

Understanding the lessons of 228

Written by Hsueh Hua-yuan 許雪華

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The 228 Incident, which took place in 1947, is a major human rights event in Taiwanese history. The administration of the time lacked any legal grounds for ordering the massacre that caused tremendous suffering and death to the elite and ordinary people.

However, it was not until 1987 — when democracy and human rights activist Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄) and Saint Mary's Hospital Luodong superintendent Chen Yung-hsing (陳永興) founded the association for 228 Peace Memorial Day and challenged the taboo surrounding the Incident — that then-president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) began to officially address this matter.

Since 1995, all presidents have made a formal apology for the event, including Lee himself, and victims and their families have received compensation. Nonetheless, the 228 Incident is a wound that has yet to heal.

Considerable disagreement over the responsibilities and the truth of the Incident remains. Steven Chen (陳冠中), who was appointed the chairman of the 228 Memorial Foundation last year by President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration, said that he could not concur with Ma, who, since becoming chairman of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in 2006, has characterized the 228 Incident as a civil rebellion induced by discontent with the government.

The past should be forgiven, but not forgotten. Only after the truth is clarified and the responsibilities ascertained can wounds be healed and lessons learned to avoid similar events from happening again. However, many of the facts of the 228 Incident remain unclear. If this is the case, how can anyone possibly learn any lessons?

As a consequence, the legacy of the 228 Incident cannot be turned into a positive unifying force for all Taiwanese. Instead, its shadow remains a negative force and an ongoing source of ethnic tensions.

For a long time, the 228 Incident has been regarded in Taiwan as a conflict between the waishengren (外省人) — people who fled from China with the KMT after 1949 — and the benshengren (本省人) — everyone else. Some have said that the 228 Incident is the waishengren's original sin, and so to commemorate it would have a negative effect on the

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relationship between different ethnic groups in Taiwan.

The problem is, the so-called waishengren today are not the same waishengren who governed Taiwan during the 228 Incident. Most of the waishengren were either not born, or had not come to Taiwan when the massacre took place. Most of the ancestors of the waishengren did not even have anything to do with the tragedy. Hence, clarifying the truth and ascertaining responsibility will help Taiwan free itself from unnecessary conflict between different ethnic groups and forge a sense of historical unity.

In light of this understanding, it can be seen that in 1947 the Republic of China (ROC) was under the political tutelage of the KMT, which controlled the government, and the person holding the greatest power in the nation was former president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石). Subsequent presidents have apologized, and the government has also used taxpayers' money for compensation, but the responsibilities of the KMT and Chiang remain unresolved.

In one sense, clarifying the basic responsibilities of the Incident can discharge the waishengren from the original sin once and for all, which will provide the necessary foundation for coexistence among different ethnic groups.

In addition, from the perspective of social structure, the cause of the 228 Incident has to do with a clash of cultures as a result of the significant gap that existed between Taiwan and China during that period. Moreover, to bolster its governance, the foreign regime used national power to oppress the original value system in society and subjugate its elite, thereby establishing the cultural hegemony that supported its rule. Those are the main causes of the tragedy.

Based on this understanding, in order to learn the lessons of the 228 Incident and prevent similar events from happening again, Taiwanese should sustain and strengthen the hard-earned constitutional democracy, reject foreign cultural values that run counter to universal human rights and eliminate any possibility of letting the nation fall into the hands of foreign authoritarian regimes again.

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