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**A Tragic Beginning Remembered: Reflections on the Dual  
History of the February 28 Incident in Post-Martial Law  
Taiwan**

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## **I. Introduction**

This paper aims to provide a critical overview of the commemoration of the February 28 Incident of 1947 since the lifting of Taiwan's martial law in 1987. The political democratization and social movements set the tone for the rise of nativistic, if not nationalistic, Taiwan study aiming to recover the neglected experience of the people and re-interpret the periphery as center. The collective efforts towards new "Taiwan-centered" history not only achieved new academic legitimacy but evolved into an burgeoning intellectual field with its own momentum and innovations(Chang 1991, 2006). Meanwhile, the revision of history in Taiwan has become a contested enterprise of collective memory and identity politics like many post-colonial societies. The situation is further complicated by domestic and international politics of Taiwan's problematic sovereignty and national identity (Hsiao 2000, Wang 2002).

Viewing the 228 history as important part of new Taiwan-centered historiography, the author looks at the dual history of the historical event in contemporary academic scholarship and public discourse in Taiwan. On the one hand, the 228 incident became a burgeoning yet contentious subject among historians of modern Taiwan, who not only endeavored to reconstruct the facts but debated over its meanings. On the other hand, the tragic event has inspired numerous oral histories, literary works and public exhibitions throughout the island. I first introduce representative works in Chinese, Japanese, and English scholarship on the 228 Incident and compare the changing approaches and interpretations in terms of different ideological

positions and historiographical traditions. I then analyze the politics of representation in local and public histories, political novels and history exhibitions of the 228 Incident. The conclusion further reflects on the 228 cultural phenomenon and its social and political implications from a comparative perspective of East Asian history.

## **II. A Tragic Beginning: the 228 Incident in History**

On the evening of February 27, 1947, agents from the Alcohol and Tobacco Monopoly Bureau in Taipei went to a neighborhood to confiscate contraband cigarettes from a woman named Lin Jiang-mai. One of the agents beat Lin on the head with a pistol, prompting the surrounding angry crowd to chase the agents. As the agents ran away, they fired their guns indiscriminately into the crowd, killing one person named Chen Wen-xi. The crowd protested to the police with no avail.

On the morning of February 28, the angry crowd held another protest at the Monopoly Bureau Headquarters and later moved to present a petition to governor Chen Yi. The crowd was met with machine-gun fire from the soldiers at the governor's office. The protest soon turned into a riot and people took up the Taiwan Broadcasting Company Station (present-day Taipei 2-28 memorial museum). As the news in Taipei spread across the island, people carried out attacks on police and military bodies in major cities and towns in Taiwan.

Meanwhile, local Taiwanese elites in Taipei organized the "February 28 Incident Settlement Committee" and negotiated with Governor Chen Yi to resolve the crisis. They went on to bring up demands for political reform.

Despite his promise of reform and peaceful resolution, Chen Yi secretly asked the Nationalist(KMT) government in Nanjing for military reinforcement. On March 9, the troops dispatched by Chiang Kai-shek arrived in Taiwan. Military suppression and large-scale slaughter of civilians and young students continued until March 16. Many more lives were sacrificed in the island-wide "country sweeping" campaign between March and May of 1947. The death toll was estimated between 10,000 to 20,000 people.

With the promulgation of martial law on May 20, 1949 and the KMT anti-communist purge of "white terror" in the 1950s, the history of 228 was turned into political taboo and suppressed memory for generations of Taiwanese. For the next four decades, the 228 has become one of the key symbols in overseas Taiwan independence movement as opposed to orthodox Chinese nationalist and communist interpretations. The tragic meaning of the 228 was further deepened by the brutal political murder of Taiwanese politician Lin Yi-hsiung's mother and twin daughters on February 28 1980. It was not until the 1980s that this "tragic beginning" of post-colonial Taiwan began to recover its historical voice and transform the political and cultural landscape on the island.

### **III. Through a Glass Darkly: the 228 Incident as History**

The 228 Incident is one of the most significant events in modern Taiwan history. The bloody massacres happened only sixteen months when many Taiwanese celebrated the "retrocession" of the island and welcome the Chinese officials and armies from the "motherland" in October, 1945. In addition to the corrupt bureaucracy, economic hardship, and deteriorating

public security during the Chinese takeover, important factors such as the ambivalent legacy of fifty-one-year Japanese colonial rule and the tumultuous context of Chinese civil war, and renewed U.S. support of Chiang Kai-shek the R.O.C. government following the outbreak of the Korean War all add to the difficulty in the analysis of the event.

Unlike other subjects in Taiwan history, the study of the 228 incident is closely related to the political situations in post-war Taiwan. From a political taboo in the martial law period, to a symbol of Taiwanese opposition during the democratization movement, to an icon of Taiwanese nationalism against Chinese aggression and to the focus of controversy of contemporary partisan politics, the changing interpretations reflect not only different ideological positions of historians but also the domestic and international contexts of Taiwan's political development(Corcuff 2002, Fleischauer 2006).

In addition to political sensitivity of the subject, the academic challenges of the 228 history involves important issues such as the accessibility of key official archives, the accountability of witness accounts and personal memoirs, the accumulation of oral history and field interviews, and the methodological and theoretical practices of historical interpretation. Using the lifting of martial law on July 15, 1987 as the watershed event of the 228 scholarship, I try to offer a preliminary synopsis of major developments and representative works as follows.

### **1. The 228 as Forbidden History**

During the martial law period, the public discussion of the 228 incident was considered seditious and may be subject to prosecution. For example, the novel by Wu Chuo-liu entitle "Wu-hua-guo(the Fig)" was banned by the KMT

government immediately when it first published in 1968. The official version of the 228 is that it was an unruly rebellion led by the communists and local mobs who were affected by Japanese colonial rule. The major sources of information came from overseas Taiwan independence advocates in Japan and the States such as publications such as Wang Yu-de, Shi Ming and George Kerr the 1960s which emphasize the corruption and brutality of KMT and the resistance and sacrifice of Taiwanese elite during the event.

## **2. Breaking the Silence of the 228 in Early 1980s**

The rediscovery and discussion of the 228 history regained momentum when historians and researchers such as Tai Kuo-hui , Yeh Yun-yun, Chen Fang-ming and Chang Fu-mei began to collect and publish related sources in early 1980s. In Taiwan, Lee Hsiao-feng wrote the first M.A. thesis on the history of 228 and continued to explore the tragic fates of Taiwanese elites during the incident.

The collective efforts in the U.S. resulted in two pioneering conferences on the eve of the forty anniversary of the incident in 1987. The titles and prefaces of the collections reflect the different identity and ideological positions among historians. For example, in Chen Fang-ming(1988) was subtitled “historical retrospective on the Taiwanese national mourning incident” while Yeh Yun-yun’s *Testimonies on 228* (1990) was published by pro-unification writer Chen Ying-chen in Taiwan.

## **3. The Taking Off of the 228 Research since 1987**

The longstanding political taboo of the 228 history in post-war Taiwan was finally broke in 1987 by an island-wide 228 Peace Movement led by

opposition intellectuals Chen Yong-hsing and Cheng Nan-rong. The movement was supported by non-governmental organizations such as the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan and members of newly founded opposition party Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In 1991, a ground-breaking conference on the 228 incident was held in Taipei with the participation of local and overseas Taiwanese scholars (Chen Yung-hsing, 1991).

In the midst of post-martial law boom of 228 reports, recollections, oral histories, biographies and commentaries, the KMT government under the presidency of Lee Teng-hui began to open up government archives and established an official 228 research group in 1991. The group under Executive Yuan consisted of five historians: Lai Tse-han, Huang Fu-san, Hsu Hsueh-chi, Wu Wen-hsing and Huang Hsiu-cheng. They concluded their report in 1992 and offered the comprehensive overview of the background, development, responses, casualties and remedies during the event(Lai Tse-han et.al 1994). A subsequent conference on Taiwan History during the Early Post-war Period was held in Academia Sinica (Lai Tse-han, 1993)

The leftist perspective on the incident also received attention with the publication of 228 testimonies and archives. In Taiwan, oral historians such as Lan Po-chou reconstruct the histories of Taiwanese socialists who sacrificed or exiled in the event. In China, aiming to counter the influence of Taiwan independence advocates, the PRC historians also published testimonies of leftist Taiwanese in Beijing as well as related KMT documents stored at the Second Historical Archives in Nanjing.

One of the early works in the revision of the 228 history is *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947* by Lai Tse-han, Ramon Myers, Wei Wou(1991, Chinese translation 1993). Characterizing the event as



an urban uprising similar in modern Chinese history, the authors were criticized for their ambiguous attitudes towards Governor Chen Yi and the KMT. Other general works were published by historians of different ideological positions such as Li Ao(1989), Tai Kuo-hui and Yeh Yun-yun(1992) and Yang Pi-chuan(1993).

#### **4. The Flourishing of the 228 Scholarship in the 1990s**

The commemoration of the 228 was institutionalized in early 1990s. An Memorial Monument was unveiled in Taipei 228 Peace park in 1995 and President Lee Teng-hui offered a verbal apology to the victim families. The Compensation and Rehabilitation Act was passed in April followed by the establishment of the February 28 Memorial Foundation in October. In 1997, the festivities of the 228 reached its climax in the fiftieth anniversary of the event with the inauguration of Taipei 228 memorial museum and the government announced February 28 as a national holiday.

Official and popular efforts in source collection continued to flourish in the 1990s. Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica and Taiwan Historical Commission both make major contributions in the publication of volumes of 228 archives and documents. Wu San-lien Foundation sponsored the large-scale oral history project led by Chang Yen-hsien(Chang et al, 1994, 1996 ). In terms of academic research, new generation of the 228 scholars began to contribute to the field. For example, political historian Chen Tsui-lien wrote the first Ph. D dissertation on the 228 Incident who not only based on solid archival sources but adopted new interpretive schemes of factional politics in her analysis(Chen 1994). And Ho I-lin received doctoral degree from Tokyo University with his study on Taiwan's post-colonial transition and

ethnic politics in the 228 incident(Ho 2003).

The development of new 228 scholarships culminated in the 1997 international conference with a total of 23 papers. They not only touched on conventional subjects of politics and biography but looked into the international aspects of the event. Local and foreign scholars also raised new issues on the 228 history ranging from memories and psychology to comparison with Germany and the historical responsibility of Chiang Kai-shek in the event (Chang Yen-hsien et.al, 1998).

## **5. Controversy and Transformation of the 228 Study in the New Century**

The election of DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian in the presidential campaign and the regime change in 2000 signifies a new stage in the 228 study. On the one hand, the DPP government strived to appropriate the 228 as symbol of Taiwanese subjectivity in its nation-building efforts against the threat of communist PRC. On the other hand, the opposition KMT and the Taipei city government led by Mayor Ma Ying-jeou continued to resist the orthodox 228 discourse and competed for the interpretation. Important events such as the controversy surrounding the 2004 presidential election, the passing of anti Anti-cession law of PRC in 2005, and the anti-corruption/depose Chen(Shui-bian) demonstration in late 2006 all testify the divisive and volatile political landscape of contemporary Taiwan.

The empirical infrastructure of the 228 study continued under the DPP government. Taiwanese historian Chang Yen-hsien was appointed as the head of Academia Historica(Guo-shih-guan) in 2000 who initiated new publication scheme of the 228 archives. In addition, new National Archives Administration was founded in 2001 which accumulated and digitalized more

than 57,000 items of 228-related documents. Meanwhile, local memorial museums have been set up by family members and descendants of victims such as Ruan Mei-shu(Ruan Chao-ri's daughter) in Pingdong county.

In February 2006, the 228 Memorial Foundation published *Research Report on Responsibility for the 228 Massacre* written by eight historians and legal scholars led by Chang Yen-hsien. No longer satisfied with the old motifs of oppression, resistance and sufferings, the report examines the question of responsibilities of decision makers, military leaders, collaborators, media and informants during the 228 incident.

Despite the ample archival sources and scholarly reasoning, the report became the focus of political controversy with the authors' accusation of Chiang Kai-shek as the major perpetrator of the bloodshed. In contrast, new efforts of revising the 228 history were led by Chu Hung-yuan and Huang Chang-chien, both Chinese historians of Academia Sinica. They organized study group and issued reports questioning the empirical details of 1992 Executive Yuan Report. For example, Huang published his *Draft evidential research on the truth of 228 incident*(2006) claiming that Kao-hiung Garrison commander Peng Ming-chi was legitimate in his decision to attack and execute civilian leaders in 1947. Similar revisionist interpretations and moral judgments were made regarding important figures like Chiang Kai-shek and George Kerr. Despite the empirical outlook of the book, the author identified himself as a historian of the R.O.C. and took a strong anti-Taiwan independence stance in his preface.

The politicization of the 228 interpretations along ethnic and partisan lines was evident in the DPP and KMT commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the event in 2007. President Chen Shui-bian addressed the

audiences the International conference on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 228 massacre and reiterated the themes of human rights and transitional justice. The focus of discussions centered on the legal and political measures in dealing with the KMT and the 228 perpetrators with reference to cases in South Korea, Germany, Austria and Vietnam. On the KMT side, Ma Ying-jeou met with the 228 victim families and emphasized the anti-official nature of the uprising and the need for ethnic harmony. And his leading consultant Yang Tu produced a documentary of the 228 victim Lin Jian-mai in which Lin's daughter made contradictory statements about the origin of conflict.....

I would like to conclude the above discussion with some personal observations of the 228 Symposium held by the Institute of Taiwan History(ITH) in Academia Sinica. The two-day conference invited 20 papers from Taiwan, Japan, China and Europe. The topics were divided into the following six categories:

- (1) the Chinese, Japanese and English sources of the 228;
- (2) the 228 in the campus;
- (3) Ethnic aspects of the 228;
- (4) the 228 in the diaries and memoirs;
- (5) Foreign perspective of the 228;
- (6) Alternative perspective of the 228

It is noteworthy that unlike the conference with DPP celebrities and politicians, the two-day conference was attended mostly by scholars, citizens and especially young students. The tone of the discussions remained academic and was no longer dominated by the emotional voices of victim families and amateur outsiders. Generally speaking, it was an extension of the 1997 conference in terms of major research areas of the event. However, by

bringing in new topics such as the role of Taiwan aborigines and native elites in the conflict and introducing alternative perspectives such as visual representations and discursive formation, the ITH conference offers promising glimpses of the intellectual transformation of the 228 study that goes beyond partisan politics and ethnic divides of contemporary Taiwan.

#### **IV. Transforming the Pandora's Box : Reflections on the 228**

##### **Incident in Commemoration**

In 1989, the movie *City of Sadness* by Hou Hsiao-hsien received the Golden Lion Award at Venice International Film Festival. Despite the shared sense of glory on the island, Hou was criticized by some historians and critics for his inauthentic representation of post-war Taiwan and ambivalence towards the Taiwanese rioters in the 228 incident (Wu 1990, Liao 1993). A Hokka born in 1947, Hou formed the Coalition for Equal Opportunity in February 2004 and called for reconciliation and abstinence of manipulating provincialism and ethnic topics for partisan interests during the heated presidential election.

There are others of Hou's cohort who took a different approach in dealing with the 228 incident and Taiwan's ethnic problems. In 1991, poet Lee Min-yung founded the Taiwanese Gruppe 47 with historian Chang Yen-hsien, economist Chang Ching-his and DPP politician Su Tseng-chang, all born in 1947. They called for the public apology for the 228, vindication of justice, political accountability and the establishment of memorial museum by the government. Lee Min-yung edited a poem collection on the 228 and wrote a

poem entitled *Love and Hope for the 1947 Overture* (1994) by composer Hsiao Tyzen that emulates the famous *FINLANDIA* OP. 26 by Jean Sibelius.

In order to resolve the tension between the call for ethnic reconciliation and the quest for transitional justice, a non-governmental Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was founded in February 2007. The commission was led by political scientist Wu Nai-de along with progressive Taiwanese scholars such as Chang Mao-kui, Wu Rwei-ren and Huang Chang-ling. Emphasizing the importance of universal human rights and mutual recognition between different ethnic groups in Taiwan, the TRC members began to dig into the dark history of authoritarian rule and to investigate the 228 incident and other important political cases.

The collective intellectual efforts of above scholars have inspired the younger generation in their commemoration of the 228 incident. Taiwanese youths combined new media of music, internet and public forum in their commemoration of the 228. No longer satisfied with the old motifs of anger and sadness, they tried to uncover positive realm of subjectivity and cultural revival. For example, there was a global internet relay of writing about Taiwan in 2006. In 2007, a day-long international concert was organized by Taiwanese symphonic black metal band ChthoniC combining music, speeches and films to advocate the message of transitional justice.

Another alternative approach to the commemorations of the 228 by the youth generation in Taiwan is the cultural forums in 2007. Disillusioned with the banal official ceremonies and divisive political hyperboles, a group of young students initiated a series of cultural forums in March 2007. The students invited scholars, oral historians, victim families and witnesses of the 228 incident participated in the month-long island-wide activities. The topics

included related issues in history, literature, theater, music and arts. Special attentions were paid to the roles of media and female experiences in the event. Adopting the metaphors of spring and light, the forums explored the multiple meanings of the 228 and the lessons of Taiwanese subjectivity and agency in the struggle for freedom, justice and equality. This activity opens up new possibilities for a dialogical mode of the 228 history and set the example for future commemoration efforts.

## **V. Conclusion**

This paper intends to provide a reflexive overview of the historiography and commemoration of the February 28 Incident of 1947. Tracing the intellectual trajectories and political contexts since the lifting of martial law in 1987, I outline the major achievements of the 228 scholarship as well as the co-existence of competing, if not conflicting discourses in contemporary Taiwan. In addition to official policies of the KMT and DPP governments, I try to illustrate important visions and alternative approaches in the commemoration of this tragic event. I argue that despite the political nature and academic challenges, different generations of researchers have made important contributions to the 228 study. We now can recognize the multiple layers and complex dimensions of the 228 history are never artificial constructs but human products of the island's multiple colonial and ethnic experiences. New scholarly focuses on marginal groups, border regions and transnational trends are therefore especially worth noting in broadening and deepening the horizons of this burgeoning subject.

Meanwhile, the collective efforts on truth and reconciliation remind us to

remain reflexive and critical to the politics of the 228 commemoration. In order to promote compassion and communication over confrontation and conflict in Taiwan, we need to achieve new synthesis from the creative tensions between civic nationalism and empowering post-colonialism in the process of historical revision. How to reconcile the joint quest for nationalist imagination, post-colonial differences, and transitional justice through competition, negotiation and mutual enrichment remains one of the major intellectual and moral challenges for future generations of Taiwanese historians. Let me conclude this reflexive essay with E.J. Hobsbawm's thoughtful reminder in his memoir of twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 2002):

**"Anachronism and parochialism are two of the deadly sins of history."**