

Taiwanese should know their history

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Su Beng (蘇炳), who died on Friday, lived a very long life. His 100 years encompassed a fascinating journey that personifies the sorrow of Taiwan, its people being oppressed in one way or another, but through it all, he never stopped fighting, and whether or not one agrees with his independence ideals, he gave his all for his beloved homeland.

Born when Taiwan was a Japanese colony, Su's fight began in China when he worked as a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agent in Shanghai in the early 1940s during the Second Sino-Japanese War after graduating from Japan's Waseda University. He believed that fighting against the Japanese on the front lines was the best way to rid Taiwan of colonialism.

Su soon became disillusioned with the CCP's brutality — including its treatment of Taiwanese prisoners who had fought for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) — writing in his memoir, “the Communists never saw Taiwanese as one of their own.”

As China fell to the CCP, Su returned home to find that the KMT was no better.

Ironically, he was forced to seek refuge with his former colonial masters in Tokyo after his 1952 plan to assassinate Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) was leaked, remaining there until 1993. The KMT's authoritarian rule had ended by then and Taiwan was on its way to full democracy — but even more ironically, the biggest threat to Taiwanese sovereignty had become the CCP, the very organization Su joined as a young man in the hopes of liberating his homeland.

All of this sounds very convoluted without a clear understanding of Taiwanese history, which is just as colorful and turbulent as Su's life, but authorities — be they Japanese or the KMT — had denied Taiwanese the right to understand in a bid to suppress Taiwanese culture and identity.

Su knew the importance of knowing one's history. “Su Beng” was not his birth name; it means “historically clear” in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), and he wrote *Taiwan's 400-Year History* (台灣四百年史), published in 1962, to this end.

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The real tragedy is that even today, many Taiwanese remain ignorant of their nation's history. Taiwan is far removed from the Martial Law era, where one could be jailed just for reading Su's book.

However, despite the efforts of the government, academics and cultural groups to reverse decades of brainwashing and censorship, it is still far too common to hear someone say, "I don't know anything about Taiwan's history" in a tone that suggests that they are simply not interested.

Yes, history is not everyone's favorite subject and can be dry and boring at times, but it can be fun too, as there has been a surge in computer games, movies, dramas and other entertainment formats that are heavily based on Taiwanese history.

To simply declare indifference is to deny the efforts of activists such as Su, who dedicated their entire lives so that Taiwanese can enjoy the freedom they have today.

This freedom includes the right to something as basic as finding out about what took place on this very land they live on.

Whatever one's political ideology is, if someone makes Taiwan their home, they should at least make an effort to learn more about the events and forces that drove Su to live the life he did. There will always be differing opinions in a free society, but ignorance is not an excuse.

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