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How Three Photojournalists Documented the Aftermath of 38 Years of Political Turmoil in Taiwan

An exhibition looks at photographs from a period of political awakening after a troubling era known as the “White Terror” in Taiwan.

Elena Goukassian | October 11, 2017



Liu Chen-hsiang. On August 26, 1988, after the memorial service of Chen Cui-yu, the funeral committee decided to let the funeral procession go round the Office of the President to protest against the “blacklist” policy of the ruling KMT (All photos courtesy TFAM)

Long passed from one colonial power to another, the island of Taiwan was in the hands of the Japanese during the Second World War. After the armistice in 1945, it was returned to China. (The Qing Dynasty had previously ruled Taiwan for over 200 years, starting in the late 17th century.) The Republic of China (ROC) was in the midst of a civil war at that point,

between Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Kuomintang party (KMT) and Mao Zedong's communists.

Many Taiwanese saw the ROC as extremely corrupt, and on February 28, 1947, an anti-government uprising in Taiwan led to the Kuomintang-backed massacre of thousands of civilian protestors and those accused of ties to the communists and other anti-KMT activities. Taiwan's period of martial law, also known as the White Terror, would last for the next 38 years. (When Mao's Communist Party took over leadership of the mainland in 1949, millions of refugees, including Chiang and his entire government, fled to Taiwan. The KMT remains a major player in Taiwanese politics to this day.)



Exhibition view of "History's Shadows and Light" at the Taipei Cultural Center

History's Shadows and Light at the Taipei Cultural Center picks up in 1986, in the lead-up to the lifting of martial law in Taiwan on July 15, 1987. After almost four decades of the KMT's one-party authoritarian rule, with its suppression of freedom of speech and assembly and its blacklist of political dissidents, an opposition party took shape — the Democratic

Progressive Party (DPP). People began coming out to the streets in hoards to protest everything from human rights abuses to a lack of workers' rights and environmental protections. Among those in the crowds were a large number of photographers, who finally felt able to document Taiwanese society as it really was, without fear of retribution. *History's Shadows and Light* highlights the works of three of these photographers, all in their 20s at the time and born under martial law — [Liu Chen-hsiang](#), Huang Tzu-ming, and Hsu Po-hsin — as well as the video documentarian group Green Team.

The exhibition begins on the first floor, with Green Team's camcorder videos of events, including crowds calling for the first free legislative elections in 40 years (1987), a bloody clash at a gathering for peasants' rights (1988), and a protest against the Civil Associations Act, which banned organizations from advocating for independence and even using "Taiwan" in their names (1989).



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The real meat of the exhibition, the photographs, is on the second floor. Reminiscent of a photographer's studio, each of the three photographers represented has his own light table, covered with about a dozen prints of various sizes. Behind each table is a wall of backlit negatives, where you can see whole rolls of film with the photographers' markings. A sign on the wall helpfully points out that you can easily reverse the negatives by using the "invert colors" feature on your cellphone camera. Meanwhile, on the tables, QR codes link to PDF documents that include descriptions of key works in the photographers' own words.

Melding political history with a behind-the-scenes look into the artistry of the photographer, this is a truly unique exhibition. The Taipei Cultural Center's encouragement of visitors to use their smart phones in a way that actually adds to the experience — rather than just as a social media ploy — was both surprising and delightfully engaging.

Below are a few of the most powerful images from the show, accompanied by the descriptions of their photographers.



On May 20, 1988, farmers went to Taipei to protest against the government's neglect of peasants' rights, and had violent clashes with the police at the Legislative Yuan [Taiwan's legislature]. The clashes went on until early morning the next day. -Hsu Po-hsin



On March 18, 1990, the DPP held an oath-taking rally at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to “eliminate the old guards and save the country”. -Hsu Po-hsin



On May 29, 1990, Hau Pei-tsun's [Premier of the ROC, June 1990–February 1993] cabinet proposal was submitted to the Legislative Yuan for approval. The Alliance Against Military Rule surrounded the Legislative Yuan and clashed with the police. After being beaten and injured by the police, protesters wearing "Black List" masks were taken to the hospital, while a bloodstained mask was left on the barricade. -Liu Chen-hsiang



On June 1, 1995, in protest against the delay in moving the nuclear waste storage facility, the Tao tribe on Orchid Island launched an action to close off the Lung-men harbor where the nuclear waste was unloaded. Tribesmen pushed huge rocks into the sea to block the nuclear waste ship from entering the harbor. –Huang Tzu-ming

History's Shadows and Light continues at the Taipei Cultural Center, TECO-NY (1 E 42nd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through October 12.

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