

*East Asia Hotspots - Revisiting the 228 Incident of Taiwan*  
*Transcription*

Richard Haddock:

Welcome to the East Asia Hotspots podcast where we invite you to join us for chats with experts and scholars from around the world to talk about contemporary issues in east Asia. I'm the lead facilitator, Richard Haddock, with the George Washington University. Support of this podcast comes from the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI grant for east Asian studies at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Our partners at the Elliott School that help make this podcast happen are the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the GW Institute for Korean Studies.

Richard Haddock:

The view and opinions expressed in these podcasts are those of the speakers alone and do not reflect the position of the NRC. Through these podcasts, we want to encourage dialogue about diverse perspectives in east Asian studies. Check out our website at [nrc.elliott.gwu.edu](http://nrc.elliott.gwu.edu) for all our podcast episodes and info about east Asian studies at the George Washington University. Now, let's start the conversation.

Speaker 2:

Welcome to the third episode of the Hotspots East Asia podcast series in association with East Asia National Resource Center at George Washington University, where we chat with experts on issues in east Asia with contemporary relevance. This project is supported by the Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Su is our guest for today. He's a visiting scholar from Taiwan. Now, he's received his PhD in History from the University of Kyoto, Japan. In pursuit of acquiring knowledge in Chinese Buddhist history, he lived and studied for seven years in Kyoto. During this time, his area of research focused mainly on the religious policy of the Tang dynasty and the interaction between China and Japan in Buddhism.

Speaker 2:

Upon his return to Taiwan, he turned to study the postwar history of Taiwan. His postwar research topics focused on the history of disposition policy towards Taiwan by the United States and China from 1941 to 1949 and the related issues regarding the 228 Incident. He is currently working on a project called Research on the Truth and the Transitional Justice of the 228 Incident by the Memorial Foundation of the 228 Incident.

Speaker 2:

Welcome to our podcast series, Dr. Su, and thank you so much for being here today.

Dr. Su:

Yeah, thank you.

Speaker 2:

Considering your current research is on the 228 Incident, I'm really excited to hear you share your very valuable insights on this topic for our audience today.

Dr. Su:

Yes.

Speaker 2:

So do you think it is important for K to 12 students in the U.S. to learn more about the 228 Incident?

Dr. Su:

Yes, definitely. In my opinion, if you are concerned about what's going on with the tense relationship between China and the United States today or concerned about the strained situation between China and Japan because of World War II and its aftermath, or even concerned about what the results of the present Hong Kong unrest will be. These issues are related to the national security of America.

Dr. Su:

In the Western history, this is an area of the war that American children should start learning about from a young age. The 228 incident of Taiwan in 1947 is a good example to understand the history, the background and offer a vital perspective to think about these current issues in east Asia.

Dr. Su:

The 228 incident of Taiwan not only can help us to understand the postwar history and the process of the democratization of Taiwan, but its effect on the Taiwan independence movements, although related to the original security of the east Asia and the national security of the United States. Besides, if China send troops to Hong Kong because of the unrest today, the result will be similar to the 228 incident. It can provide a history perspective for thinking about the future of Hong Kong. That is why understand the 228 incident is so important.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. Like you mentioned, considering the relation of China and the United States, I think this dates back to during the Korean War and the Vietnam War, or China and Japan during the aftermath of World War II. I think it's really interesting for students to later gain a unique perspective based on the important historical events which would inform them about current

issues in east Asia, so there is national security in east Asia or even in the United States. So could you briefly describe the 228 incident and its final outcomes for our audience?

Dr. Su:

Yes. Taiwan was a colony of the Japanese Empire from 1895 to 1945. During World War II, President Roosevelt decided that Taiwan should return to China after the war because he wanted to strengthen the U.S. [inaudible 00:05:36] with China. This decision put Taiwan into a disastrous situation after the war.

Dr. Su:

Under the rule of the Japanese government, Taiwan experienced modernization in terms of politics, the economy and even in social and cultural development. If we compare economic and social situations of Taiwan and China at that time, Taiwan was a modern region, but China was an undeveloped country. [inaudible 00:06:12] Besides, particularly the leader of China, Chiang Kai-shek, was a famous dictator. The ruling party, the Nationalists or what we call Kuomintang, was also well known for corruption and incompetence after the takeover of Taiwan by the Kuomintang in October 1945. Every aspect of Taiwan's life deteriorated very fast.

Dr. Su:

Many factories closed. Taiwanese lost their jobs. The costs of living skyrocketed and public health declined rapidly. Only the government officials who came from the mainland China lived in luxury, largely because they controlled the economy in addition to the government.

Dr. Su:

This situation was unbearable and made the Taiwanese very angry. Finally, it led to a strong protest against the Kuomintang rule by Taiwanese on February 28th, 1947. After the beating of a widow who was selling cigarettes illegally, during that protest the authorities killed someone who protested her treatment. The demonstration evolved into a conflict between the Taiwanese and the new Chinese officers. The conflict began in Taipei but in no time, [inaudible 00:07:54] to every city of Taiwan.

Dr. Su:

Instead of investigating the responsibility of the incompetent government, Chiang Kai-shek sent the military to suppress the protest and massacre thousands of Taiwanese. This historic event is called the 228 incident.

Speaker 2:

Wow. Thank you so much for sharing all these intricate details about the 228 incident as well as its effects on Taiwan. I believe that speaking on this subject was considered a taboo for several decades in Taiwan. Is that true?

Dr. Su:

Yes.

Speaker 2:

Okay. I believe that it was an attempt to erase the terror incident from the minds of the Taiwanese. Right? I think until President Lee addressed the subject publicly, today the event is openly discussed and the details of the 228 incident have become the subject of government and academic investigation by scholars like you. It's very applaudable that the government declared February 28th as the peace memorial day in the memory of these victims.

Dr. Su:

Yes.

Speaker 2:

That's very applaudable.

Speaker 2:

What was its impact on Taiwan's postwar history development?

Dr. Su:

The 228 incident impacted Taiwan in several ways. The first and the more immediate impact was the Kuomintang [inaudible 00:09:16] rule over Taiwan after the 228 incident. Chiang Kai-shek's military killed thousands of Taiwanese people during [inaudible 00:09:27]. Chiang's regime was afraid of Taiwanese [inaudible 00:09:33] or possibly rebellion. So they enforced martial law that went on for 38 years.

Dr. Su:

Under martial law, the Chiang regime could arrest anyone and even put them to death if they were suspected of having the wrong political views. The 30 years long martial law period was also called The White Terror. It is estimated that the Chiang regime put more than 10,000 people to death during martial law period.

Dr. Su:

The second impact was the social condition between Taiwanese people and the mainland Chinese. The corruption and the incompetence of the Chinese government was the main reason that triggered the 228 incident. People who come from China after the war, we call them mainland Chinese. After the 228 incident, the Chiang regime did little politic reform but relied even more heavily on the mainland Chinese as government officials. The mainland Chinese not only became the ruling class, but also enjoyed a lot of the political and the social privileges.

Dr. Su:

In contrast, the Taiwanese [inaudible 00:10:58]. They enjoyed no privilege and were even discriminated against by the mainland Chinese. Only those Taiwanese who joined the crime system of the Kuomintang could enjoy limited politic and economic privilege. This situation caused the social contradiction between Taiwanese and the mainland Chinese. The Chiang and the Kuomintang regime did not seem to resolve the social contradiction. Instead, they used it to their politic benefit.

Dr. Su:

The third impact on the national identity, although martial law ended in 1987 and the people of Taiwan were allowed freedom of speech, there is still conflict between the two views of the national identity in Taiwan.

Dr. Su:

One view is that Taiwanese are not Chinese and that Taiwan should be a democracy and independent country. The other one is that Taiwan is a part of China. Taiwanese are Chinese and Taiwan should be unified with China in the future.

Dr. Su:

These two senses of the national identity originated in the 228 incident. As we know, Taiwan was a colony in the first half of the 20th century. Most other colonized areas were asking for independence during World War II, however Japan modernized Taiwan. For this reason, the Taiwanese did not think of themselves as an independent country and even accepted the takeover by China after the war.

Dr. Su:

Before the 228 incident, the Taiwanese [inaudible 00:12:59] colony under the Chinese government. However, the Chiang regime saw autonomy as a betrayal of China and eventually

sent the military to massacre Taiwanese people and used [inaudible 00:13:18] measures to rule Taiwan.

Dr. Su:

This result made Taiwanese awaken to the idea that Taiwanese are not Chinese. They become passionate about pursuing nationhood of Taiwan. That is the Taiwan independence movement.

Dr. Su:

In contrast, the members of Kuomintang and most of mainlanders still identified themselves with China, even though China is communist and totalitarian country. They use their influence on the media or even on the education system to advocate China has a prosperous economy and enlightened government in that one country, two systems is fit for Taiwan. It's extremely irony and it's also a crisis for Taiwan considering that Taiwan is economically developed country and has converted from a dictatorship to democracy itself.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. It's really powerful to see how media can influence people's minds. But I think Taiwan has admirably worked towards addressing the horrors of the White Terror.

Speaker 2:

In 1995, President Lee officially apologized for the government's actions, and I think he also advocated for open discourse about Taiwan's troubled past. I think we should all focus on the incredible turn that Taiwan has made towards full democracy as well as apology. In fact, there's a lesson that demonstrates that people or the government can accept their dark past while still moving forward for the benefits of the citizens. I feel like the world has so much to learn from Taiwan. Its trajectory from authoritarianism toward democracy and finally accepting its history. Thank you so much for sharing all these intricate details with us.

Speaker 2:

Should the United States be responsible for the 228 incident?

Dr. Su:

I think so, because President Wilson advocated the self-determination for all colonized people. Atlantic Charter declared that the right of all people to choose the form of government and which they will live. However, the decision of the United States to return Taiwan to China did not give any chance to Taiwanese, or did not respect the right of Taiwanese to choose their government.

Dr. Su:

When the corruption and incompetence occurred in Taiwan after the Chinese took over and when even the 228 incident happened in Taiwan, the US government gently kept silent. From the moral perspective, the United States should be responsible for the 228 incident.

Speaker 2:

I really appreciate your honest perspective on this. Thinking about it today, the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act by the US Congress on March, I think 2018, relations between the United States and Taiwan, ever since [inaudible 00:16:44] high level basis. So I think this is also a good example to know that the history of a country doesn't decide the relationship with the country in the future. Or in the current events.

Speaker 2:

Not to keep you for a long time, but I still have one last question for you.

Dr. Su:

Yes.

Speaker 2:

As an expert in this field, what resources would you suggest for K to 12 teachers as well as students to use in their classroom for this topic?

Dr. Su:

There is a very important book named *Formosa Betrayed*. I think it's very good for the K-12 teachers. It's a book that looks at the incident from an American perspective. The author, George H. Kerr, was one of very few Americans who had been in Taiwan before the war. He was a vice counsel in Taipei after the war and was an eye witness of the 228 incident. His view include the US national interest, which [inaudible 00:17:49] today is the [inaudible 00:17:52] of the national security and the geopolitical view to Taiwan and Okinawa, and the human rights of Taiwanese people and even the human rights of Chinese people. This is the first book talking about the 228 incident, even in Chinese. That's the first book.

Speaker 2:

Okay. I think it's important for students to, especially to learn from the US perspective.

Dr. Su:

I think history could be a mirror to [inaudible 00:18:20]. Reading his book, we not only can understand the postwar history of Taiwan, but also could think about international effort. It's the

reason why I recommend this book. If the reader has not enough time to read through the whole book, I would suggest that if one can read at least from chapter one to chapter 10. You also can find how inspiring it is.

Speaker 2:

Thanks for that [inaudible 00:18:51] as well.

Dr. Su:

Yeah. Besides, there are other references published after the 1990s. Like a book named *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947*. It's published by the Stanford University Press in 1991. The other paper called *The Public Implication of February 28th, 1947*. It's by the famous scholar [inaudible 00:19:25] from Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. It published in 2007. You can read it on the website. There are related books or paper, but if possible, the K-12 teachers may compare this with *Formosa Betrayed* to see how different they are.

Speaker 2:

Interesting. Thank you for mentioning that so that the readers or our audience can view it from different perspectives.

Dr. Su:

Yes. For the K-12 students, at least those may be too difficult to understand but there are some English websites that introduce the 228 incident. For example, the GW website has an introduction to many aspects of Taiwan. The website of the foreign policy research institute at [inaudible 00:20:21] online magazine and there's a great [inaudible 00:20:24]. Both have pages about the 228 incident. These are useful references for students in understanding the 228 incident.

Dr. Su:

I will suggest that teachers read *Formosa Betrayed* before, but if you want to have the inspiration from the 228 incident or want to introduce it to students.

Speaker 2:

Oh, great. Is *Formosa Betrayed* available online? They can buy it on Amazon?

Dr. Su:

Yes. Maybe you can find in website. It published last year, [inaudible 00:20:58] published.



Speaker 2:

Interesting. For all our teacher audiences, you can find *Formosa Betrayed* book online or even on Amazon. Dr. Su, thank you again for sharing all your valuable insight. Before I let you go, do you have any final comments or suggestions for our audience who are listening to the podcast?

Dr. Su:

Yes. When we are looking at the postwar history of Taiwan or looking at the postwar history of eastern Asia, all the question I mentioned before, I would suggest that there are two important perspectives for understand the postwar history.

Dr. Su:

One is geopolitical perspective. Another one is the human right perspective. The geopolitical perspective is a critic viewpoint to understand the complicated relationship between China, Taiwan, Japan and the United States. 228 incident happened in that complicated geopolitical situation. If we believe in justice and freedom, the human rights perspective should be the only base for judging history. We should abhor any country that uses violence to rule people, and even threaten neighboring countries. These are my suggestions.

Speaker 2:

Great. Two important perspectives. One is the geopolitical perspective and the other one is the human rights perspective. I think it's definitely going to broaden the perspectives of our audience. Thank you again for sharing your thoughtful responses. I'm sure the audience will enjoy this episode and [crosstalk 00:22:40] resource.

Dr. Su:

It is my honor and my pleasure to-

Speaker 2:

To be here. Okay. Thank you so much. It was an honor for me as well to have you in this conversation. Thank you so much, Dr. Su.

Dr. Su:

Thank you.

Richard Haddock:

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Richard Haddock:

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