

**Dr. Mark Harrison Lectures at the Australian National University:
“Be Mindful of Each Bowl of Rice: Democracy, Development and Taiwan’s
Reconciliation with its History”**

Dr Mark Harrison gave a very insightful and fascinating lecture entitled “Be Mindful of Each Bowl of Rice: Democracy, Development and Taiwan’s Reconciliation with its History” at the Australian National University as the second ANU Library/China in the World/Taiwan Resource Centre for Chinese Studies on Monday 24 October 2016.

Dr. Harrison, obtained his Ph.D. at Monash University. He received Research Grant for Foreign Scholars in Chinese Studies in 1997, and now is the Senior Lecturer of University of Tasmania, and the president of Chinese Studies Association of Australia.

His presentation took a very wide brief – sweeping through the history of Taiwan and reinterpreting the nature of the way the past lives in the present intersect and are remembered in Taiwan. He used as his example the partially restored and reconstructed and partially derelict sites of the Human Rights Memorial Park on Green Island, including the New Life Reeducation Camp (新生訓導處) and the Ministry of National Defence Green Island Reform and Re-education Prison, known as Oasis Villa (綠洲山莊). He noted that “Their histories and their architectural spaces overlap as expressions of the institutionalization of authoritarianism and the transition to democracy and now of the memorialization of personal and national memory.”

Taiwan’s cultural, political and social history is extraordinarily complex. Interwoven with early governance from the Dutch empire, then China and Japan over many centuries, it has provided a heady and often violent backdrop to the development of its identity. Dr Harrison sees Taiwan’s imperial, colonial and post-colonial historical experience as one that has left it with conflicts that are deep seated. From Taiwan’s earliest settlers, members of Pacific Ocean societies of what is evocatively known as the Civilisation of the Voyaging Canoe, through Chinese settlement, Japanese colonisation to a modern democracy, Taiwan’s history has been punctuated by periods dynamism but also of great violence. Taiwan became

part of Nationalist China in 1945, but the 1947 Anti-Nationalist uprising, known as 二二八 or 2-28, cost tens of thousands of lives and was followed by a very long period of authoritarian rule. Thousands became political prisoners of the state from the 1950s to the 1980s, with huge consequences to their families and descendants. The decades of struggle by activists achieved a democracy in 1990s, but it taken the years since for the Taiwanese to fully come to terms with the history of authoritarianism.

The story of modern Taiwan stands a relationship to mainland China and the democratization of other countries in the region. Dr Harrison provided a very thoughtful view of the transition and its compelling features: “Taiwan’s democracy has been lauded globally as exemplar of third wave democratization. It is the foundation of Taiwan’s security. Democracy, sovereignty and nationhood, rights and Taiwanese subjectivity, capitalism have all been intertwined into a coherent and powerful story. Taiwan as told in this familiar way is structured by a narrative of not merely modernization, but modernity itself.” He noted that since the 1990s, Taiwan has been through periods of bitter political division, which “pitted Blue against Green in a fight for the future of Taiwan”.

Developing this argument, Dr Harrison argued that a new stage has been reached – one that can be seen in the work which is redefining identity through art and culture, museums and memorialisation. “Taiwan today is drowning in history, memory and nostalgia as art, urban development, museums and memorials proliferate across the island. Rather than being demolished, as might have happened in Taiwan’s era of hypergrowth, every historic structure from the Japanese period or the early KMT period is being transformed into a cultural zone or arts precinct or a museum or a memorial.”

He expanded to reflect on the legacy of Taiwan’s history of violence at all levels in Taiwanese society, suggesting that seeing its contemporary social life through this lens provides a vital context to understanding them. He noted that this argument has been given credence through important initiatives such as the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Tsai Ing-wen’s apology to Taiwan’s indigenous people.

Harrison then moved on to discuss Green Island, a remote and rugged place off the south east coast of Taiwan, so as to explore the story of this shift in the full recognition by Taiwanese of the tragedy of the past and demonstrating the commitment to political and cultural changes. He richly described the isolation of Green Island (a one hour ferry ride from Taitung). Its history reflects a tragic time for the nation – operating as a prison from 1951 until 1987. Dr Harrison noted that “The prison buildings, some preserved, some derelict and their histories blur into each other. The boundaries of the prison sites constantly shifted with new constructions and new administrative structures as the legal and penal system of martial law developed over many decades. There are actually different and contradictory accounts of which buildings belonged when and to which institution.”

The Green Island Human Rights Memorial is a milestone in the transformation of the site, a memorial to the victims of martial law.

Dr Harrison walked the audience on a journey through the buildings and messages they have left behind. He noted slogans left on the walls of a derelict building in the New Life Reeducation Centre, which were an adaptations of the popular aphorisms of Zhu Bolu, in his early-Qing dynasty text *Maxims for the Well-Managed Household*. (朱柏廬·治家格言 Zhū Bólú : Zhìjiā Géyán) One such slogan was 一粥一飯當思來處不易 (With each bowl of gruel or rice you should be mindful that its production is not easy).

His talk explored the symbolism and cultural significance of these popular Confucian texts on the walls of a mess hall in a prison on Green Island. They were intended to create a “Chinese imaginary, an everyday Chinese sense and a Chinese worldview but one that was imposed with ideological, psychological and political and if necessary violent force through the institutions of authoritarianism”. He then went on to describe how today the texts are subject to a kind of double reading, read as popular Confucianism but also as expressions of the suffering of Taiwanese people struggling for political rights. Today, instead of representing an economy of authoritarianism, they represent what Dr Harrison called Taiwan’s “economy of memory”.

In reviewing the nature of Green Island, the violence of the past and its reassessment in Taiwan today, Dr Harrison provided a wealth of evidence to support his conclusions that “Memory in Taiwan is not simply the public memorialisation of what might once have been kept private, as a social process, it is an expanding array of institutional arrangements that are engaging in an act of democratic Taiwanese national subject-making as thorough-going as that of the KMT fifty years ago.” He concluded that many places around the world face difficult and violent history, and Taiwan has much to teach us about the tasks of remembering.



Dr. Harrison lectures at ANU