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Tales From Taiwan: Mourning

By Paul Katz

Siaolin’s survivors are in the midst of grappling with three main issues: mourning the dead, coping with current difficulties, and planning for the future (see the online chats about these issues on Siaolin’s own website, the 甲仙鄉小林社區入口網). On August 21, I attended two meetings with Professor Chien Wen-min 簡文敏 and his colleagues (林清財, 吳旭峰, 段洪坤, 張東炯, 黃智慧, 潘英海, 簡炯仁, 謝世憲). The first meeting focused on the needs of Siaolin’s villagers, who were preparing a petition to present to President Ma when he attended mourning rituals the next day. Consensus was reached on three main points, namely requesting the government allow disaster victims to participate in reconstruction planning, simplify the compensation process for survivors, and commit to Siaolin’s cultural reconstruction. The goal of the second meeting was to lay the groundwork for the formation of the Association for the Reconstruction of Siaolin and its Plains Aborigine Culture (小林平埔文化重建協會), which is currently submitting an application to the government for formal approval.

The next morning (8/22) began with an early morning visit to the site of the disaster, which we timed to avoid the usual political theatrics that took place when President Ma attended the 二七 mourning rituals for the nearly 500 victims of the Siaolin mudslide. Accusations of blame for the slow disaster response continue, but it is becoming increasingly clear that this tragedy was also a result of 921 Earthquake (which loosened soil in terrain consisting largely of volcanic ash mountains), poor land management policies, and illegal land exploitation, all of which set the stage for the horrific events that accompanied unprecedented rainfall. At this point, the challenge for Taiwan’s government will be to institute and enforce land policies that take the interests (and voices) of disaster victims into account, especially the south’s Aboriginal peoples.

However, the true focus of the mourning rituals (and hopefully subsequent reconstruction efforts as well) was on remembering the victims and supporting the
survivors. These rites, presided over by numerous Buddhist specialists (and some Taoists), vividly revealed the sheer magnitude of the tragedy (some altar tables had as many as 10 photos). A sizeable percentage of the victims were children, with some altars featuring milk bottles for babies and toddlers. In some cases, only one or two family members survived, especially young people who had been away at work (it was mainly the elderly and small children who actually resided in Siaolin village). There are pressing psychological concerns, especially children in tears over losing their classmates or unable to fall asleep if it is raining outside. There was also one reported case of ghost marriage (冥婚) between a fiancé and his bride-to-be who died in the mudslide.

The importance of ritual to the mourning and spiritual healing processes was also readily apparent, including the presence of numerous Buddhist volunteers who stood by the survivors, guided them through the ritual’s stages, and provided hugs and other comfort when emotions proved overwhelming. Professor Chien and I stopped at many of the altar tables to offer incense and attempt to comfort, and I soon realized that Chien was in possession of a truly invaluable gift, namely local memories in the form of audio and visual records that he has compiled during his years of studying Siaolin’s Plains Aborigine culture. These will prove of the utmost importance as the reconstruction process progresses.

In terms of where the survivors will next reside, there is talk of temporarily housing them on local military bases, while the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (Fojiao Ciji gongdehui 佛教慈濟功德會) has announced plans to construct a set of villages for different Aboriginal groups at Shanlin (杉林) (a township in Kaohsiung County nearer to the Kaohsiung metropolis). Nonetheless, many survivors hope that one day they will be able to resettle in
nearby areas, especially the village of Wulipu 五里埔. Plans are already underway to rebuild Siaolin’s Plains Aborigine shrine (公廨) in that location and stage traditional rituals during the ninth lunar month (other Plains Aborigine groups have promised to help). Other reconstruction efforts currently in the planning stages include a memorial hall near the site of the tragedy and a Museum of Plains Aborigine Culture, all of which is designed to ensure the perpetuation of Siaolin’s intangible cultural heritage.

Tags: Siaolin