

Historical documents should be made public

Written by James Wang 王健
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Outsiders do not know whether documents related to the 228 Massacre that Academia Sinica said it purchased five or six years ago contain any information about one of the victims — Lin Mo-sei (林墨賽), former dean of the College of Liberal Arts at National Taiwan University and once the highest-educated person in Taiwan.

If any such information is available, but has not been made public, it would be a cause of irredeemable regret for Lin's descendants, given that his second son, Lin Tsung-yi (林宗義), a psychiatrist and former director of mental health at the WHO, and his youngest son, Lin Tsung-kuang (林宗光), a professor of history, both died in the past five years.

“Mr Hu” (胡), the man who “half sold, half gave” the documents to Academia Sinica, said he is unhappy about the way in which the academy's Institute of Modern History has been “taking its time” researching the documents and its failure to honor its promise of making them public. Hu has many reasons to be unhappy given the public's desire for transitional justice and the eagerness of victims' relatives to find out the truth.

The documents need to be sorted and investigated, but the research work should not be restricted to a single institution or specific academics. Tens of thousands of innocent people were massacred in the 228 Incident. While members of the generation who experienced those events firsthand, and sons and daughters of victims are still alive, the most urgent task is to make the documents public, rather than poring over them at a snail's pace.

Publishing the documents related to this tragedy could be done at the same time as research, without conflict between the two. Making the documents public would also encourage academics who are interested in them to investigate them further.

Thanks to modern techniques of photocopying, scanning and digitizing, it is not difficult to preserve original documents, while also providing copies for outsiders to read. When the US government declassifies documents, they are all copied and handed over to the National Archives and Records Administration, which makes them accessible to the public. Hundreds of researchers visit the archives every day to read documents.

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The rediscovery of some documents related to the 228 Massacre and the White Terror era could help clarify some of the facts related to the then-Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime's violent rule and its scant regard for human rights.

The military police have recently been caught “unlawfully” searching someone's property for lost documents. This act, and the motives behind it, are incompatible with a democratic system. Any further documents that come to light as a result of this incident should be made public as soon as possible.

When people call for transitional justice, it means they want to know the truth and where responsibility lies. Making documents accessible is the most important step in seeking the truth. The documents that Academia Sinica purchased should all be copied and made public. It is not acceptable for the truth to go on being kept under wraps in the name of research.

James Wang is a media commentator.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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