

Taiwan Transcript

Henry: 解嚴以後，當然不一樣，解除了白色恐怖，你就不用擔心你會講錯話，言論自由，是不是百分之百的言論自由？還沒有到那種地步，至少大家可以開始講

Narration: I am an ABT, an American born Taiwanese, which means I have a Taiwanese heritage but was born and raised in the U.S. I grew up going to Chinese School every Saturday and visiting the temple to celebrate cultural holidays and pay respect to my ancestors. But as I've grown older, I have become more and more aware of just how little I actually know about Taiwan itself and its history.

The tipping point was a workshop, a brief overview of Taiwanese history, that I attended during my second year of college. It opened my eyes about many things like Taiwan's time under the rule of martial law before democracy was implemented. But then I realized, I have family, aunts, uncles, cousins, who have lived through all this history. They've experienced everything first hand and I could simply talk to them to learn more.

The martial law era in Taiwan lasted from 1949 to 1987. That's a total of 38 years, which makes it one of the longest periods of martial law in history. To better understand the context under which martial law was implemented, it's necessary to go a bit further back in time. Taiwan's sovereignty has flip-flopped several times in modern history. It originally was a part of the Chinese Empire before becoming a Japanese colony near the end of the 19th Century. After Japan surrendered in World War II, Taiwan was semi-officially returned to the Republic of China.

Christina: Before the Chinese government come to Taiwan, we are actually ruled by Japanese government.

Narration: That's my cousin Christina. Like me, she was born in the U.S., but, unlike me, she grew up in Taiwan.

Christina: After World War II Japan got lost so Taiwan is returning to Republic of China and the people over here were actually pretty happy about it because they are thinking about "we are going back to our own country."

But when they come over, they actually didn't treat everyone fairly. They separate people by when did you come to Taiwan. If you originally were in Taiwan, you don't have more chance and you can't a job to the government. Even though you are smart, they still will not give you the place to be in a good position. But for the people just come to Taiwan, the new Chinese government, they have more opportunity. So the people over here in Taiwan were not very happy about it because they feel like "oh I am very welcoming you to come back but you didn't treat us fairly"

Narration: The discontent with governmental corruption and inequality boiled over with the 228 Incident. The 228 Incident got its name from the date on which it occurred, February 28, 1947. A confrontation between government officials and a street vendor and local crowd resulted in the shooting death of a bystander. Angry Taiwanese residents protested the incident, then took over

the island for a week, organizing volunteers to maintain order and demanding governmental reform, including greater autonomy, free elections, the withdrawal of the army, and an end to corruption in the government.

Instead, military reinforcements were called in from China to put down the uprising. For months afterwards, the military executed civilians, at first, indiscriminately killing people in the streets. But soon they began to specifically target intellectuals, local leaders, and young students. The actual number of deaths is still unknown and highly contentious. By the end, tens of thousands of people were killed. My mom told me about a few people close to our family that didn't make it through this time.

Tracy: There's a couple of story I heard. One is my brother have an elementary school classmate whose father was lawyer and got killed in 228 event. He live in the same village as my family. And every time if you're talking about 228, we always refer to what happen to his family.

Another person is pretty close to us is an uncle who was judge, also kill in 228. What I heard, they just found out he disappear. And next thing you know, they found his body under some kind of bridge or something. You don't know where did he go, you don't know what happen, but by the time you found him, he's dead.

Narration: The period of martial law that followed the 228 Incident was known as the White Terror and for good reason. During a recent trip back to Taiwan, I sat down around a traditional Taiwanese meal with my mom and a few of my aunts and uncles. As we ate lunch, high above the northern Taiwanese city of Zhongli, they talked about what it was like to live under such harrowing times. This conversation was originally spoken in Mandarin but has been translated to English with voiceovers recorded by my friends Reika, Jessica, Gary, and Celina.

Shiang: It was really scary during the martial law era.

Tracy: No freedom of ideology.

Lian: Also no freedom of activity.

Henry: Absolutely no freedom of speech. No freedom at all.

Chu: If you criticized the government, then you had to be prepared psychologically. If you said the wrong thing, you would be arrested and put into jail for no reason. Even the people who came over to Taiwan from Mainland China who tried to contact their relatives were put under surveillance.

I had a colleague, her husband was Indian-Chinese. He came to Taiwan by himself and tried to contact his brothers and sisters who lived in China through Hong Kong. As a result, my colleague ended up getting put under surveillance by the school's security staff.

During that time - the martial law era, people lived a not only scary but also very dissatisfied life.

Henry: The atmosphere wasn't good, of course, it wasn't good. No one likes martial law, but it may have been a necessary process towards democracy. The most important thing is the progression to democracy after going through that period. The martial law era was only a short period of time, we can't say it was wrong but it had to end.

Narration: And it did, in a gradual process which included an underground opposition party and numerous student protests that began in 1987. That was six years after my mom immigrated from Taiwan to the U.S.

Henry: Everybody was invigorated, we were very happy! After so many years of martial law, the people had had enough.

Chu: If martial law had continued to be enforced, then there would have been problems because the government already couldn't control people's thoughts anymore.

Lian: The democratic era allowed for the direct election of the President, the freedom of expression, the freedom of movement.

Shiang: And a new political party was created, there no longer was a one party dictatorship.

Narration: Democracy in Taiwan is still very young. It only really began with the first presidential election in 1996, the same year I was born. But in the years since, the election process has experienced an evolution. Now, in the recent 2016 elections, things have changed quite a bit.

Henry: The first presidential election only had two parties involved.

Tracy: It was catered to the older generation; young people weren't involved yet.

Henry: This time there are many political parties involved.

Shiang: Yeah, eighteen political parties.

Lian: Also a lot of young people have come out to participate.

Shiang: That's the biggest difference.

Henry: The next generation has their own ideas, it's very important.

Tracy: They are standing up for their future.

Henry: It's the right thing to do. This is their own country, they have to participate.

Tracy: Today's young people know they should control and decide their own futures themselves.

Narration: Despite the development of a flourishing democracy, the political environment in Taiwan is still very complicated, particularly in its relationship with the People's Republic of China. But learning about this dark period in Taiwanese history, during which many people lacked the same rights and freedoms that I, having lived in the U.S. all my life, often take for granted, has highlighted just how lucky I have been. I never had to worry about something like saying the wrong thing in front of the wrong people for fear of retribution from the government. The current contentious political climate in the U.S. has reemphasized the importance of being an engaged citizen, speaking out when something is wrong, and holding the government accountable for its actions. This is something that many of the young people in Taiwan recognize as well.

Christina: We are the generation can having this democracy is because past generations actually fight for it so I really appreciate. Because it is very easy so sometimes we might get used to it and then feel like we don't need to go vote and stuff, it's not going to work or something. I think because they fight for the democracy and we have the chance to speak out, we need to speak out no matter the result is what we want or not, we still need to do our part and see what's going on. If something doesn't work right, we need to stand up and try to fix it, do some improvement and then make this society or this country or the whole world better.