

❖ RONALD CHIN-JUNG TSAO

Chief Planner: Green Island Human Rights Memorial Park

“A BALM FOR THE WOUNDS OF HISTORY: PEACE MUSEUMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS PARKS IN TAIWAN”**Abstract: Peace Museums and Human Rights Parks in Pacific Taiwan**

Ronald Tsao is proud to represent Taiwan. Mr. Tsao is President of Taiwan Art-In Design & Construction Co., Ltd. He has almost thirty years of design and real-estate planning experience, and, since 1997, has been involved with the 228 Memorial Museum and the Green Island Human Rights Park in various roles: as designer and planner, as curator, and as director. In this essay, Mr. Tsao wishes to place Taiwan's most serious cases of governmental violence—the 228 Incident and the White Terror—in their historical and cultural contexts. He also contemplates Taiwan's achievement in peace, multiculturalism, and respect for human rights.

The prospect of attending the Fifth Annual Peace Museum Conference in Gernika-Lumo inspires in me many feelings. Pride fills my breast at the opportunity to represent Taiwan, but there is also a special sense of historical connection. My birthplace is Keelung, Taiwan's northernmost harbor. Looking out to sea, one sees standing proud in the mouth of the harbor Ho Ping Island, or Peace Island, the site where almost four hundred years ago, in 1626, the Spanish army began constructing castles, churches, and forts, turning Peace Island into a base for Spain's trading activities in South East Asia. On the southwest of the island is San Salvador, Keelung's first and only remaining castle.

Over the past decade, I have had the great honor of participating in the planning and design of memorials of government oppression and brutality in the post Second World War period. With this paper, I hope to share with you, my fellow lovers of peace, Taiwan's experience and achievement, as a part of our common effort to create a global culture of peace.

History

The Japanese surrender on August 15th, 1945 brought different destinies to nations such as Korea and Taiwan that had been in the Japanese sphere of influence during the war. For Taiwan, the surrender meant out of the frying pan and into the fire, as Taiwan was immediately put, as according to the Cairo Declaration of 1943, under the control of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime. Taiwan was now embroiled in the Chinese Civil War, which was raging between Chiang Kai-shek and communist forces under Mao Tse-tung.

Chiang sent Chen Yi to set up a military administration on Taiwan in October, 1945, but after sixteen months of Chen Yi's corrupt and incompetent governance, the people were fed up with repression and rampant inflation. On February 28, 1947, a minor dispute between a cigarette vendor and a government official escalated into civil disorder. The disorder was put down brutally by the army over the next four weeks. All the while, Chiang Kai-shek was still fighting on the mainland, with no time to worry about what Chen Yi was doing on Taiwan. Indeed, for Chiang Taiwan was merely a pawn, a haven to which he retreated after the last battle with the Communists, and a launching pad for the offensive he dreamed would return mainland China to his control.

One of Chiang Kai-shek's first acts after he arrived battered and beaten in 1949 was to impose martial law. Taiwan has the dubious distinction of enjoying the world's longest martial law, which lasted thirty-eight long years until 1987. The “White Terror” is a general term for the political oppression of the martial law years, but the most intense period of the terror began right in 1949, with the blood spilling until the following summer. This was Chiang's mad effort to root out the communist spies he believed were thick in the underbrush. We can use phrases like “massive loss of life” to describe what happened in from 1947 to 1950, but the truth is we just don't know exactly. Official figures are shocking, in the range of ten to thirty thousand. 1950 brought an end to the bloodshed but not to oppression. Democratic activists—nay, anyone who dared voice a dissenting opinion—were in grave danger of being paid a visit by the secret police, interrogated, tortured, and sentenced to life in political prison. A great many brave individuals had decades of their lives stolen by a government that could not tolerate criticism. Many perished in prison, but some lived to see the general amnesty granted in 1976, one year after Chiang Kai-shek's death. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, the democracy movement gathered steam. This is not to say that there were not hitches along the way, but in the end democracy, human rights, and peace won out. From 1987 to 1996, obstacles to democracy were removed one by one, and in 1996 Taiwan held its first democratic presidential election, with a second in 2000 and a third this past March. Today's Taiwan is a peace-loving and democratic nation that strives to uphold human rights, to respect “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” Taiwan's present political situation is complex to say the least; there are hundreds of missiles aimed at Taiwan along the southeastern Chinese coast, to back up China's assertions of sovereignty over Taiwan with some fearsome muscle. Taiwan's task in the years ahead is to act out of the basic ideal of pacifism no matter what we come up against.

Taiwan's Peace-Related Buildings

To keep peace and human rights alive in our thoughts, it is essential to remember how they have been compromised in the past. The lifting of martial law in 1987 made it possible to speak out and remember, to attend to wounds that had not fully healed, and to see that justice be done, both for the 228 Incident and for the long dark night of the White Terror.

By 1986 many groups had formed demanding that the government address the 228 Incident. Braving the threat posed by the Military Police, these groups held street demonstrations and memorial activities to advance their cause in a peaceful and loving manner. They demanded an investigation into what happened, an official apology, a 228 memorial day, monument and museum, as well as victim compensation. The fruits of their efforts were gathered on February 28th, 1995, when President Lee Tung-hui inaugurated the 228 Monument and gave a formal apology to the victims, their families, and society at large. In the same year, damage compensation legislation was passed. In 1997, the 50th anniversary of the 228 Incident, the Legislature declared February 28th as National Peace Memorial Day, and Taipei Mayor Chen Shuibian inaugurated the Taipei 228 Memorial Museum in 228 Park, one of the sites where the Incident took place. A local NGO—Taiwan Peace Foundation—was put in charge of the museum. The facility is designed for exhibition, education, collection, and research, and it serves as a space for activities and for the storage of historical materials.

The museum and monument are milestones, but regrettably they are still involved in political disputes over national and ethnic identity, ideology, and historical interpretation. These disputes were tangential to the museum's true purpose and arose because the project was political football in struggles between the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party and the Kuomintang. A major test of the wisdom of the Taiwanese people will be to let peace museums stick to their original creative intentions and exercise their unique functions independently of successions in central or local government. Indeed, part of the mission of this museum is to transcend partisan strife and treat all sides sympathetically. Those who struggle for human rights and peace do not wish to pit the mainlanders against the native Taiwanese. The villains in this story were not the mainlanders, most of whom were ordinary citizens as peace-loving as their Taiwanese counterparts.

What better place to remember the White Terror than Green Island, which is to Taiwan what Robbin Island is to South Africa. Green Island lies thirty-three kilometers off the southeast coast of Taiwan. On the northeast corner of the island stands what was once a political prison. On December 10, 1999, Lee Tung-hui opened the first stage of the Green Island Human Rights Memorial Park and offered his apology to the victims of political oppression. On December 10, 2002, Lee was followed by Taiwan's second democratically elected president, Chen Shuibian, who joined former inmates—the remaining few—in pushing open the gates of the prison, symbolizing the end of government injustice. The Memorial Park bears witness to the struggle for democracy and human rights, promotes human rights education, and raises awareness about the importance of ecological and cultural preservation. The island provides a rest stop for migrating birds and habitat for fish and shellfish. It is also an important site for the archeological study of Austronesian culture. Thus, the significance of the Memorial Park is not merely human rights; it extends outwards to include the peaceful coexistence of different cultures, as well as sustainable development and the vision of humanity and nature living in harmony.

The New Life Correction Center was the Green Island facility where political prisoners were incarcerated from 1951 to 1965. However, most of the buildings have disintegrated. There

is more of interest at Oasis Villa, an enclosed prison where prisoners were kept from 1972 to 1987. Oasis Villa, an important part of the Memorial Park, is now open to the public. While Oasis Villa has all the charm of reinforced concrete, the future plan is to keep the atmosphere unchanged, so as to transport the visitor back in time. However, more modern facilities have been installed, namely a theater and an exhibition hall, to tell the many amazing stories that weave through the walls of Oasis Villa. One story, a testament to the tenacity and tenderness of the human spirit, is of the musical instruments—guitars and violins—that the prisoners on Green Island spent months if not years piecing together out of bits of junk. Thousands of visitors each day—three hundred and fifty thousand visitors annually—come to hear the stories that the Human Rights Memorial Park has to tell.

The right to tell such stories at all is a big improvement over the White Terror, but not all that could be done has been done. Despite the compensation that has been provided to victims of government oppression, there has been no official inquiry to seek the truth and see justice done. Other countries have established Official Truth Commissions, but not Taiwan. Thus, there has been a call in recent years, in which the voices of the victims of 228 and the White Terror have joined, for the Legislature to set up a "Commission on Postwar Human Rights Abuses" that will broaden the public debate. This has not happened yet; for now, it is only NGOs, academics, and intellectuals who are leading the way.

But it's not just researchers and peace activists who are involved but the people en masse. Last year, on February 28, 2004, two million Taiwanese formed a line stretching five hundred kilometers all the way from Peace Island, Keelung Harbor down to the southernmost tip of Taiwan. We broke the world record for the longest human chain, declaring our collective resolution to safeguard our homeland using peaceful means, by "joining hands" instead of "using arms".

Today Taiwan is a peaceful island laved by the waves of the Pacific Ocean and blessed with a multicultural society. Yet, it was not always this way. If we delve back into the earliest traces of human habitation, we find that the island's earliest residents were Austronesian, whose descendents populated Easter Island and Madagascar and the vast waters in between. Strife was common among Taiwan's indigenous peoples, as well as between the indigenous population and the Chinese settlers who began arriving four centuries ago from the Chinese mainland. The conflict between the mainlanders who accompanied Chiang Kai-shek and the local people was just one more chapter in a sad history. However, we are now doing better. We have learned the virtues of pacifism and intercultural respect. Hakka, Hoklo, Han Chinese, the members of over ten officially recognized indigenous tribes, and residents and visitors from all over the world live together in harmony. Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and Taoists respect one another and get along with the business of living. That's the meaning of peace for me, and I hope that the 228 Memorial Museum and the Green Island Human Rights Park are contributing in some way to a better future. Lest we forget.



Peace Island, Keelung Harbour, 2004 - 228 Hand-in-Hand Rally



Peace dialogue, 1998: Children's poet and drawing (Taipei 228 Memorial Museum)



Taipei 228 Memorial Museum (1997)



Exhibition of Taipei 228 Memorial Museum

Bird's-eye view of the Green Island Human Rights Memorial Park



Exhibition of the Green Island Human Rights Memorial Park (2002)

Bird's-eye view of the New Life Correction Center (1951-1965 camps)



Green Island: fish, shellfish and landscape



Green Island Human Rights Memorial Monument (1999)

228 Monument (1995)

