

The real cause of the 228 Incident

Written by Lee Hsiao-feng 李蕭峰
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The 228 Incident of 1947 has been interpreted in different ways, depending on the changing political environment and varying political standpoints.

During the martial law period, starting from the time of the 228 Incident itself, the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) offered two official explanations.

The first reason given was that Taiwanese people opposed the government of the “motherland” (China) because they had been indoctrinated by the colonial Japanese education system. This ridiculous assertion is easy to refute. One need only ask why, if Taiwanese people had really been indoctrinated in this way, they so enthusiastically welcomed Taiwan’s return to the “motherland” following the end of World War II.

The second official explanation was that the 228 Incident broke out because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had incited the Taiwanese to revolt. This amounts to boasting on behalf of the CCP. With just a few dozen members in Taiwan, how could the CCP have incited the whole island into rebellion against the KMT government? Kam Yiu-yu (簡義宇) did underground work for the CCP in Taiwan after the war. As Kam later recalled, the CCP in those days had few members and little influence in Taiwan, and it played no role in the uprising.

The CCP is quite happy to have the KMT carrying out propaganda on its behalf. So, babbling away on its own side of the Taiwan Strait, the CCP claims that the 228 Incident was a revolutionary act by Taiwanese compatriots responding to calls for rebellion issued by chairman Mao Zedong (毛澤東) from his cave in Yanan. As a matter of fact, a certain China-friendly “academic” in Taiwan sings the same tune, claiming that “the 228 Incident was a part of the Chinese people’s nationwide resistance to the corrupt rule of the KMT government.” To anyone who knows anything about the incident, this kind of politically colored language is hardly worth scoffing at. Regrettably, the person in question has been given important responsibilities by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) as a member of the team appointed last year by the Ministry of Education to revise Taiwan’s high-school history syllabus. One of the results of the more than 7 million votes that put Ma in office is that the teaching of Taiwan’s history is now in the hands of people like this.

The nonsensical explanations for the 228 Incident described above have fallen by the wayside in the face of newly uncovered historical evidence. In the past few years, Ma has finally admitted that the 228 Incident was one in which ordinary people were forced to rebel in response to bureaucratic misrule. For KMT officials to admit such a thing is in itself a major breakthrough, but this explanation on its own is simply an attempt to put all the blame on Chen Yi (陳儀), who was appointed by China’s KMT government to head Taiwan’s administration at the time. Such an interpretation is inadequate and not entirely fair.

Another explanation that is often heard is a “conflict between ethnic groups.” Serious ethnic clashes did indeed take place around the time of the 228 Incident, but to interpret the events

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solely as an instance of ethnic conflict does not penetrate to the heart of the matter.

“Ethnic conflict” refers to antagonism between two communities that have lived together in the same society for a long time. If, on the other hand, the antagonism is between two communities that come from different societies, ie, between newly arrived immigrants and the original inhabitants, then it is not just an ethnic conflict. Rather, such a conflict arises from the cultural gap between the two different societies. This was just the situation in which Taiwan found itself after World War II. Behind the appearance of ethnic conflict lay a more profound element, namely the cultural gap between the societies of Taiwan and China.

Why were Taiwanese so resentful of the newcomers’ political nepotism? Why were they shocked when exposed to embezzlement and plunder after a gap of 50 years? Why were they bewildered when Chen Yi found it necessary to declare that “civil servants must not sponge off the government”? Why were Taiwanese so resentful when Mainlanders rode buses and trains without buying tickets, or pushed to the front when others were lining up? Why, when a crowd of Taiwanese protesters surrounded the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau and started burning things, did they not loot money and other property — unlike troops sent over from China to “mop up,” who looted people’s homes? All these questions can be answered easily by quoting the words written as a warning to the KMT government by Lien Chen-tung (連戰), a KMT official who was born in Taiwan but had lived in China: “After years of cultivation by Japan, Taiwanese people have a new kind of lifestyle. They bathe regularly and are very clean, hardworking and thrifty.”

Under Japanese rule, Taiwanese received a modern education, through which they encountered modern civilization, and this brought about a big change in the island’s traditional rural society. Taiwan was gradually transformed from a folk society into a civil society. No wonder Chinese reporters and authors arriving in Taiwan after the war were full of praise for its high cultural standards, as can be seen in articles republished in my book *Chinese Views of Taiwan* (李筱峰).

Despite their high cultural level, the Taiwanese were dismissed by Chinese officials as having been “enslaved.” An editorial published in *Taiwan Minpao* on Feb. 19, 1947, commented sarcastically: “These gentlemen who have arrived here from the motherland often say we have a slave mentality. At first we were quite indignant and did not know what they meant by ‘slave mentality,’ but now we understand. To be public spirited and law abiding is mental slavery, but to cast aside the virtues of propriety, righteousness, honesty and a sense of shame is the only way to survive in this society now that it has returned to the arms of the motherland.”

In just a few words, the writer summed up the cultural gulf between the two sides. Just eight days after the editorial was published, the 228 Incident broke out. Can it be said, then, that the incident was just a popular reaction against misrule by officials, or that it was just an ethnic conflict? Ethnic communities are not in themselves to blame — what we must face up to is the cultural gap. Applying the lessons of yesteryear to today’s situation, as Ma and his government invite the wolf to dinner, should we not be on our guard?

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