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Illuminating Taiwan's history

An exhibition at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York explores Taiwan's political photography 30 years after the lifting of martial law

By Chris Fuchs / Contributing reporter in New York



On March 18, 1990, the DPP held an oath-taking rally at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to "boot out the old crooks."

Photo courtesy of Hsu Po-hsin

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An exhibit in Manhattan is aiming to introduce visitors to the tumultuous period around the end of martial law in Taiwan 30 years ago as witnessed through the eyes of the camera lens.

"History's Shadows and Light" (歷史的暗影, 與光) features the work of three Taiwanese photojournalists and a team of videographers who captured scenes from political and social movements in the nation between 1986 and 1995.

"Before the end of martial law in 1987, political photography was impossible," said Sharleen Yu (余

思穎), one of the curators of the exhibit, sponsored by the Taipei Cultural Center in New York.

In conjunction with dangwai (黨外, "outside the party") magazines, political photography of the 1980s centered on mass rallies and rarely seen events, striking a critical pose against the government, according to literature about the exhibit.

This came amid the backdrop of 38 years of martial law, lifted by former president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) on July 15, 1987. During that period, Taiwanese were denied such basic freedoms as the right to assemble, speak freely and organize political parties.

It was seen as a first important step toward democratization — a process that journalists were on hand to capture.

"Around the time martial law was lifted, society had already amassed a great amount of energy in hopes of forging change," Yu said. "The people wanted the truth. That period also just so happened to coincide with the rise of the media."

"History's Shadows and Light" originated from a larger-scale exhibit called "Faint Light, Dark Shadows" (微光闇影), held earlier this year at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in Taipei and also curated by Yu.

Housed in the first and second-floor gallery space of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in New York, "History's Shadows and Light" showcases the work of photojournalists Liu Chen-hsiang (劉振祥), Huang Tzu-ming (黃子明) and Hsu Po-hsin (許伯鑫).

TURNING POINTS

Greeting visitors on the first floor as they enter are also videos from the Green Team (綠色小組), a photographers' group founded in October 1986. Using home video cameras, the Green Team recorded a number of social movements that took shape in Taiwan during that time.

The group distributed their footage through informal channels in an effort to circumvent official news being reported by Taiwan's big three television networks.

Among the filmed events shown at the New York exhibit are the Taoyuan Airport Incident of 1986 and the desecration of graves of Aboriginal people in Nantou less than a year later.

The Taoyuan Airport Incident unfolded on Nov. 30, 1986, when the newly formed Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) sent people to meet Hsu Hsin-liang (許信良). Exiled for opposing the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government, Hsu had attempted to enter Taiwan by plane via Japan, but was blocked.

The other video shows a dozen organizations, led by the Taiwan Aboriginal Rights Association (台灣原住民權利促進會), carrying a coffin to the Executive Yuan on April 3, 1987. The groups were protesting the Nantou County Government's digging up of Aboriginal graves — and leaving the disinterred remains exposed — to develop the Dongpu hot spring

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area in Sinyi Township (信義).

The exhibit's second floor features the work of Liu, Huang and Hsu. In a setting reminiscent of a photography darkroom, light boxes illuminating negatives are affixed to the walls, displaying a series of shots leading up to the one chosen for development. The selection is marked with a red square around it.

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Wish this article had featured more photos of the exhibits.

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