

A much-needed history lesson

Written by Jerome Keating
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There was a time, not long ago, when Taiwanese were not allowed to speak Taiwanese and could not say they were Taiwanese without being ridiculed. There was a worse time, also not that long ago, when Taiwanese were imprisoned and tortured if they wanted democracy. That is the period portrayed in the movie *Formosa Betrayed*, which opened in theaters nationwide on Friday.

Can one imagine deprivation if one has only known plenty? Can one imagine oppression if one has only known democracy? Can one imagine a one-party state violating people's rights unless one has experienced it? These questions inform the narrative of *Formosa Betrayed* and are just some of the issues it raises for Taiwan's youth. It is a film that lays bare the harsh reality of Taiwan's not too distant past, a harsh, often unspoken reality, endured by the parents and grandparents of today's youth, a harsh reality that is hard to imagine. It is easier to say that it did not exist.

As a foreign consultant and professor, I currently find myself in the awkward and somewhat embarrassing position of having lived more years in Taiwan and experienced more of its changes than any of my Taiwanese university students.

When I first came to Taiwan, martial law had just been lifted and Taiwanese were still afraid to talk about, let alone criticize, the government. The Strawberry Generation, born shortly after the Kaohsiung Incident, was just entering school at that time. They probably have no memory of the dreaded Garrison Command walking the streets; they may not even know what the Garrison Command was.

Today's "1996 consensus" generation was just starting school when the first popular presidential election was held. They probably have no memory of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) one-party state control and the lack of free elections for important political positions. They have no experience of fat-cat KMT legislators and National Assembly members. Elected way back in 1947, these men enjoyed unquestioned iron rice bowl privileges that only ended in 1992 when those that had not died of old age were forced to finally shuffle into retirement, albeit with a generous retirement package.

As the youth of today search for a job, they must wonder at the privileges and job security Taiwanese tax dollars gave such KMT members.

Formosa Betrayed depicts a fairly recent time in Taiwanese history. Set in 1983, the film is, however, not a documentary. Rather, it is a composite of the murders, torture and reality of things that happened before, during and after the 1980s. There is an irony to it in how Taiwanese seeking democracy were betrayed not only by the KMT, but even by the US, which too often turned a blind eye to human rights violations in Taiwan. More irony can be found in the fact that the same KMT that in the 1980s oppressed Taiwanese for spurious suspicions that they might be "communist spies" now runs and fawns over those same communists in their present dealings with China.

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In the film, a young American FBI agent, Jake Kelly (played by James Van Der Beek) is sent to Taiwan in pursuit of two Chinese gangsters who have just murdered a Taiwanese professor in the US because of his outspoken and critical views of Taiwan's government. In that journey, a Taiwanese, Ming (played by Will Tiao, 王鈞) introduces Kelly to the side of Taiwan that most outsiders never see. In turn, Kelly has to deal with his own personal epiphanies and disillusionment.

The film doesn't have the action scenes of Mission Impossible movies or the femmes fatales that are always a feature of James Bond films; it has only the simple reality of a Taiwan that not long ago few wanted to admit to or face.

Did such things really happen? Talk to those who know Lin Yi-hsiung (林義雄), whose mother and twin seven-year-old daughters were brutally stabbed to death in broad daylight in the family home, despite the fact that he was under round-the-clock surveillance by Taiwan's secret police. Talk to those who know the family of the murdered Chen Wen-chen (陳文成), an outspoken Carnegie Mellon associate-professor. Talk to those who know the family of Henry Liu (劉賓雁), who wrote critically of government officials and was subsequently murdered in the US. Talk to the thousands upon thousands of families whose loved ones were unceremoniously dumped on Green Island or killed during the 228 Incident, the White Terror period, to the present.

Is it that long ago? The man who was head of the Government Information Office, an agency that helped cover up and misdirect investigations of the above high-profile murder cases, ran for president in 2000, vice president in 2004 and mayor of Taipei in 2008. That is just two years ago and this same man now wants to broker deals with the "communists" on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

Similarly, many of those who had their doctoral degrees in the US sponsored and paid for by the KMT government shown in the film still hold offices in today's government. They were often the campus spies spoken of in the film.

Will the film be successful? That is up to Taiwan's youth and how much they really want to know about their past. Cape No. 7 was not that artistically strong, but it was successful because it dealt with the delightful nostalgic side of being Taiwanese. Formosa Betrayed deals with a harsher side of being Taiwanese that many of today's youth may not want to face. The ball is in their court.

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