

The ugly side of human nature

Written by Chang Hsun-ching 陳昌興
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Twenty-three years ago, naval conscript Huang Kuo-chang (黃國昌) died under dubious circumstances. Now, a film director with a heart of gold has sold his ancestral home to raise money to produce a human rights film together with Huang's mother, Chen Pi-e (陳皮娥), and they even got the commander of the Republic of China Navy, Admiral Huang Shu-kuang (黃淑光), to issue a public apology to her.

The apology came too late, and was passive, but it might have brought some solace to Chen.

The real problem is that the culprit still does not understand why there are so many accomplices that silently allow so many deaths to occur.

Huang Kuo-chang wrote to his mother before setting out to sea that someone wished him ill. If someone wants to commit murder on a ship, especially in such a strongly hierarchical organization where people follow orders without question, then, even if no one was outright part of the plan to kill him or lent a helping hand, they must at least know what was going on.

Furthermore, an officer would not lightly dismiss a family by simply saying that their son fell overboard and drowned.

This raises a question: Why do people who witness a killing or a violent act, or know that such a thing will happen, stick their head in the sand to protect themselves?

This is perhaps a selfish and egoistic calculation they make out of fear of the collective power of a social organization — a fear of being isolated and ostracized by the group.

However, if it is a matter of life or death, and if people still behave that way, then the apology presented to Chen by the navy commander is meaningless.

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From the murder of National Taiwan University professor Hsu Shou-shang (許壽裳) in 1948 to violent organized crime, bullying in the workplace, and the #MeToo movement in the US and Europe today, the darker side of humanity and self-preservation have always played a large part.

This is what leads to murder, sexual harassment of women and the exploitation of migrant workers in Taiwan.

From the deaths of Huang Kuo-chang and army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘) to horrible and ugly violence, those who stand by silently are cold-blooded, but the question is: What would you do if you found yourself in the same situation? This is the true test of how civilized a society is and how highly it values human rights.

“Collective evil” is not necessarily a matter of agreeing to violent behavior. Rather it is a matter of knowing what is right, but still choosing what is best for oneself — the darker, weaker side of human nature, and a way to fawn on evil forces or the privileged.

In the end it perpetuates the existence of this kind of evil and villainy by using human weakness to control the vast majority of people who are fearful hypocrites.

If things such as the death of Huang continue to occur today, decades later, people will be ashamed of their ugliness.

Chang Hsun-ching is a writer.

Translated by Perry Svensson

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