8-12-2010

Sodden Anniversary

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August 8, 2010 marked the first anniversary of the Siaolin Village 小林村 tragedy, when torrential rains caused by Typhoon Morakot triggered a massive mudslide that swept this idyllic community off the face of the earth, taking 474 lives. Conditions one year later were eerily similar, with rain drenching the disaster site and another threat (Tropical Storm Dianmu 電母) lurking off the east coast (happily it did not make landfall). Southern Taiwan has suffered heavy rains during the past month, but there has been little destruction and loss of life (so far), unlike the terrible flooding that has ravaged so much of China recently, such as the Gansu 甘肅 landslides.

The past year has been a time of profound pain and loss. Such feelings found expression in the Buddhist memorial ceremony held to commemorate the disaster, with tearful villagers making offerings such as betel nuts and rice wine to their loved ones to the accompaniment of scripture recitation rites. This being an election year, the rituals also attracted all three candidates running to serve as mayor of the new Kaohsiung Municipality (encompassing today’s Kaohsiung City and Kaohsiung County). Nonetheless, the focus rightly remained on the needs of those victims who survived.
For amidst the grief has also arisen hope for new life. The first permanent housing project for some of Siaolin’s survivors, known as “Great Love Village” (大愛園區), was built by the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (佛教慈濟功德會) in Shanlin Township (Kaohsiung County), yet only a few villagers have chosen to live there. More villagers have expressed interest in the second permanent housing project being constructed by the government, which is slated to be finished soon. These homes will be situated in the village of Wulipu 五里埔, located less than one kilometer from where Siaolin Village used to stand and also the site for the successful restaging of the annual Siraya Plains Aborigine 西拉雅平埔原住民族 ritual known as the “Siaolin Night Festival” (小林夜祭).

Most of the villagers, representing between 106 and 130 of Siaolin’s remaining 247 households, have continued to advocate for their dream of undertaking the rebuilding process themselves using land purchased by the ROC Red Cross in Shanlin. Their wishes went unheeded for many long months, with the government insisting that they settle in one of the two above-mentioned housing projects. Things finally came to a head in the days leading up to the anniversary, when villagers and their supporters started circulating a petition that appealed to the government to follow through on its earlier pledges to rebuild the village of Siaolin in a way that helped preserve its Plains Aborigine culture. They also staged a candlelight ceremony on the evening of August 8, with President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 and other dignitaries joining villagers in lighting candles placed in the shape of the Chinese character “home” (家).
This time their dreams have come true, be it due to the legitimacy of their claims, the power of their rhetoric, and/or the fact that another round of elections is coming up. Following the ceremony, village leaders joyfully announced the good news: President Ma has promised to support a special rebuilding project that adheres to the villagers’ wishes. If land acquisition and construction processes go according to schedule, the new Siaolin Village should be completed in just eight months, and its Plains Aborigine culture will be preserved.

The road to recovery has been a long one, and there is still some distance to be travelled, but at least things now seem to be moving in the right direction. The fact that so much has been accomplished is a tribute to the spirit of Taiwan’s people, as well as the quality of this nation’s democracy, which, while far from perfect, does allow citizens to pressure their leaders to do what it takes to meet their needs.

*Note: Many thanks to Hung Shu-fen 洪淑芬 for providing the photos.*

*This is the final in a series of articles Paul Katz has written on the rebuilding of Siaolin. Read previous entries here.*

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