

TAIWAN: SEVENTY YEARS ON — A DIFFICULT ANNIVERSARY

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ON 28 FEBRUARY 1947, in Taiwan's capital Taipei, two customs guards accosted a widowed woman, Lin Jiang-mai, selling unlicensed cigarettes at the Tianma Teahouse on present-day Nanjing Road. In the ensuing confrontation, one of the guards struck the woman; an angry crowd gathered, and one of the guards fired his pistol and killed a bystander. This set off a riot, and then an island-wide uprising by the Taiwanese people against the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) government on Taiwan.

Japan had claimed Taiwan as a colonial territory from 1895, after it defeated China in a war near the end of the Qing imperial period. It ruled Taiwan for fifty years, until its surrender at the end of WWII in 1945. Under the Japanese, Taiwan experienced

both modernisation and colonial oppression. Resistance to Japanese rule took the form of violent uprisings in 1915 and 1930, but also civic activism. Among many actions, leading Taiwanese petitioned the Japanese Diet every year from 1920 to 1934 to establish a Taiwanese legislative assembly, until Tokyo's turn to hard right-wing militarism made such activism impossible in its colonial territories.

Meanwhile, in 1911 in mainland China, the Qing dynasty fell, and the Chinese Nationalists under Dr Sun Yat-sen founded the Republic of China. From the late 1920s, China descended into chaos, with warlords dividing the country into virtual fiefdoms, the horror of Japanese military invasion and occupation of the north-east, and in the second half of the 1940s the out-



National 228 Memorial Museum, Taipei
Photo: Mark Harrison

break of full-scale civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists.

Upon Japan's defeat at the end of WWII, control of Taiwan passed to the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石. It became a province of the Republic of China, and Chiang, who was preoccupied with the Communist threat, dispatched one of his generals to Taiwan to run it as governor-general. Initially welcomed, the Nationalist administration quickly proved itself to be incompetent and corrupt. Amid the roiling social and political tension between the main-

land Chinese and the Japanese-educated Taiwanese, the beating of Lin Jiang-mai was the flashpoint for the eruption of violence.

The provincial government feigned sincerity in negotiations with Taiwanese community leaders while secretly organising for military reinforcements from the mainland. Upon their arrival on 8 March, the military began killing civilians both systematically and indiscriminately across the island. Estimates are that 30,000 people died, while tens of thousands more were imprisoned or fled to Japan or Hong Kong. Exiled Taiwanese established a fractious nationalist movement dedicated to the creation of an independent Republic of Taiwan, free from both Japan and China.

The February 28 Uprising, known as 2-28 二二八 in Chinese, was widely reported internationally. Political leaders and government officials in the US and other Western countries subjected Chinese Nationalists to great opprobrium for their actions. The British-American journalist Felix Greene (cousin of the author Graham Greene), who became a long-standing supporter of Mao's China, later claimed that 2-28 led to the split between Chiang Kai-shek and his US supporters. In any

case, eighteen months later, with the Communists closing in, the Nationalist government of the Republic of China fled the mainland and relocated to Taipei, along with more than one million Nationalist refugees and military personnel.

In what the Taiwanese call the White Terror under the Nationalist military dictatorship, the government set about erasing 2-28 from Taiwan's collective memory. They forbid any mention of the event in writing or in public life generally. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, and Taiwan's alliance with the US reaffirmed in opposition to communism, the rest of the world soon forgot about 2-28.

The Taiwanese, however, did not. During Taiwan's political liberalisation in the 1970s and 1980s, which led to democratic reforms, people began warily to discuss 2-28 in public forums. On the fortieth anniversary in 1987, a handful of newspaper articles broached the subject. Then, in July that year, the government ended thirty-eight years of martial law, and with the taboo on discussion lifted, a vast outpouring of vitriolic debate and cultural expression around 2-28 erupted. On 28 February 1988, the major newspapers devoted pages upon pages to the upris-

ing. In 1989, Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢 released his monumental film *A City of Sadness* 悲情城市 — the first ever to address 2-28 in cinema.

On the fiftieth anniversary, in 1997, 28 February was declared a national day of remembrance, and a memorial was consecrated in central Taipei. A plaque bearing an anodyne description of the event was vandalised within hours — a sign of the contestation over the meaning of 2-28 in Taiwan and enduring bitterness and anger that many Taiwanese continued to feel.



Still from *A City of Sadness*
Photo: 3H Productions Ltd

Since the late 1990s, governments have held commissions of investigation and paid compensation to victims and their families. Yet despite this progress, questions of justice and memory have become dominant concerns of Taiwan's political and cultural life. In a sense, 2-28 had come to stand in for all the injustices, social and political harm, and enforced silences of the whole of the authoritarian martial law period from 1947 to 1987. The history of political violence on the island has compelled a greater reckoning than that realised in 1997, spreading beyond the island of Taiwan itself. Taiwanese-American author Shawna Yang Ryan's 2016 novel *Green Island* is one example, addressing 2-28 and its long aftermath in Taiwan and the US.

The policies and politics of transitional justice, addressing the legacy of authoritarianism after Taiwan's transition to democracy, have been central themes for the Democratic Progressive Party government of President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文. The year 2017 was both the seventieth anniversary of 2-28 and the thirtieth anniversary of the lifting of martial law, and on February 28 Tsai led the remembrance with a speech at the 2-28 memorial in Taipei — one of numerous events held across

the island. Protesters calling for Taiwanese independence massed across the road from the memorial park at the much larger Chiang Kai-shek memorial and statues of Chiang were vandalised at Fu Jen University 輔仁大學.

In a tacit acknowledgement of the importance of 2-28 in Taiwan in 2017, the events of seventy years ago were also commemorated in the mainland. On 23 February, Lin Wenyi 林文漪, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, chaired a symposium on 2-28 in Beijing. Lin is also a member of the Central Committee of the Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League, a political party established in Hong Kong in 1947 and one of the eight official United Front parties in China.

An Fengshan 安峰山, spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, made a statement calling 2-28 'part of the Chinese people's struggle for liberation', and followed up by saying 'For a long time, this incident has been used by certain Taiwan independence forces for ulterior motives'. An Fengshan accused Taiwan independence 'secessionists' of twisting the facts and labelled them 'despicable'.¹ Among a large number of articles, Xinhua news agency published a

piece entitled 'It is time to clarify the historical truth of 2-28', which stated that 2-28 was a conflict between provinces, and that historical archives and witness statements show any attempts to link the incident and 'ideas advocating "Taiwan independence" are false and absurd'.²

The Taiwanese are endeavouring to understand their history, and negotiate a series of fraught transitions with regard to 2-28: from private memories to public knowledge; from authoritarian state secrets to official acknowledgement; from the politico-judicial realm to sociocultural questions of cultural representation and social memory. Beijing's attempt to 'rectify' Taiwan's political account of the history of 2-28 in 2017 intervened in a decades-long process. It could only ever present to the Taiwanese as belligerent and antagonistic, an unwelcome interference in the complex terrain of politics and sociocultural life in Taiwan in which 2-28 is at the very centre.

If, in February, Beijing attempted to appropriate the event that defines

the history of modern Taiwan for the Taiwanese, in October, its rhetoric was more pragmatic. In a meeting of Fujian delegates to the Nineteenth Party Congress, led by Fujian Party Secretary and incoming head of the United Front Work Department, You Quan 尤权, Party delegates called for youth exchanges between Taiwan and Fujian; job creation through economic links, internships and apprenticeships; cross-Strait cultural festivals, and other activities.

Beijing's Taiwan policy can be understood as either multidimensional and multilayered, deploying pragmatic strategies within broad but sharply-defined ideological boundaries, or simply be contradictory and inconsistent. The Taiwanese, meanwhile, continue the difficult but constructive process of confronting their history and creating their modern identity. Beijing has yet to find a way to speak meaningfully to that task. For the Taiwanese in 2017, the political, social, and cultural gulf between Taiwan and mainland China seemed wider than ever.

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