

Bringing White Terror history to the public

Written by Weng Chien-tao 翁建滔

Wednesday, 26 September 2018 07:00

Hsieh Hsueh-hung (謝雪紅) was a Taiwanese communist organizer who fled to China in 1947 to escape repression following the 228 Incident.

However, after several years in China, she was labeled a “rightist” and subjected to “struggle sessions” by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

Chen Fang-ming (陳芳明), a professor at National Chengchi University’s Graduate Institute of Taiwanese Literature, described Hsieh as “a broken soul, born in a broken age. What she eventually left to posterity was just a broken history.”

Hsieh was by no means the only one to have met such a fate.

The same could also be said of the victims of the 1950s White Terror.

I have taken part in filming the story of White Terror victim Lin Yuan-chih (林元智).

In the course of field research for the film, I discovered that most of those involved, including Lin’s relatives, the descendants of other victims in the same case, elderly people from the same village who knew him and even farmers who helped hide him when they were children, were not very clear about Lin or what happened to him.

They did not know why he was on the top of the list of fugitive “traitors and bandits.” They did not know how he joined the Communist Party, how he went on the run or why he was imprisoned for 19 years although he was never sentenced by a court.

They only knew that he ran away because of the 228 Incident.

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The other details gradually faded away during the 38 years of repression under Martial Law.

It was a tragedy of those times, and what remains of it is a broken history.

Many years have passed since martial law ended in 1987. Surviving victims have received compensation, but that period in history is still shrouded in mystery.

Neither the general public nor the families of victims are clear about what happened. It may well be that many files have been opened so that they can be read at any time.

There are indeed reams of academic research waiting to be read.

Memorial museums have been established in various places and they present a wealth of visual information — all you need to do is walk in.

However, how many people, in the midst of their busy lives, are likely to visit the National Archives and read the files kept there?

How many people would have the patience to read academic theses in detail?

Although memorial museums have photographic and film materials that bring the history to life, they usually have few visitors. In such a social atmosphere, although many historical truths have been made public, how many people really know about them?

If the truth stays enclosed in archives or research reports, it will never be spread among the general public or blend into the history of this land.

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If we want to repair that broken history in the memories of Taiwanese, the government should popularize it through avenues such as news reports, television dramas, films and education, so that the public would get to know more about the stories of victims of repression.

Only when Taiwanese are no longer ignorant about the history of the White Terror would most of them accept the legitimacy of the Transitional Justice Commission, and only when the majority of people have arrived at a consensus would the proposal for a lustration law, such as those enacted in former communist nations, be able to move ahead.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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