

Remember those who fought for Taiwan

Written by Ho Lai-mei

Monday, 16 September 2019 04:35

It came as a shock to hear that former legislator Hsieh Tsung-min (許雪姬), who in 1964 co-drafted the “Declaration of Formosan Self-Salvation” with his professor Peng Ming-min (彭明敏) and classmate Wei Ting-chao (魏廷朝), has passed away.

I interviewed him in early 2017 when compiling material for Wei’s memoir. Severely tortured in prison at a young age, Hsieh in later years suffered from kidney disease. Despite his suffering, he remained optimistic and went swimming every morning.

A classmate of former Judicial Yuan president Shih Chi-yang (史希元) and writer Li Ao (李敖) at Taichung First Senior High School, Hsieh was admitted to National Taiwan University’s College of Law with the school’s highest score.

The declaration was drafted by Hsieh and further revised by Wei due to its length. The draft was then finalized by Peng, but all of them were arrested and jailed before the declaration was distributed. Peng received a special pardon from then-president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), while Hsieh and Wei were granted sentence commutation.

In early 1970, Peng escaped and went into exile in Sweden, much to the chagrin of intelligence agents. Hsieh, Wei and Li were then placed under surveillance around the clock before being arrested and once again imprisoned for two explosions in which they were not actually involved.

In a bid to let the truth be known to the public in Taiwan and overseas, Hsieh secretly wrote a letter in English on prison toilet paper calling for help and asked inmate Masashige Kobayashi to bring the letter out of Taiwan when he was released.

Peng, who had moved to the US at that time, was worried that the letter’s publication would lead to severe torture of Hsieh and conveyed his concerns through contacts, but Hsieh remained undeterred.

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Finally, the letter, titled “From a Taiwan Prison,” was published by the New York Times on April 24, 1972, and the US House of Representatives sent a team to investigate human rights in Taiwan.

Hsieh later said that “fortunately the New York Times’ publication of the letter shocked the nation and the world, otherwise they wouldn’t even know how we died.” After the letter’s publication, Hsieh’s situation drew the attention of the US Congress and international human rights groups, but he was nonetheless severely tortured.

After a failed escape attempt, Hsieh had to wear ankle shackles and nearly died of gallstones. Luckily, his condition was diagnosed by late Academia Sinica academician Sung Juei-low (孫國治), and Hsieh was released on medical parole.

Prior to the Formosa Incident, Hsieh arrived in the US, where he was informed by US intelligence that the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) was about to arrest dangwai (黨外, “outside the party”) dissidents. Hsieh advised Wei to resign from Formosa Magazine, but Wei, lacking a sense of danger, was arrested and sent to jail for the third time.

When Hsieh returned to Taiwan in 1988 hoping to run for a legislative seat, he said that “when I was drafting the declaration, the new political elite of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) did not even exist.” Ostracized by certain DPP members, Hsieh acquired qualification as a candidate thanks to the help of Shih, a KMT member.

Wei, Shih, Hsieh, late DPP politician Chai Trong-rong (蔡東榮), late legal scholar Chiu Hung-dah (邱洪達) and late minister of justice Hsiao Tien-tzang (蕭天章) all graduated from NTU in 1958. These elites crossed party lines and all had a profound influence on the modern history of Taiwan and cross-strait relations. With their passing, an era ends.

Ho Lai-mei is a writer of culture and history.

Translated by Chang Ho-ming

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