

SU BENG: AN ORAL HISTORY

史明口述史

* Nominated for the 2014 Taipei Book Fair Award

* Winner of the 2014 Golden Tripod Award

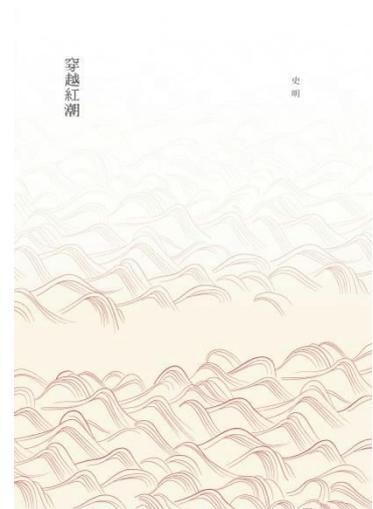
This is a book telling the story of one of Taiwan's most important independence activists and revolutionaries, known as the 'Che Guevara of Taiwan.' Born in Taipei in 1918, Su Beng's pen name means 'to know history clearly,' a statement of intent that sums up a remarkable life.

While studying politics and economics at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan, Su Beng became a Marxist. Upon graduation in 1942, he went to Shanghai to work as an undercover agent with the Chinese Communists. He quickly became disillusioned, however, and made his escape to Taiwan in 1949. Once home, Su and others began devising a plan to topple the Chiang Kai-Shek dictatorship that had taken power on the island after the Kuomintang's defeat on the mainland. When Su's plot to assassinate Chiang was discovered in 1952, he was forced to flee to Japan. There he continued to support Taiwan's underground independence movement and wrote the first version of *Taiwan's 400 Year History*.

Su Beng returned to Taiwan in 1993. He has been a frequent fixture at independence rallies and continues to be an enduring symbol of the fight for the rights of the Taiwanese people.

Su Beng Oral History Group 史明口述史訪談小組

Su Beng: An Oral History is the outcome of a series of interviews conducted by a group of students centred on the Taiwanese Literature Research Society at National Taiwan University. This group has also been involved in reissuing *Taiwan's 400 Year History*, as well as writing introductions and essays reflecting on the book's significance.



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By the Su Beng Oral History Group. Translated by Chang Hsintao & Tang Cijyun.

Preface by Su Beng

I was first encouraged to write an autobiography by Taiwanese expatriates in the United States when I visited in August, 1981. The idea did not immediately take hold because at the time I could not see a successful conclusion to the movement for Taiwanese independence. However, when I returned to Taiwan in 1993 in my seventies, I began to think about leaving a record of my life in earnest, and made plans to write my autobiography.

The background of my education means that I always think in Japanese before translating the words into Chinese, and although I could consult Huang Min-Hung and Li Cheng-Chung in matters of vocabulary, I never felt entirely confident with the language. At the same time, I was wary of the oral history approach, in spite of people's continued willingness to interview me, as I worried that they could not truly understand my innermost thoughts and feelings.

My description of the past is shaped by the personal experience of having lived through two distinctly different political regimes, under Japanese and Kuomintang (KMT) rule, and may be difficult for others to comprehend. Still, there cannot be many around today, who know Marxism, have been to China, and had direct involvement with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). I decided, therefore, to do these interviews as I wrote *Taiwan's 400 Year History*, and talk about my life in a systematic manner.

Japan's occupation of Taiwan began in 1895, but for someone born in 1918, traditional feudalistic thinking and colonial rule were inevitable sources of oppression in my early life. It was through learning and growing up alongside Japanese classmates from the age of eight, first at Jian Cheng Elementary School and later at Taipei First High School, that my life became semi-liberal, with modernised Japanese education and enlightened thought exerting an influence in tandem with the traditional values at home. The most formative period of my life was the six years of study at Waseda University. While Japan remained an essentially feudal society even after the Meiji Restoration, universities like Waseda and Keio were veritable temples of freedom.

In contrast to the official discipline-specific universities aimed at training bureaucrats, Waseda University was fertile ground for nurturing ideas about liberty and democracy. All the socialist, Marxist and anarchist thought in free circulation on Japanese campuses since the Taisho period further opened up the mind of a colonial subject. Upon graduation, seeing the single-mindedness with which my fellow students enlisted to serve their country, I made a decision to go to China and participate in the resistance against Japanese incursion, as a way of joining in Taiwan's struggle against imperialist colonisation.

Arriving in Northern China after the War, I realised that Mao Zedong had become a dictator, and the CCP were practicing not Marxism but dehumanised Fascism. The mass butchering of the Chinese people and the hostility towards the Taiwanese were in direct opposition to my belief in human rights, and I was driven to escape back to Taiwan at all costs in 1949. Yet, KMT's rule on the island was in reality no less authoritarian. My comrades and I felt compelled to act, and formed the Revolutionary Corps for Taiwanese Independence. Unfortunately, our plans were thwarted and I had to flee once more to Japan on a banana

freighter.

In spite of the many setbacks I suffered in the first half of my life, my mind remained clear, my heart ever hopeful, and my passion for Taiwan's independence undiminished. In order to raise funds for the movement, I opened Hsin-Chen-Wei Noodle House in Tokyo and was able to publish *Taiwan's 400 Year History* in 1962 with the steady income the business provided. I persisted in the old mode of underground armed resistance until 1975, and throughout the 1980s, toured the US annually to promote our cause.

With the founding of the Democratic Progressive Party in 1986, Taiwan's move towards democracy since the lifting of Martial Law entered a new and more turbulent phase. In 1993, I returned once more to Taiwan by stealth and started to operate independently outside the system, utilizing the funds accumulated in Japan for Mass Line campaigning. At one time, I could mobilise as many as twenty campaign vehicles, and am even now conveying the ideal of Taiwanese independence to society in disciplined steps, from philosophy and principle to strategy and tactics. With the continued efforts of the Association for Taiwan Independence, there has been a significant turnaround in the preconception of the independence movement among the general public and young students in particular, notwithstanding the constant threat of China (from both KMT and CCP) that keeps Taiwan steeped forever in its political quagmire.

During my sit-in in front of National Taiwan University in 2005, I first experienced the fervor of the local university students, and began working with some of them after recovering from a major illness in 2009. The youth of Taiwan, including members of NTU's Dalawasao society and others engaged in Taiwan-related studies, have shown tremendous care in conducting and transcribing the interviews and writing the explanatory notes. Their efforts are duly noted.

My thanks also go to Editions du Flaneur, for providing the students with this opportunity to present their achievement to the world.

Much remains to be done, but I believe we are on the right path.

December 3, 2012

Chapter 1: Childhood and Family

My 'Name' and Childhood

I was born Shih Chao-Hui but have used many different names throughout my life. For instance, when I needed to go into the liberated areas held by the Chinese Communists after the War, I was known as Lin To. The choice of Lin as a surname was in some way connected to my father, Lin Chi-Chuan. In any case, working underground for the Chinese Communist Party meant being assigned a different name for each job: you would be Lan Tien this time, Li Kan the next, and so on. The monikers were never used more than once. It was only after publishing *Taiwan's 400 Year History* while in Japan that I became Su Beng to the world in general.

I was born in 1918, in a house located at 75, Dadong Road in Shilin, on the fifth day of the tenth month in the lunar calendar. The house was shared by two families, the Shih's and the Lin's, so I was born where my mother was also born. My grandmother had that house built specifically for my parents' marriage. Even though at that time, Taiwan had been under Japanese rule for over two decades, the outskirts of Taipei were still largely rural. In a place like Shilin, with a population of about thirty thousand, there were only two two-storey buildings, one of which was the house my grandmother had built. By the time I went to middle

school, most of my classmates were living in two-storey houses, but we had to wait until after the War to see a three-storey building.

As a child, I spent most of my time with my grandmother, living above the Shih family house. The rooftop terrace had a view of the streets and gardening space. Ours was a street of commerce, of shophouses no less, though my family were not in trade. In those days, all the houses on city streets were designed like that, rows after rows of shophouses, regardless of whether they were used as shops or as homes. There was an old unit for house size called *luo*, and ours was a four-*luo* house, with a vegetable patch at the back. The Shih's were a fairly important family in the Shilin area – my great-grandfather was even a successful candidate in the provincial civil examination at the end of the Qing Dynasty. The family owned some farmlands in Dayuan in Taoyuan, where they first became established, and later acquired more lands in the hills around Shilin, such as in Shuangxi Shan and Jingque.

The most vivid memory I have of my childhood is of going to Taiwanese opera performances and temple fairs with my grandmother. Although she had bound feet, she really enjoyed rambling about, like climbing Zhishanyan in Shilin or visiting the temples in Guandu and Mengjia. Once, she went to Beigang to worship at the temple and I tagged along. We took the express train from Taipei Station in the morning to Chiayi, and then changed onto the narrow gauge railway line to Beigang in a journey lasting three days and two nights. It was a thrill for me to look out the train window at the farmland and hill scenery. Of course, as a kid you liked nothing better than to go on outings and be amongst human bustle and noise. What a shame that there is not much festive atmosphere these days. There were celebrations throughout the lunar year: the new year in the first month, the Birthday of the Jade Emperor on the second day of the second month, the Birthday of Matsu the Goddess of the Sea on the 23rd of the third month, followed by a month-long, countrywide procession of her statue. Duanwu came in the fifth month, Ghost Festival in the seventh, and Mid-Autumn in the eighth. There were festivities to mark the Double Ninth Festival, the Beginning of Winter in the tenth month, and Winter Solstice in the eleventh, when people rolled glutinous rice balls. In the last month of the year, the Earth God was honoured with offerings on Weiya. Now that I think of it, people were making *gui* month after month, not only in Shilin, but all over Taiwan. There were so many millstones everywhere, one in each household, and pushing the millstones was a favorite activity with the children. The millstones have long disappeared. I wonder where they could have gone.

'Local-Born' versus 'China-Born'

Folk festivals were actually fundamental to the formation of a Taiwanese identity and Taiwanese society. In 1624, the Dutch invaded Taiwan from their base in Batavia (Jakarta) in today's Indonesia. At first, the purpose was to establish a place for conducting trade with mainland China, but the fertility of the land gave rise to the idea of planting sugarcane and producing sugar for export. That was when our ancestors arrived in Taiwan, as slaves. Since the period of Cheng Cheng-Gong's rule in southern Taiwan (1661–1683), there had also been a steady trickle of Han migrants from places like Fujian and Guangdong, driven out by poor harvests and the scarcity of food. Back then, whole villages would relocate together, to make a new life together in Taiwan. Consequently, fighting would often break out between migrant communities over land and water resources in their efforts to 'look after the living,' which sometimes evolved into the so-called 'clan wars.'

Have you ever heard of 'clan wars?' Every gangster occupied a territory and fought with one another with or without intention at that time. However, Taiwan eventually formed a

society with rituals and festivals, such as Chinese New Year, Matsu processions and Ghost Festival. No matter which mafia, they were always in charge of worshiping Matsu. As we're talking about why people worshiped Matsu every fourth month of the lunar calendar, the reason is that it was extremely difficult for people to cross Taiwan Strait, the so-called 'Black Ditch.' Only three out of ten arrived, one out of six gave up. If disaster happened in the ocean, people overcame the difficulties by the spiritual support of worshiping goddess of the sea, Matsu. Thus, no matter they were from Quanzhou or Zhangzhou, or Hakka, everyone worshiped Matsu. Even if people fought with one another for irrigation water, that kind of internal ethnic cleavage would be broken down because of the celebration of Matsu's birthday in the fourth month of the lunar calendar. Or people gathered together to row the dragon boats for Dragon Boat Festival, which is in the beginning of the fifth month of the lunar calendar every year. Mobsters and gangsters from different territories got together for festivals and built partnerships even they were hostile to one another in their daily lives, thus, the archetype of Taiwanese and Taiwan society was gradually constructed. None of the scholars and researchers in Taiwan have found this. In my view, if we want to study the history of Taiwan, we should apply the ideas of historical sociology developed in France in 1970s and rethink the formation and development of the Taiwanese Han communities.

In addition to the festivals, the settlers would unite and fight against the pressure they suffered at the hands of the colonists. In the Qing Dynasty, those government officials, military, landlords and businessmen were actually Han people. But Taiwan wasn't seen as a part of mainland China, the government officials usually played a role as exploiters who preyed on Han immigrants with even harsher means compared with when they were on mainland. They took Taiwan as a colony, therefore created an internal discrepancy between those who governed Taiwan and those forerunners in Taiwan (local-borns), and between the immigrant forerunners and the bureaucrats (the Tangshan people and China-borns.) How to distinguish them from each other? Those government officials wore shoes, while the first settlers were mostly barefooted.

This is why I think the false idea of 'China-born' came about, promulgated without any real sense of the history. 'China-born' was used to refer to mainland China, while we called ourselves 'local-borns.' Local-borns fought against Tangshan, this happened every year. Therefore, as a saying goes, 'Every three years there will be a small civil revolt, and a big one every five.' These were the observations of the everyday people, not ideas developed by intellectuals.

There was an even more critical concept in the process of local-borns fighting against Tangshan: 'Be successful, and be your own master.' Being successful meant to be able to see the blue sky and gain your freedom, while being your own master meant being in charge of your own affairs. Honestly, it has long been an underemphasised issue in the historical studies of Taiwan. 'Be successful, and be your own master,' was an ancient ideology extended to contemporary Taiwanese society, and it should be the starting foundation of our national independence.