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The terrible secrets of Taiwan's Stasi files

Researchers have unearthed the surveillance records of Taiwan's former dictatorship. But the revelations inside could tear society apart



May 1st 2025

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By Alice Su

During the 1980s a young intellectual called Yang Bi-chuan used to give illicit history lectures in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. Charismatic and fearless, with a frizz of unruly hair, Yang was only in his 30s, but had already served seven years in prison for angering the authoritarian government that ruled the island. A voracious reader and self-taught historian, he referred to himself as the Taiwanese Trotsky.

At that time, nobody was teaching the Taiwanese their own history. The lush, sub-tropical island, which sits 130km off the coast of China, was run by the exiled Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT). When Taiwan was mentioned in KMT-run schools and universities, it was merely as a footnote in the glorious 5,000-year-long history of China. Students at the National Taiwan University invited Yang to come to their classrooms after the day's official lessons were over to fill in the gaps.

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Taiwaneseeness is a complicated concept. Some islanders are from indigenous ethnic groups, but most are descended from Han Chinese immigrants from the province of Fujian, who first arrived in the 16th century. The island has been colonised by various empires: the Dutch, the Spanish, the Qing dynasty, the Japanese. Yang talked about the distinctly Taiwanese sense of identity that was forged by enduring and resisting these waves of occupation. Dozens of students would gather to listen.

Even if they didn't know all the details of their history, they knew about Taiwan's vulnerability to outside powers. During the second world war the Allies took the island from the Japanese and gave it to the nationalist government of China, run by a general called Chiang Kai-shek. Soon afterwards Chiang lost control of China and fled to Taiwan. Running roughshod over the local population's feelings, Chiang decided to turn Taiwan into a fortress for his party's crusade against communism. He put the island under martial law, which lasted four decades. Yang's lectures formed a small part of the resistance to it.

At 9:30pm, when university staff switched off the classroom lights, Yang and his students would relocate to a Japanese bar, or *izakaya*, to hear Yang's prison tales. During the period of martial law around 140,000 people disappeared into the dictatorship's jails. The most notorious of these was a "re-education" and labour camp just off Taiwan's south-eastern coast. Yang was taken to the Green Island prison complex in 1970. He spent three of his seven years there in solitary confinement. Afterwards, he would rely on black humour to talk about the experience. He used to say that Chiang had thoughtfully taken care of his education by locking up so many great teachers alongside him (he also liked to joke that he rewarded the government agents who trailed him after his release by visiting a strip club).



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The 1980s were a heady time in Taiwan. After America formally recognised the communist regime in China in 1979, it was clear that the KMT, far from being in a position to retake the mainland, could only hang on to Taiwan with Washington's blessing. The island had a pro-democracy movement called *tanowai* or "outside the party" and its activists were

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in the past.

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But that didn't mean they weren't being watched. The surveillance infrastructure of the White Terror, as Taiwanese call the period of martial rule, was still in effect. Students often confided to Yang that government agents had phoned them asking what kind of things he was saying in the bar. Yang laughed this off. Didn't those agents have anything better to do than stalking a bunch of drunkards?

One of the people who attended his lectures was an art student called Huang Kuo-shu. Huang was fun, bubbling with ideas, and often the last to leave the bar. Yang liked him a great deal. After graduating Huang moved to Taichung, Taiwan's second-largest city, where he boarded with a dissident bookseller. The bookseller introduced him to prominent figures in the underground opposition, and when free elections were eventually allowed in the 1990s, Huang was selected to stand as a candidate. Yang watched with pride as his former acolyte became a prominent politician for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

One entry claimed that his child's nanny had been recruited as an informant

One day in 2019 Yang got a call from a government official, who told him that they had recently acquired a trove of surveillance files from the old regime's secret police. It included notes on Yang from his dissident days. Would he like to take a look?

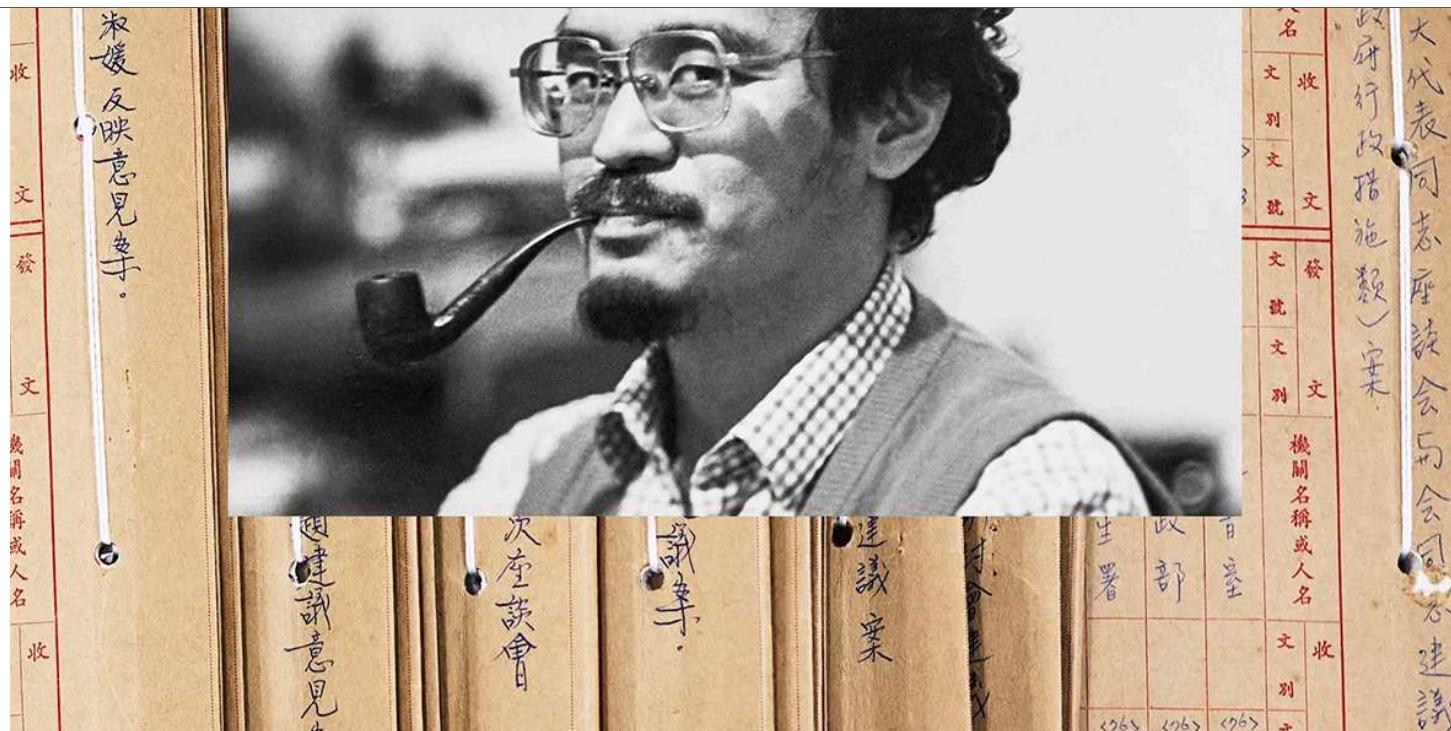
Yang went to an office building where, on a desk, officials had placed two fat stacks of yellowing files plastered with Post-it notes, each about a metre high. Inside were meticulous handwritten notes on who Yang met every day, who he called, who he drank with, and what they said. There was a hand-drawn map of his home, with photos of the rooms and bookshelves. One entry noted that agents had bought a property near Yang's home to watch him more closely. Another claimed that his child's nanny had been recruited as an informant.

Most of the informants were referred to by codenames, but there were enough details for Yang to work out who they were. At first, he wasn't angry. The authoritarian system was violent, he reasoned. Its officials knew how to scare people into doing what they wanted. Many of those he identified as informers had in fact already apologised to him for it. But there was one figure he hadn't known about before, who seemed to have been in the bar with him every night. This informant, he

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Yang Bi-chuan refers to himself as the “Taiwanese Trotsky” (top and above). As a young man he was imprisoned for seven years on Green Island, where the most notorious prison complex of the White Terror was located

Yang was an old man who had lived through cruel times, and little shocked him. But this hurt, he said. “Like a knife in your back.”

Outside Taiwan surprisingly little is known about the White Terror. The events that led up to it began on February 27th 1947, when police beat up a Taiwanese woman for selling tobacco on the streets without a licence. When a crowd gathered round, the police shot at them, killing one person. The next day there were huge street protests. The KMT’s army carried out systematic public executions, marching suspected dissidents to the banks of Taipei’s rivers to be killed by firing squads. Others were taken from their homes in the middle of the night. No one knows exactly how many people died in the 228 Incident (a reference to the date on which the protests took place). It is estimated to be at least 18,000.

Two years after the mass killings Chiang imposed martial law. One of the first things the new regime forbade was any discussion of them. The KMT also banned local languages (most Taiwanese spoke Japanese or dialects from southern China rather than Mandarin), and sought to turn the Taiwanese into “proper Chinese people” who would one day help take back the mainland.

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~~When you don't know what's happening, you think they must be covering something up. But once you know, you regret knowing"~~

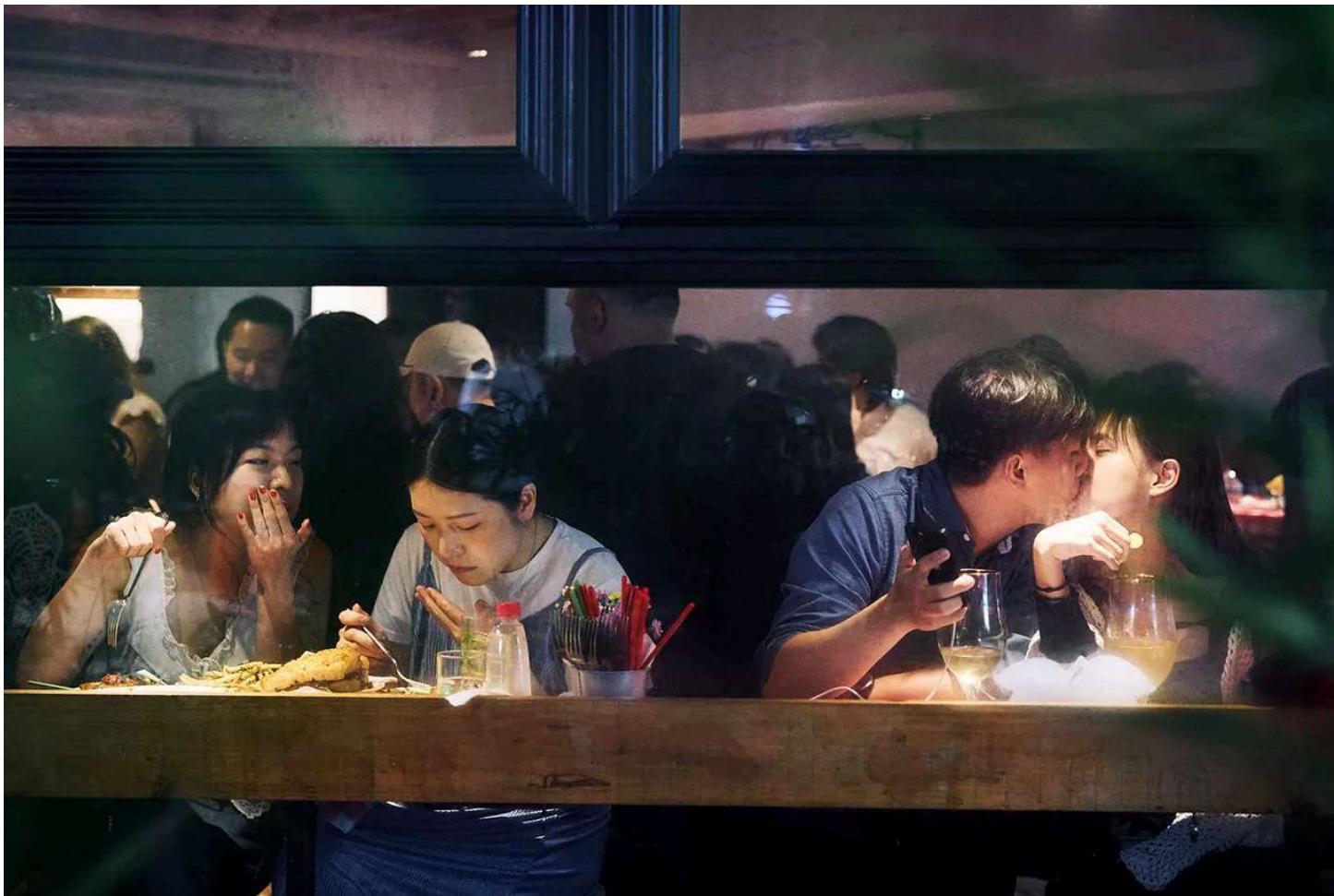
To keep them obedient, police and intelligence agencies built spy networks across the island, recruiting ordinary people to report on students, church members, writers, lawyers and activists. Phone-tapping was widespread – some dissidents found their landlines didn't even work outside the office hours of the agents listening in. Political prisoners like Yang were sent to Green Island, where torture was endemic.

Today Taiwan's 24m citizens live in a thriving democracy. Election rallies are lively, and talk-show hosts and taxi drivers are free to criticise the government as much as they like (and they do, at all times of day). A national identity has taken hold – only 3% of the population today think of themselves as primarily Chinese. But society remains divided about how to deal with China's Communist Party, which insists the island is part of China, and has threatened to take it by force.

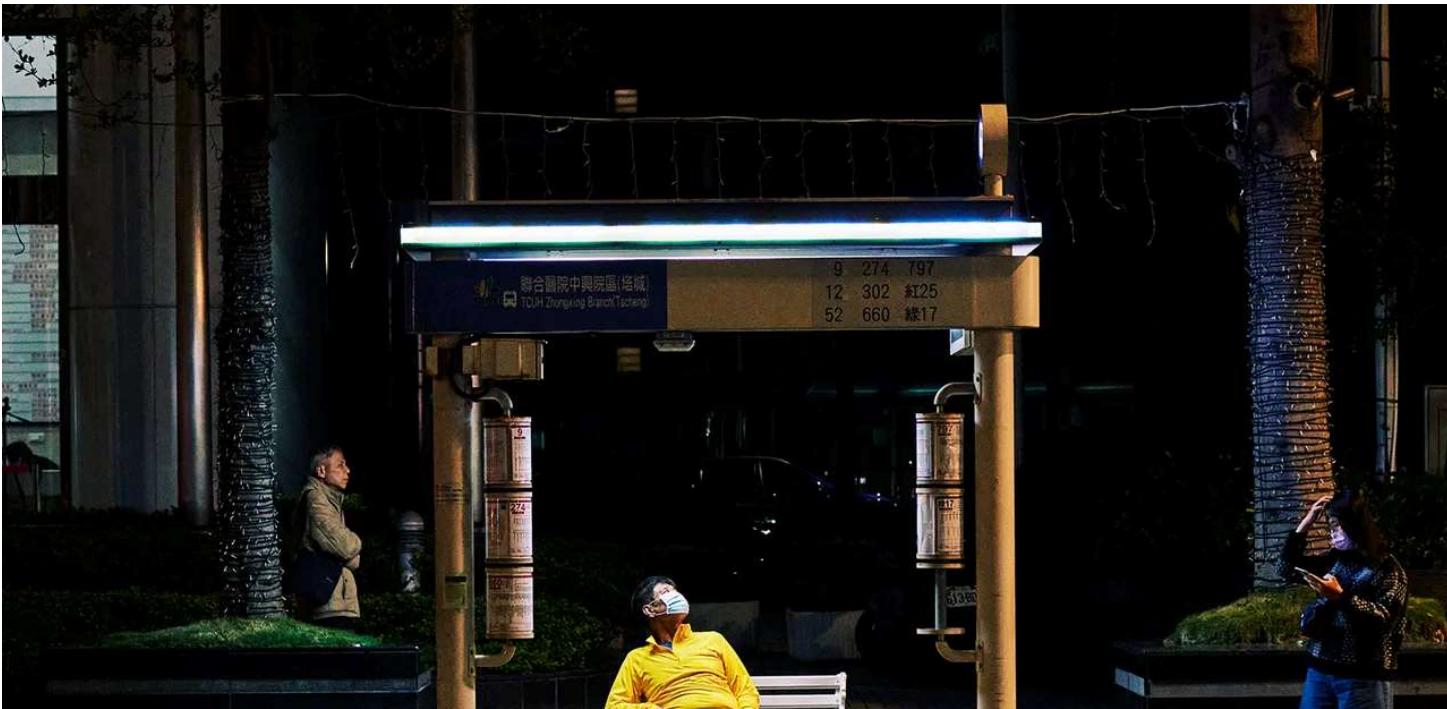
On the one hand, a generation has grown up in what is an independent country in all but name. For many of them, the prospect of being swallowed by the giant dictatorship next door is appalling. But others, especially older people, still feel strong links to the mainland. Many Taiwanese also fear confrontation. Having spent much of the 20th century raging against Chinese communists, the KMT now favours deepening relations with them, in an attempt to avoid war.



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The White Terror itself is still only murkily understood in Taiwan, and there is no consensus on how to talk about it. This is partly because Taiwan's transition to democracy in the 1990s was gradual – an evolution, rather than a revolution. There was no storming of the public-records office, the way there was in East Germany. The most prominent secret-police unit, the Garrison Command, was dissolved, but all other security agencies continued functioning as before. In 1995 Taiwan's first democratically elected president apologised for the 228 Incident and offered compensation to victims of the KMT's abuses, but declined to offer transparency into that era.

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The result is a kind of amnesia. The KMT still exists, but as one party in a competitive political system. Chiang's statue still stands in the centre of the capital. Green Island is home to a museum on the horrors that happened there, but many Taiwanese see it primarily as a holiday destination with excellent snorkelling. ("It's the worst habit of Taiwanese people," said Yang. "Once the past is over they don't want to talk about it any more. They say, 'It's already in the past, let's move on.'")

In 2016 the DPP, the party founded by dissidents, won control of both the executive and legislative branches of government for the first time. Officials decided they were going to try to shine light on the White Terror, and passed a bill declassifying the files of political prisoners and establishing a body to analyse them, known as the Transitional Justice Commission (TJC).

Only as an adult did Su realise that her father was not a common criminal. When she was a child, no one had dared explain the concept of a political prisoner to her

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looking to score political points – within a few months of the TJC being formed, its members were recorded discussing how their findings might be useful in blocking a particular KMT politician from running for office.

For others the best thing about opening up the files was that it would strengthen Taiwan against China. Polling suggests young people care more about economic issues than the threat from China, and are becoming less committed to Taiwanese independence. Some advocates for opening up the files hoped that showing the reality of a dictatorship would rouse the youth out of this blasé attitude. “What’s important is that everyone can understand how an authoritarian system works and the harm it brings,” said Huang Chang-ling of the Taiwan Association for Truth and Reconciliation.



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On February 28th 1947 demonstrators gathered in the streets of Taipei (*top*). Security forces fired into the crowd, and subsequently executed thousands of people in what came to be known as the 228 Incident. The head of the Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek (*middle*), was responsible for security forces on the island. When he lost his civil war against communists on the mainland Chiang retreated to Taiwan and put it under a state of martial law which lasted for four decades (*bottom*).

Yet when the commission finally started probing the files, they were full of surprises. Some of the revelations were so troubling that people who once campaigned to know what was inside were left ruing their curiosity. “When you don’t know what’s in the files, you think they must be covering something up,” said Su-ching Hsuan, a researcher from the TJC. “But once you know, you regret knowing.”

Yang told a friend what he’d learnt about Huang, and the information eventually made its way to a journalist. When the story broke, in 2021, most people in Taiwan had little idea what was in the files. They were stunned to hear that a respected figure in their country’s struggle for democracy had been collaborating with the torturers.

The news provoked intense soul-searching within the DPP. Li Chin-hsiang, the bookseller who had hosted Huang in

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professionally trained, not a low-level informant.

“In that kind of totalitarian environment, every person has to co-operate in some way. They have to protect themselves”

Huang addressed the rumours in a Facebook apology with the heading: “Face the past calmly, take political responsibility”. Intelligence agents had coerced him into working with them, he said. They had promised to protect him and his fellow student activists as long as he co-operated. “At that time I just wanted everyone to be safe,” Huang wrote in the post. He pledged to step down from public life once he finished his legislative term in January 2024 – and duly did. (Huang did not want to be interviewed for this story.)

His dignified response somehow made the confusion worse. Many in the DPP were inclined to forgive him. Michael Tsai, a former DPP defence minister who once employed Huang as a secretary, said that Huang had apologised to him privately, and ought to be shown compassion. “In that kind of totalitarian environment, every person has to co-operate in some way. They have to protect themselves, protect their family, protect their friends,” he said. “He is also a victim.”

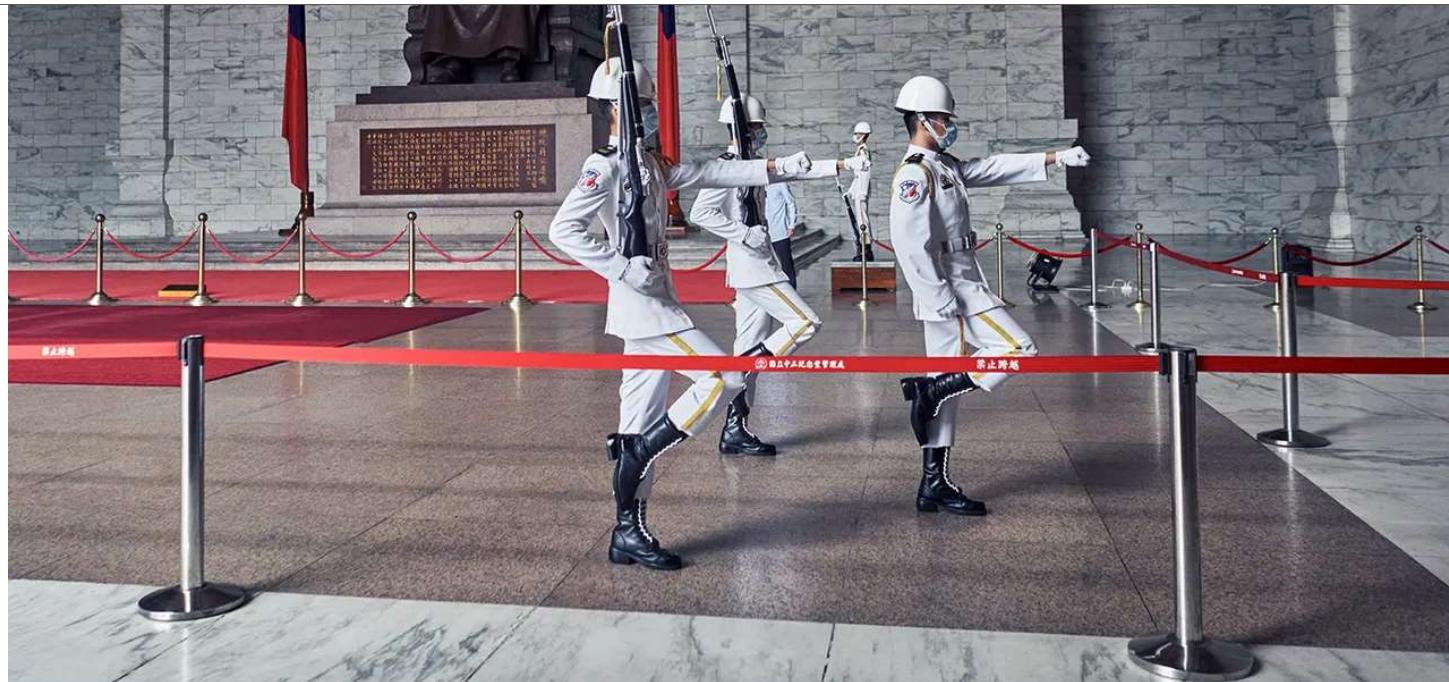
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Others remained furious. “We paid the costs of that era, but he reaped the fruits of democracy and became a legislator,” said Su Chih-fen, a DPP politician. “I think we’ve already treated him too well.”

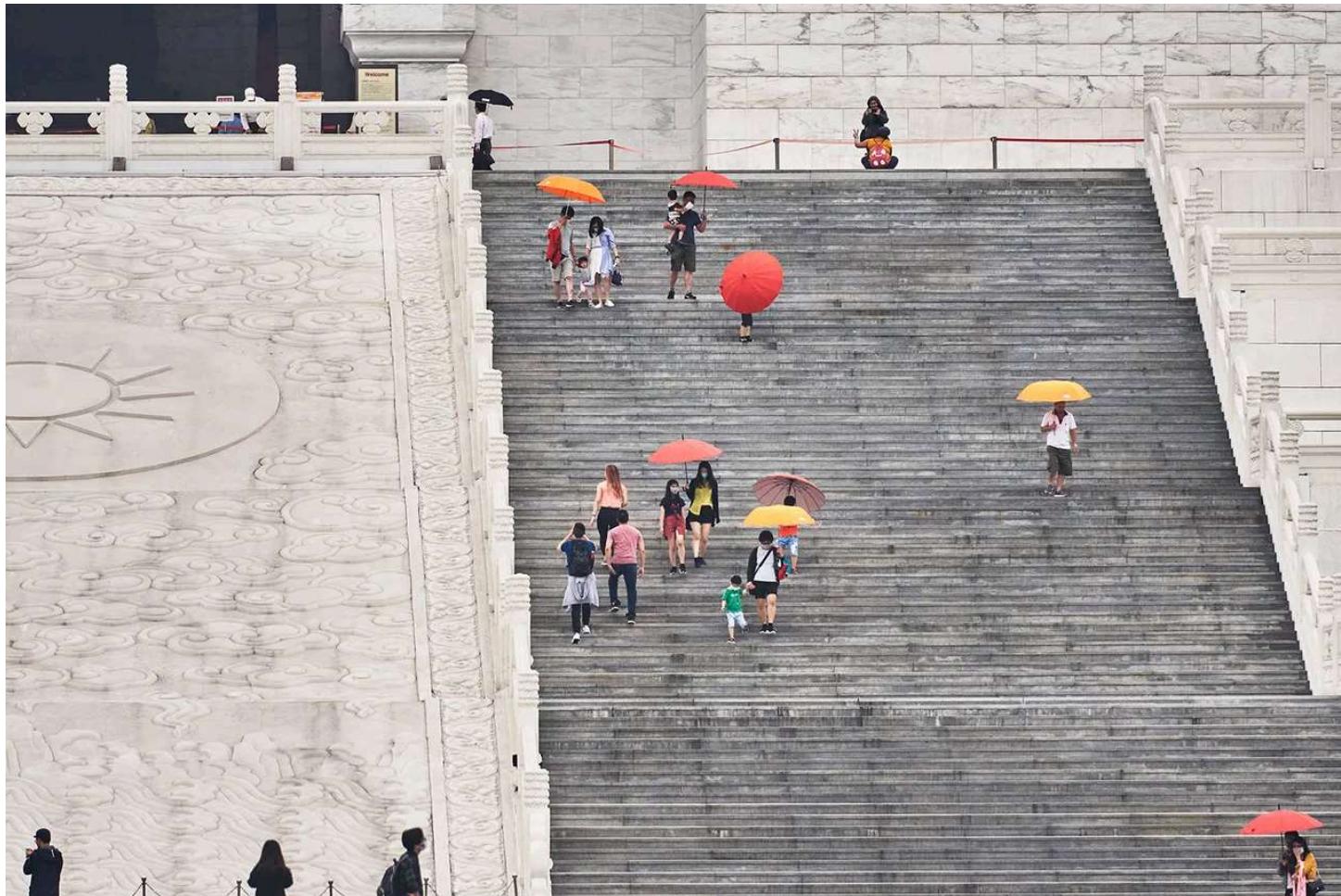
Su suffered more than most during the White Terror. She was eight when her parents disappeared one night in 1961. Her father, Su Tong-chi, was arrested for being a *tangwai* activist; her mother was taken for failing to report on him. The couple were brought to a military prison on the outskirts of Taipei where political prisoners were shackled alone in the dark for “self-reflection”, and sometimes executed.



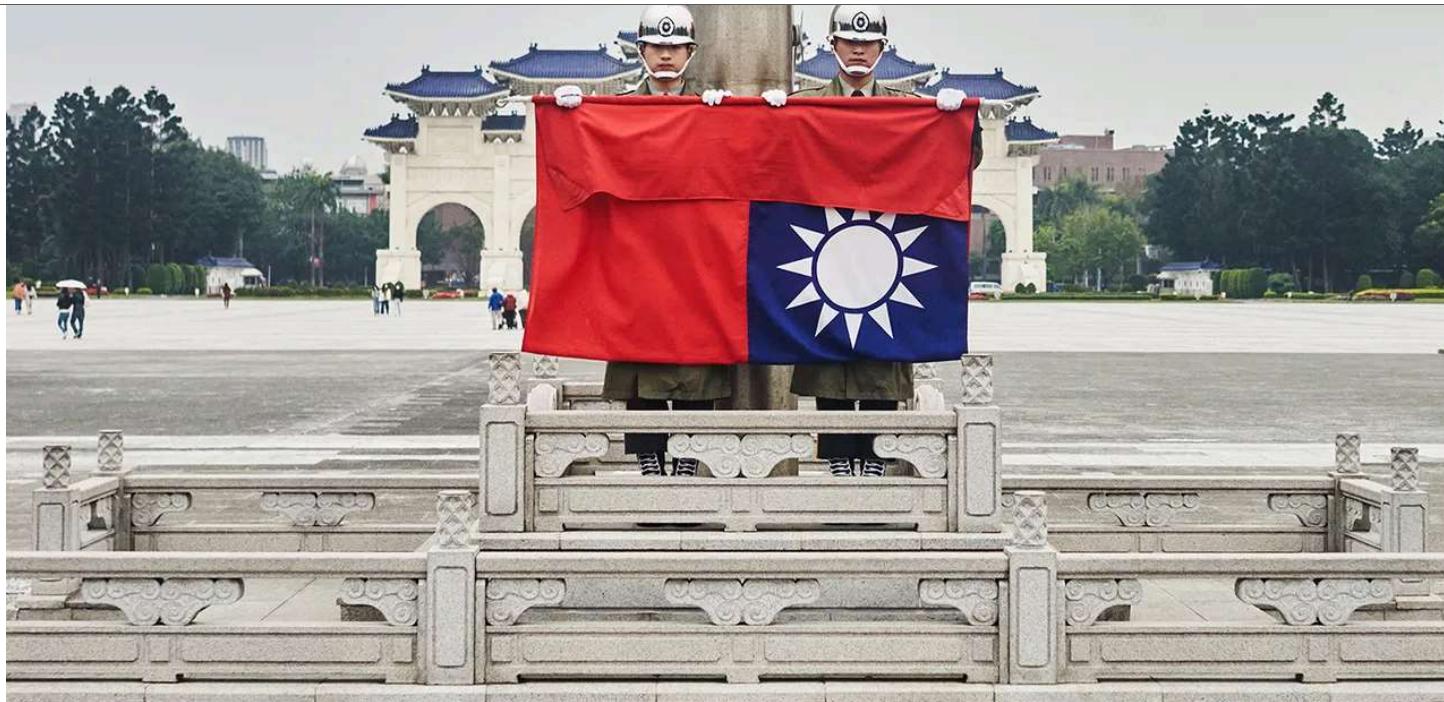
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Chiang Kai-shek is still celebrated in Taiwan. There is a memorial hall commemorating him in Taipei (top), with a waxwork likeness on display (second down)

The frightened girl went to live with relatives. They didn't tell her where her parents had gone or what was happening, but she felt somehow as if she ought to be ashamed. It was several years before she was reunited with her mother; she didn't see her father again until she was 22. Only as an adult did Su realise that her father was not a common criminal or a "bad person". When she was a child, no one had dared explain the concept of a political prisoner to her.

Su believes that the state owes families like hers the catharsis of seeing collaborators held accountable. She thought about the public trials of Hitler's henchmen in Nuremberg, and felt envious. The idea that Huang could just apologise, and face no further consequences, seemed insulting to her. "If the archives hadn't been opened, wouldn't he just continue as he was?"

The surveillance files of the KMT's secret police sit in temperature-controlled vaults in an earthquake-proof building in the outskirts of Taipei. Government researchers use the space to store all the records they've managed to prise from intelligence agencies relating to human-rights abuses during the period of one-party rule. They're known collectively as the "political files".

Agents took copious notes on dissidents' sexual preferences, marital affairs

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If stacked together, the political files assembled so far would create a tower nearly six times higher than the tallest building in Taipei. In almost every page of the court records and security agencies' internal communications there is something that would be meaningful to at least one family. Some files contain haunting photos of political prisoners smiling shortly before they were executed.

The surveillance files, which are a subset of the political files, are currently in the process of being digitised. Inside the archive building I watched technicians in protective masks and gloves stand over the fragile pages, using tiny brushes and tweezers to remove rusted staples and glue ripped-up pieces back together. The work was painstakingly slow.

Only a tiny fraction of the information contained in the surveillance files has been released to the public. Partly this is because the process takes such a long time. There was no central department holding them – researchers had to approach each of the different government agencies that carried out surveillance and ask to go through their catalogues. The agencies' records often consisted of disorganised stacks of paper kept in dusty, cockroach-infested storehouses. Many refused to turn over their files in spite of the law obliging them to do so, citing national security. So far researchers have retrieved 30,000 surveillance files, but have no idea how many more exist.



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Fan Yun, a Taiwanese politician, was invited to read her surveillance file (top and above). She discovered that several friends had been informing on her when she was a student

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redacted. As well as encoding the names of informants, intelligence agencies had blocked out their agents' names.

The files' contents were often salacious. Agents took copious notes on dissidents' sexual preferences, marital affairs and secret vices. One file discussed using "female psychological weakness" to "strike radical actors" – in other words, telling women about their husbands' cheating. As Su Ching-hsuan, a TJC researcher, explained: "They're thinking, 'We don't want these men out on the street leading resistance to the government. We want them to stay at home and fight with their wives.'"

The gossipy details were even more problematic for being potentially untrue. Agents seem to have made things up when it suited them. One admitted to the TJC that he'd once pretended that someone was an informant just to fulfil his work quotas.

In the end, the TJC decided to invite a handful of people who had been under heavy surveillance, like Yang, to come in and look at their files. The commission allowed members of the public to request files too, though this service wasn't widely known about.

"If these people were willing to betray their friends and their loyalties for self-interest in the past, then they could still sell us out to China today"

One person who received the invitation was a DPP legislator called Fan Yun. Fan had become involved in the student democracy movement at the end of the 1980s, and attended Yang's campus lectures. She was surprised to hear she'd been under extensive surveillance, as she hadn't really been politically active until after martial law ended in 1987. Curious, and a little anxious, about what kind of information the regime had on her, she went to see the files.

She found more than a thousand pages of notes detailing her conversations, interests and relationships over a period of nine years. Agents even kept track of the marks she received for her academic work. They portrayed her as a strong-willed radical, and speculated on why she was so stubborn (had she been indulged too much as the youngest child in the family?).

Fan was amused by the armchair psychology. But she couldn't sleep for several nights after reading the notes. There had been seven or eight fellow students informing on her, and she couldn't work out who most of them were. "I keep wondering, who are they?" she said. "And where are they now?" They would now be in their 50s or 60s, and, if they had stayed in politics, at the peak of their influence.



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In the National Archives, researchers are painstakingly reassembling the surveillance files of the old regime's secret police (from top to bottom)

The fear that politicians might not be who they say they are, or might be serving a secret agenda, is especially potent in Taiwan. China's spies have concentrated vast resources on penetrating Taiwanese society. Last year 64 people in Taiwan were charged with spying for China. A recent crackdown on alleged spies has swept up at least five members of the DPP, who are being investigated on suspicion of giving information to Chinese agents.

Reading the surveillance files made Fan wonder if anyone could be trusted any more. "If these people were willing to betray their friends and their loyalties for self-interest in the past, then they could still sell us out to China today," she said.

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himself. But another person listed as an informant in Yang's file did agree to see me.

Ang Kaim is a historian at the Academia Sinica, a prestigious research institute in Taipei. He appears in Yang's file under the code name *tongren*, or "like-minded companion".

We met in his home, a small flat on the outskirts of the city. It brimmed with books and paraphernalia he'd picked up during his research: old maps, sketches of Dutch ships, a metal figurine of Mao Zedong.

They asked Ang if he felt guilty about taking money from intelligence agents. “Aren’t you Yang Bi-chuan’s friend?” they had said

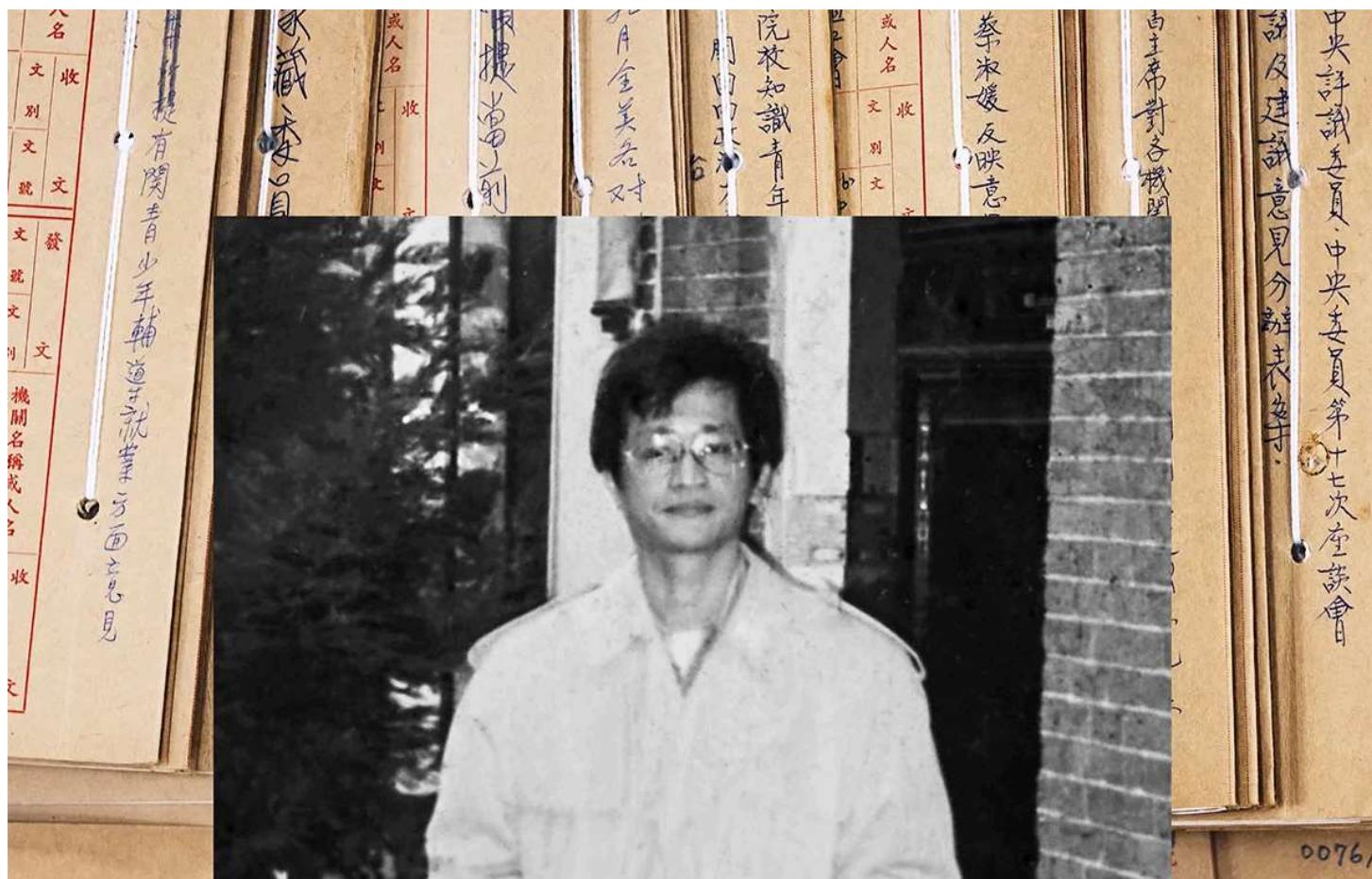
Ang had been raised to be proud of his Taiwanese identity – something that got him into trouble. As a schoolboy, he had been punished for speaking Taiwanese in class. A teacher hung a sign around Ang's neck that read: "I must speak Mandarin, not dialect". The teacher offered to remove the sign if he informed on another child, but he refused. That would make him a *liàu-pê-á* (back scratcher), the Taiwanese word for snitch. "To be accused of being a *liàu-pê-á* is a huge humiliation," he explained.

He went on to study at National Taiwan University, where Yang gave his underground history classes, and frequented the same bookshops as the historian, both men in search of forbidden titles smuggled from Japan. The pair became friends.

Then Ang was recruited by the secret police. According to the file, he provided information about Yang on five occasions, each time in exchange for money. At one point his handlers wrote that their source was jeopardising his position by speaking brashly to Yang and drinking too much. "We have already asked the Taipei department to guide Ang properly in maintaining relations with suspect Yang," they said. Another entry noted that Ang seemed to be in financial difficulty, and recommended increased contact with him.



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Ang Kaim attended Yang's underground history classes (top and above). He was characterised as an informant in the files, but says he was never paid

Ang found out about the files in 2021, when members of the TJC came to question him about them. He felt as if they were eager to catch another spy. It unfolded more like an interrogation session than a discussion. They asked if he'd helped intelligence agents install listening devices in Yang's home, and if he felt guilty about taking money from them. "Aren't you Yang Bi-chuan's friend?" they had said.

Ang was upset. He was 65, nearing retirement and spending most of his days at home caring for his disabled wife. He didn't want to be pilloried in public like Huang. He hadn't sold out his friend, he told his questioners, and they shouldn't just believe whatever the files said.

This is what Ang says happened: in 1981 he was approached by a stranger who said he had a crush on one of Ang's female classmates, and needed advice on approaching her. The man asked to meet near the library on the university campus. It was an ominous location: Chen Wen-chen, a maths professor and democracy activist, had just been found dead in the same spot after a long interrogation by Taiwan's secret police.

The security services have no desire for more transparency, especially when the results seem to increase tensions within Taiwan

The stranger quickly made clear to Ang that he was an intelligence agent. He told Ang that there was already a thick file on him, but that he could help himself by providing information about Yang. Ang was frightened. He started carrying a toothbrush and toothpaste on him at all times, in case he was suddenly detained.

Soon afterwards, a second agent began visiting Ang. When Ang came back from drinking with Yang, the agent would show up at his home to ask about their night. Ang wasn't sure if this agent was investigating him or Yang. Either way, he tried to be cordial and answered the agent's questions. He also told Yang about what was happening. Ang says he was never paid – he suspects the agent pocketed the money he was meant to give him.

Yang chooses to believe that Ang was never paid, in spite of what the files said. The two are still friends today. When I met them together last spring, they joked with each other in Taiwanese. Ang still called Yang *laoda*, meaning "big brother" or "boss" (he is nearly a decade his junior). Yang frequently interrupted Ang and scolded him for rambling ("stop going off on tangents!"). Ang would laugh and continue talking.

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Some people think that the problem with the files is not that too much information has come out, but that too much remains hidden. Michael Tsai, the former DPP defence minister, believes there is no point in the exercise unless the agents' names are unredacted and every file is made available to the public. "It's about restoring the truth of history."



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Last year Taiwan elected a new president, Lai Ching-te, who called for more declassification. But the security services continue to insist that the names of agents remain covered up. Many files relating to the cases Taiwanese people most

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~~meanwhile, the DPP has lost its parliamentary majority. The PJC has been dissolved, its tasks distributed to other~~

government agencies. The declassification process is ongoing, but for now it has lost momentum. The security services have no desire for more transparency, especially when the results seem to increase tensions within Taiwan.

The political parties have other things on their plates, and may also fear unexploded ordnance in the files. And the general public has shown surprisingly little interest in finding out more about their contents. Su Chih-fen, whose parents were political prisoners, thinks the DPP threw away its best chance of getting real accountability for the White Terror. “There’s always something else that seems more important.”

The surveillance files that were made public have actually become harder to see. For a few years, anyone could apply to look at them. But in 2023, the law was amended to protect the privacy of people mentioned in them. For now, only people who were targeted for surveillance in the files (or their descendants, if they have died) can apply to see them, or permit others to see them. The files will be made completely public 70 years after their creation, when everyone mentioned in them will probably be dead.

The Investigation Bureau, the agency which held many of the surveillance files, declined my requests for an interview, and wouldn’t put me in touch with the agent who wrote the notes on Ang. The National Security Bureau, Taiwan’s intelligence agency, also declined to comment on the political files.

For Yang, the “Taiwanese Trotsky”, the whole declassification project was ill-conceived. “If we started doing this 20 years earlier, it could have been meaningful,” he said. Now it was just destroying trust between ordinary people who had been preyed upon by an authoritarian regime, he said, while the real bad guys – the heads of the security agencies and of the KMT – had gone unpunished.

When the country democratised in the 1990s Yang was widely expected to become a DPP politician, but his anti-establishment beliefs and innate scepticism were too strong. I sat with him in his favourite *izakaya*, where he is treated like a celebrity. Passers-by stop to drink a Taiwanese beer with him. He alternated between sips of beer and scathing criticisms of Taiwan’s political scene: “What’s the use of democracy and democratic voting when we have a bunch of chaotic and useless candidates? I just cast blank votes.”

He told me that Huang tried to contact him through intermediaries to seek his forgiveness, but Yang rebuffed him. “I don’t want to deal with him or talk about it.”

I asked if he regretted looking at his case notes, and he shrugged. There would be no use in dwelling on that. But when I asked what he thought should be done with the files now, he was decisive. “Burn them,” he said. ●

Alice Su is an international correspondent for *The Economist*

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