

In Taiwan, with spring came death, not rebirth

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏勇

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March is the month of spring, a joyful season welcomed by all. However, in March 1947, Wu Hsin-jung (吳新仲), an intellectual and a physician, wrote a tragic poem of destroyed dreams amid Tainan's salt fields: Who would have thought that a flood would arrive in March?

At a time like this, we should discuss history.

The 228 Incident in fact occurred on Feb. 27, 1947, but it was only on the next day, on Feb. 28, that it began to spread like wildfire. The Taiwanese, who at first welcomed the arrival of Chinese, but had then been forced to wake up from that dream, protested in anger throughout Taiwan — from north to south, from east to west.

At the time, Taiwan's chief executive and garrison commander Chen Yi (陳儀) pretended to play along with the intellectuals who, still hoping for democracy and a high level of autonomy for the nation, tried to mediate and reconcile the parties as the protests were going on. In the end, the intellectuals were also slaughtered. In March, under the pretext that rebellion had broken out in Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) sent support troops from China. In their bloody suppression of protests, they paved the way for the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) flight to Taiwan after being defeated by the communists in China.

Wu described the suppression by the Chinese nationalist army as a flood, an occurrence that left him with three sorrowful questions: "When will we be able to rebuild our homeland? When will our people be able to stand up again? When will this society be reborn?"

It is easy to see that Taiwanese intellectuals, who had harbored hopes with respect to China, were deeply disappointed.

The slaughter that began with the 228 Incident can be seen as a deliberate elimination of the Taiwanese elite that had developed during the Japanese colonial era and remained in Taiwan. The chilling White Terror during the 1950s was directed at eliminating reds, leftists and communist sympathizers. Among these, a large part was made up of Chinese intellectuals who had followed the KMT into exile, although the greatest part was made up of Taiwanese.

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The KMT was drenched in blood. It had carved an indelible mark on the altar of history to consolidate its rule. Although the 228 Incident is remembered and compensation has been paid, and although compensation has been paid for the White Terror, that was all done by a Taiwanese president or, in other words, by one member of the victim group to other victims. After President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) restored the KMT regime to power, this remembrance and compensation became an ironic part of history.

Sixty-seven years ago, in March 1947, the KMT was preparing to suppress and purge Taiwan of protesters. The reason the Taiwanese bowed down instead of standing up in defiance was a political ailment: a collective sense of frustration.

Spring was arriving, but it was not a spring of life and joy, it was a spring of death and tragedy. It was in March that the spirit of Taiwan was drowned in the deluge.

Lee Min-yung is a poet.

Translated by Perry Svensson

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