

Who is Worse, the Thief or the Fence?

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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The word fence has different meanings. As a noun, it can denote a barrier or divider. Robert Frost has the well known line, "Good fences make good neighbors," in his poem "Mending Wall." In a different realm, the verb "to fence" describes a sport of swordsmanship where opponents use blunted foils, epees or sabers to register hits on each other. But there is third totally different meaning. The noun fence also can describe a person who receives and sells stolen goods or who acts as a conduit for stolen goods; this is the meaning that Taiwanese need to become aware of because it concerns their President.

In the world of crime, thieves often steal things not for their personal use but for the profit from the resale value of the goods. An art thief will steal famous works of art not because he has a taste for art, but because he knows private collectors will secretly pay good money for such works. Diamond thieves steal diamonds and jewelry not because they have a flair for wearing jewelry but again because these items have a high resale value. Even petty thieves who want quick cash will steal lesser items if the items are in high enough demand to have quick resale value. To accomplish and profit from their thievery, the thieves need a fence.

In all such transactions, the fence makes a handsome commission off of the sale price of the stolen goods; the thief while not getting the market value of the stolen goods still makes a sizeable profit. The buyer profits because he gets the stolen item for less than the normal street value. The only one who loses is the person whose property is stolen. This poses an interesting ethical question, whose crime is worse, that of the thief, that of the fence, or even that of the buyer if he knows he is buying stolen goods?

What has this to do with Taiwan? A lot! When the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) came to Taiwan they took over not only the national assets but even private property of individuals. These are what are often referred to in matters of transitional justice as the "stolen state assets" though the personal assets of some families should also be included in those crimes. With the KMT as an authoritarian one party state, some of these assets went directly to KMT party members and families and others benefited the party as a whole. How many homes did Chiang Kai-shek possess? What KMT families got possession of ready made businesses? With KMT control of the National Assembly, the Legislative Yuan and the courts for nearly a half a century, the paper trail of such thievery has already easily been destroyed and/or buried. Further under martial law, anyone who had challenged such theft would end up dead, in prison, or at a minimum, helpless with no recourse. The KMT as a result became and remains one of the richest political parties in the world.

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Transitional justice has never been served in Taiwan. Yet there is more. Surprisingly some assets are still in the hands of the KMT. This is where Ma Ying-jeou the current president of Taiwan and chairman of the KMT party comes in. Ma is professing that in the name of cleaning up the party's image, he is going to divest the party of these assets and sell them off. All well and good, except for one catch, the KMT is going to keep the money from the sale and use it to pay for pensions of party members and other debts. This again is the doublespeak of Ma Ying-jeou.

Can Taiwanese not see that the remainders of their stolen goods are simply being fenced? Transitional justice has still not been served, yet Ma hopes to finally bury the whole matter of stolen assets with this action. Are Taiwanese blind? Ma has already earned a variety of nicknames among the people including Ma the Poseur, Ma the Fawner, and Ma the Incompetent. But now, Ma is working on yet another name, Ma the Fence. When will it end?

Source: [Jerome F. Keating's writings](#)