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Siaolin Stands Up

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Bouncing over ruined roads washed out by Typhoon Morakot (some roadbeds have been transformed into river beds), a group of scholars (including myself) drove to the township of Chia-hsien 甲仙 (Kaohsiung County) on August 18 to attend a press conference marking the formation of the Reconstruction Committee for Siaolin’s Plains Aborigine Culture 小林平埔文化重建委員會. Arriving in Chia-hsien, one is soon struck by the roar of helicopters and generators, as well as the smell of flood debris and betel nut juice, which serve to cover up other odors. Power has been restored, but there is still no running water, which puts a huge strain on the limited number of Port-a-pots available to disaster victims now sheltering in local temples. Relief supplies are relatively plentiful, but distribution remains haphazard, and appeals for needed items are issued on a regular basis.

The press conference was held to initiate planning for the rebuilding of Siaolin Village 小林村 (Xiaolin; Sio-na in Southern Min), once a center of Taiwan’s Plains Aborigine (平埔族) culture. Today, all that remains is a massive tomb of mud containing the corpses of hundreds of victims buried under a five-storey landslide that engulfed the village when two nearby mountainsides collapsed (Recent reports allege that the landslide may have been caused by a faulty water diversion project 越域引水工程, which involved dynamiting mountainsides to build a massive tunnel from two major rivers to a nearby reservoir). Searchers have started to find some remains, including those of a mother and child hugging each other during their final moments on earth. They are also digging up body parts, some surrounded by pools of blood. Local tallies list a total of 491 individuals missing and presumed dead, but they have yet to be granted the dignity of being recognized by the state. According to government statistics posted on the Center for Disaster Prevention and Relief 災害防救中心 website on the day of the press conference, 136 people have been listed as dead and 337 missing, with 71 of the dead and all of the missing coming from Kaohsiung County. As for the Siaolin villagers, their status is currently “under investigation” (查證中).
The difficulties surrounding the aftermath of the Siaolin tragedy reflect larger problems with the overall disaster response and relief effort, not to mention reports of high-ranking officials going out for banquets, wedding parties, and hairstyling appointments during and immediately after the typhoon. The result has been a tidal wave of disappointment, disbelief, and disgust that has transcended the usual party lines. One on-going Yahoo forum contains 3,818 essays commenting on President Ma’s performance (up from over 1,000 just two weeks ago), while a recent ICRT poll had 14,998 people (96%) responding in the affirmative to the question of whether Ma should step down, with a mere 513 (3%) saying there was no need for him to do so.

All this is of little import to the Siaolin survivors, however, who are simply trying to cope with the magnitude of their loss. The press conference we took part in, which started just after noon, was packed. It began with a deeply moving film prepared by Professor Chien Wen-min簡文敏, who has been studying Siaolin’s Plains Aborigine culture for over a decade. For 4 minutes, we watched scenes of Siaolin’s vibrant village life before the disaster struck, followed by images of devastation and mourning, but concluding with survivors expressing their wish to rebuild. Dozens of villagers showed up while film was running, so it was shown a second time. Chien then explained the Reconstruction Committee’s goals, namely to build a safe and secure community that would be healthy and eco-friendly, while also preserving the essence of Plains Aborigine culture (安定、安全, 具有平埔文化特色的健康生態社區). This was followed by remarks by village leaders (林建忠 and 蔡松瑜), scholars, and other outside experts. Villagers also had a chance to express their feelings of grief, frustration, and anger. In their closing statements, the village leaders called for an end to all tears in favor of a new sense of self-reliance, so that Siaolin’s future would be assured (there are now plans to establish a private foundation to help achieve that goal). Finally, the leaders left the podium and joined the villagers in loud chants of “Go Siaolin!” (小林加油). The Reconstruction Committee starts its work this Friday, while a second set of mourning rituals for the victims (二七) will be held on Saturday.

If history is any guide, the prospects for recovery are not as dim as they might seem. Residents of this part of southern Taiwan have suffered worse calamities in the past, especially during the Ta-pa-ni Incident, which caused thousands of deaths. Those who have toughed it out are fiercely independent and resilient. They have rebuilt before, and they certainly have the ability to do so again. However, many other communities have also been devastated. It will take much more time and a lot more hard work before the job can be fully and well done.

Tags: Siaolin