his aide Andrew Lo Cheung-on was "Lo the Eunuch". In a play on the sound of their names, Professor Cheng became "Cheng the Evil Spirit", while Mr Chung was "Chung Who Has To Stop".

Previously the students union had organised public protests about the right of abode and voiced dissatisfaction with the Government during the handover anniversary. Despite their high profile, the activities drew little student participation, with only about 20 student protesters joined by many non-students. But this time the controversy has sparked a heated debate among students, with both supportive and critical opinions of how student leaders have reacted.

On campus the affair has proven to be the hottest issue for student activists in recent years. Ms Chang recalled several episodes in which fellow students approached her to discuss the issue.

"When I was having lunch at the cafeteria, a student came up and sat down with me. He gave his opinion about the issue, and we talked about our own stance. In the end, he also offered his help, and it was very encouraging."

The Internet has proved a powerful tool to reach the students during their summer holiday. "Most students are not on campus during the summer holiday, but we have a lot of discussions on our Web site and news group," said Christopher Fung Ka-keung, vice-president of the Chinese University Students Union.

Last week the academic freedom controversy also shook the Chinese University after it was discovered that vice-chancellor Arthur Li Kwok-cheung had also met Mr Tung's aide, Mr Lo, to discuss the reappointment of a council member.

Yet despite the huge interest, the activists generally believe that the controversy will not make the campus more active than before.

"This really raises the students' interest, but I don't think the whole atmosphere is

changing or that students will actively participate in each campaign," said Yuen Hoi-yan, external vice-president of the HKU Students Union.

"Every year, the issues [under discussion in] the students' union is different," said Mr Fung. "This year, we stress academic freedom. Next year, it will be something else."

However, Ms Chang said she hoped the controversy could be used to encourage more student involvement in campus affairs. She and her fellow activists are now pushing for further democratisation of the campus, including a ballot so students and university staff can elect the university's vice-chancellor.

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