

Taiwan and the spiritual exiles of Kenneth Pai

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏勇

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After World War II, Taiwan made the transition from the Japanese to the Chinese era and the China of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT).

After 1949, the KMT's China existed only in Taiwan, while the five-starred red flag flew over the territory that was the foundation of its Constitution. In 1971, the nation lost the right to represent China in the UN.

The reason that the KMT of China became part of Taiwan and that Chinese culture became a part of Taiwanese culture was that colonizers are transitory; like the wind, they come and they go.

Japanese culture was absorbed into Taiwanese culture because it remained here when the Japanese left. The same thing will happen to Chinese culture.

Not all Chinese in Taiwan were members of the KMT and not every member of the KMT was high up in the party's chain of command. Some Chinese became Taiwanese, and some Taiwanese became KMT members and even became part of the KMT hierarchy.

In an era when literature was used as a tool to disseminate government policy and ideals, there was some literature that did not fit the mold of the literary establishment that entered Taiwan from China after the war.

Author Kenneth Pai's (裴 敬之) father, former minister of national defense Pai Chung-hsi (裴 鍾和) was a member of the Guangxi Faction, which was not very much liked by Chiang Kai-shek (蔣 介石).

In Taiwan, he was lonely and marginalized by the regime. This was also the reason why he never had to shoulder any of the political responsibility for the imposition of martial law and the authoritarian era.

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His misfortune turned out to be a benefit, because without it, the world might never have had the chance to appreciate Kenneth Pai's literature. The book *Healing the Pain: General Pai Chung-hsi and the 228 Incident* (二二八事件與白雲飛渡) by Kenneth Pai and historian Liao Yen-po (廖彥波) contains deep historical insights.

The younger Pai's collection of short stories *Taipei People* (台北人) describes the sentiments felt, and the loneliness of the families of government officials after the KMT was routed and fled to Taiwan in 1949.

Another collection, *The New Yorker*, describes his experiences living in a foreign land, as he stayed in the US after his studies.

These collections portray the atmosphere among young Taiwanese after the war — including those who entered Taiwan after 1949 — who sought to study at National Taiwan University and then go to the US.

The characters and situations portrayed in his books cover both the US and Taiwan, and recently a play based on his novel *Crystal Boys* (晶男) toured Taiwan.

Loneliness and feeling unwanted are key themes in the writer's novels, and while socialists and moralists may be critical, the work of Kenneth Pai has become popular in Taiwan and China — just as Eileen Chang's (張愛玲) works have become popular in both nations — because they are situated on the fringe of politics and portray spiritual exile.

These kinds of novels contain more truth than history books that are manipulated by the KMT.

They prove that poetry speaks more truth than historical fact. This kind of literature will continue to exist even after the KMT has turned Taiwanese history on its head.

Taiwanese must know about this politically marginalized literature and poetry if they are going

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to be able to see the faces and hear the voices of those who live their lives in the darker corners of society.

Lee Min-yung is a poet.

Translated by Perry Svensson

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