

Renjian Manifesto: Liberation and Dignity

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Introduction

In contemporary public discourse, the rhetoric of Taiwan as “the Lighthouse of Democracy” (minzhu dengta 民主燈塔) in Asia after it transitioned from a one-party authoritarian polity to a multi-party democratic system can often be detected, even if it already appeared as a selfcelebratory metaphor manipulated by the KMT regime to differentiate itself from the CCP-led China during the Cold War. Herein lies the (mis)conception that, after the watershed moment of 1987 when Martial Law was lifted in Taiwan, democratization and transitional justice took place smoothly and automatically without too many hiccups, when in fact many social and political problems continued across this threshold.¹ The fear of an immediate amnesia of these problems haunted the left-leaning intellectuals at Renjian (人間) magazine, which ran from 1985 to 1989, both before and after Martial Law was lifted. In the manifesto entitled “Liberation and Dignity” (jiefang yu zunyan 解放與尊嚴) published in 1989, the editorial board collectively issued a relentless self-criticism as it asked itself a thorny question: “After the Martial Law system is lifted, what more can you do?” Feeling both furious and powerless about what they took to be a pseudo-democratic shift, the editors at Renjian criticized both the continuation of the “Cold War/National Security State/Vassal of US-Japan Hegemony” structure and the inaction of intellectuals. In a classic left-wing fashion, they then argued that “the total liberation of history, intellect, and culture is the foundation of human dignity,” one that requires even more critiques and activism to challenge authority. Indeed, the Renjian Manifesto serves as a sharp and eloquent reminder of the intellectual atmosphere of the immediate postMartial Law period, one

¹ For a recent survey of the lifting of Martial Law and the process of democratization, please see: Ryan Dunch, and Ashley Esarey, eds., *Taiwan in Dynamic Transition: Nation Building and Democratization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020).

that attempted to sustain the radical spirit of a social movement and question the problematic rhetoric of the state.

Renjian magazine—its title literally meaning the Human World or Human Society—was established by the (in)famous left-wing writer Chen Yingzhen (陳映真, 1937-2016) in 1985 along the lines of class-based humanism and activism. Published at a time when freedom of speech and the press were extremely choked by the autocratic state (censoring by the now-defunct Government Information Office was only abolished in 1988), Renjian stood as an exemplary independent investigative publication that sought to foreground social malaise and minorities. In the opening statement of its inaugural issue, the editorial board bemoaned “Humans have become merely tools for the consumption of a dazzling array of merchandise,” clearly evoking the concept of reification in Marxist philosophy. During the so-called Taiwan Economic Miracle that transformed Taiwan into a member of the Four Asian Tigers, Renjian was keenly aware that society had grown more and more numb towards many disadvantaged groups that were left behind, and it thus vowed to “report, discover, document, witness, and comment through images and words.” With a team of talented journalists and photographers, Renjian was able to cover crucial social events neglected by mainstream media, such as the Anti-DuPont Movement in 1986 (protests against the chemical pollutants released by the US company DuPont in Lukang), the Tang Ying-Shen Incident in 1987 (protests against the execution of an indigenous youth Tang Ying-Shen who murdered his employers due to long-term discrimination), Anti-Nuclear Movement in 1988 (protests against the dumping of nuclear waste on Orchid Island), and more.² Typically accompanied by large-scale black-and-white photos that aimed to shock readers, the articles in the magazine not only reported on issues ranging from social movements, environmental protection, labor rights, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and LGBTQ communities, but it also uncovered many instances of political

² For an account of the Anti-DuPont Movement, please see: James Reardon-Anderson, *Pollution, Politics and Foreign Investment in Taiwan: Lukang Rebellion* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For an account of the Anti-Nuclear Movement, please see: Ming-sho Ho, “The Politics of Anti-Nuclear Protest in Taiwan: A Case of Party-Dependent Movement (1980-2000),” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2003): 683-708. For an account of the Tang Ying-Shen incident, please see: Darryl Sterk, “A Tale of Two Settler Nationalisms: The Formosan Aborigines and Settler Nationalism in Han Chinese Fiction and Film,” in *The Proceedings of the 2007 UCSB International Conference on Taiwan Studies*, ed. Robert Backus, 85-105 (Santa Barbara: Center for Taiwan Studies, University of California, 2008).

oppression during the White Terror that were muted by the state. Indeed, it seems clear that, for Renjian, “the total liberation of history, intellect, and culture” could only be pursued by honest and in-depth reportage. In this sense, Renjian can be seen as a pioneer of investigative journalism and documentary photography, as well as an active participant in many of the social movements that have shaped Taiwanese political history.

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Further Readings

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At the end of the year 1985, Renjian magazine was inaugurated. She held high a torch that emanated a sincere faith, hope, and compassion for human beings as she went past 1986 and 1987, the final years for the post-war Martial Law system in Taiwan. Through the viewpoint of the masses embedded within their everyday life and their workplace, she examined the Taiwanese people, their livelihoods, their lives, nature, and the society.³ In an era flooded by taboos and lies, she even took the first step to uncover the neglected history of the Red Purge in the early 1950s in Taiwan in the forms of public history, reportage photography, and literary works.

In 1988, the militaristic Martial Law that had dominated Taiwanese lives for almost 40 years was lifted. Facing an upcoming year of 1989 and looking back at the historic year after Taiwan's lifting of Martial Law, Renjian came to a profound selfreflection: she has not initiated and built a more progressive intellectual and humanistic force even as this long-term political, cultural, and intellectual shackle was being dismantled. The maneuvers introduced by the system for the lifting of Martial Law have turned into unprecedented challenges and mockeries against the progressive cultural viewpoint of Renjian since its inauguration.

Before the lifting of Martial Law, it was Renjian who called into question the suffocating, authoritarian, and twisted authority developed under the structure of "Cold War/National Security State/Vassal of US-Japan Hegemony" for 40 years in Taiwan; it was Renjian who fought against the corruption of the obese and privileged rentier class

³ In the manifesto, Renjian magazine is personified as a female, evident in the use of the gendered pronoun "her" (ta 她).

who “grew under Cold War/Dependency/Authoritarianism.” But, after the lifting of Martial Law, the enormous authority and dominating apparatus has made its response and its comeback, throwing a hard and cold-blooded punch at Renjian and the dissidents who had once called for freedom in the dark nights during the past: “After the Martial Law system is lifted, what more can you do?”

This is the moment for Renjian to engage in serious introspection, to come to an intense epiphany, and to start afresh with bravery and valiance once again.

Renjian should not be indulged with social images like an “antioppression hero” or an “advocate for the weak;” Renjian should also not unconsciously fall into a mutually restrictive and mutually dependent relationship based on “oppression/antioppression” with the new postwar oppressor: a reincarnated fascist specter.

The current situation reminds us of an open letter written by Parisian writers who wished to declare their stance during the 1937 Spanish Civil War:

“...the lack of a firm stand, ambivalence, ivory tower, paradox, or ironic transcendence will not work anymore. ...We have witnessed fascism systematically carrying out social injustice and cultural death.”

When General Francisco Franco united international fascist forces to overthrow the Spanish people’s very own Republican government, and when the “liberal democratic” West shamefully chose fascist bandits over the Spanish people who sought liberation and dignity, the intellectuals, poets, writers, painters, musicians, doctors, revolutionaries, and laborers around the world who firmly believed in peace, justice, and democracy devoted themselves to the struggle for peace and justice in Spain and the world with their precious lives and noble ideals. Their honorable aspirations remain touchingly inspirational even today. The “crystal spirit” demonstrated by Picasso, Malraux, Orwell, Neruda, Bethune, Hemingway..... who gallantly threw themselves into

the Spanish anti-Fascist struggle, and exposed the laziness, timidity, and negligence of duty of the intellectuals of our entire generation!⁴

The overall structure of “Cold War/National Security State/Vassal of US-Japan Hegemony” that lasted for 40 years resulted in the depravation of this generation of intellectuals, evident in the bloody fact that they are not ashamed about their “lack of a firm stand, ambiguity, ivory tower, paradox, or ironic transcendence!” One year after the lifting of the Martial Law, the masses cannot find any profound, progressive, constructive, and productive cultural and intellectual performances on the part of intellectuals.

“After the Martial Law system is lifted, what more can you do?” becomes a pungent irony and mockery hurled back by the authority and the system!

Renjian’s self-reflection also focuses on the core of this provocation—what can we do, what will we do? —in order to respond to all kinds of difficult issues raised by history and life after the lifting of Martial Law.

The temporary thaw of the global Cold War structure and the lifting of the Taiwanese militaristic Martial Law system first and foremost demand a liberation of cultures, intellect, and thoughts. In terms of the history, creativity, bravery, intelligence, thought, and culture that were obliterated, deserted, distorted, fabricated, and suffocated under the “Cold War—Martial Law” system for the past 40 years, we should assess, analyze, and reconstruct them step by step. During this transitional period in history, Renjian, together with the people, will liberate every history, intellect, and culture distorted and suffocated by lies and fabrications under the “Martial Law subculture” throughout these 40 years, so as to reshape the thoughts, creativity, and cultural characteristics of the new era.

⁴ The term “crystal spirit” comes from a line of a poem—“No bomb that ever burst shatters the crystal spirit”—within George Orwell’s book *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), a reportage that covers the Spanish Civil War

Renjian believes: the total liberation of history, intellect, and culture is the foundation of human dignity. The long-term suffocation and fabrication of history, creativity, and intellect under the Martial Law system, as well as the cynicism, compromise, ambivalence, comprador mindset, and paradox have deeply humiliated and distorted the spiritual dignity of Taiwanese intellectuals and people.⁵ Liberating ourselves from the “Cold War/National Security State/Vassal of US-Japan Hegemony” structure with solid and difficult works, thoughts, critiques, and creations is the only way to reconstruct our personal, cultural, intellectual—and ethno-national—dignity.

Yes. Liberation and dignity. In a social movement that critiques international Cold War history and seeks liberation and dignity, we will reconstruct a Taiwan in this new historical era—and then a new human and new civilization in China as well as in Asia. This is the new goal for Renjian and her readers in this brand-new age.

Ah! A Renjian of “liberation and dignity.” Renjian will proceed as such. The society will advance as such.

January, 1989.

⁵ The term “comprador” (maiban 買辦) is a Portuguese word that means buyer, commonly used to designate a native servant or merchant who assisted Western business in Southern China and beyond. It is used here to describe intellectuals who subscribe to Western hegemony.