

## The Taiwan Experience: Book One

I can think of no better way to introduce the political circumstances of Taiwan in the last year and a half of martial law (1986-July 1987) than to simply relate my own experiences living and working in Taipei. After arriving in the capital, I stayed at a hostel named the Happy Families in Zhongshan North Road, and found English teaching work at several schools specialising in teaching 'conversation' classes to adults. After a month or two at the Happy Families, I moved out to live with my Taiwanese girlfriend, Michelle.

It seems, in retrospect, that I was fortunate to gain a great deal of insight into the political circumstances in Taiwan during the last two years of Chiang Ching-kuo's rule (and life), particularly through one of my English students, who went by the English name of Denny. However, it has to be said that not all these insights were particularly welcome at the time.

From my first meeting with Denny Ho, I sensed there was something amiss. Like most of the other students at the International Fellowship Center (IFC), one of three English school where I taught conversation classes, his English was good. All he really needed was daily practice to bring it as close to 'native speaker' level as it ever would be. And that's exactly what Denny was at IFC for. But it wasn't the only thing he was there for. He did have an ulterior motive, and as his charade could not be as sophisticated when rendered in English as it would have been in Chinese, this was almost immediately apparent to me.

The KMT had been quick to recognise that university campuses were places of open ideas and thought and the practice of hiring student informants in classes to inform the Taiwan Garrison Command of any students discussing issues that could have been seen as a threat to the KMT was well known to local students, but not to me. The IFC was not a university; it was an English school. But it was an English school of a special kind. Due to its location close to the corner of Hoping East Road and Jienguo South Road, more than half its students were also students at either one of two nearby universities; National Taiwan University (Taida) or National Taiwan Normal University (Shida), and some of the remaining English students were also university students at other universities more distant. Although I was unaware at the time of the party's practice of spying on students, Denny's inept spy work alerted me to the fact that he was not all as he tried to give the impression of being.

Denny was two or three years older than me; about 28 or 29 years old in 1986. Generally, he wore a dark jacket and open-necked shirt, and didn't wear glasses, which put him in a small minority among intellectuals in Taiwan where the majority of all people over the age of 12 needed them. He spoke in rather measured terms, which didn't seem to be entirely due to lack of confidence at using a foreign language; rather, he liked to be absolutely clear and precise to avoid misunderstandings. He wore a slight smile most of the time, which seemed almost to be pasted on.

Throughout my association with this character, he was consistently guarded about his own background, while at the same time demonstrating a remarkable degree of interest in the personal details of other people, both local students and foreign teachers (as all the teachers at IFC were). Even his family name was not divulged directly to me in conversation; I only learnt it because Alison - a friend of my girlfriend, Michelle - was at that time responsible for taking tuition fees and she referred to him by his full (English) name; presumably because he had given his full name at registration. As for the name Denny, 'English' names were not (and still are not) mandatory or fixed for Taiwan citizens. They may change their foreign names as often as they change their clothes, if they so desire. So, there's no way of knowing whether Denny had used this English name all his life, or just since he registered at the IFC.

But Denny was extremely interested in knowing my girlfriend's name. "Michelle", I told him, intending to leave it at that.

"No, no, I mean what is her Chinese name?"

"Oh, I wouldn't like to try pronouncing that," I replied, "I just call her Michelle."

This was the truth. I had been in Taiwan a little over a month; just long enough to know that English transliterations of place names and people's names were often so inaccurate that I didn't like to voice any name out loud that I hadn't actually already heard local people pronounce.

"Well, how do you write her Chinese name, in English?" Denny asked. I found this to be a very strange question. Why did he want to know the spelling? But that was not the reason I avoided telling him. I

genuinely did not know the exact spelling off-hand.

“Oh, but you must find out! Ask her how she writes her name in English, and tell me next class,” Denny insisted.

“What for?” I asked. Our interactions up to this point had been very amiable, but I didn’t feel like leaving Denny with the idea that I would give him this information next class, as I had no intention of finding out how Michelle wrote her Chinese name in English for no good reason.

“Oh, we Chinese attach a lot of importance to names, you know. We can know a lot of things from a name, such as whether your girlfriend is suitable for you!”

His explanation oozed disingenuousness and insincerity, and I felt he had made it up on the spot. Despite this, and despite that fact that he even asked exactly where my girlfriend lived (again, I genuinely didn’t know the exact street number; I had never memorised it), I may possibly have brushed off these intrusive questions and thought nothing more of them. But what happened next made that impossible.

I left the building the IFC was located in, and began walking in the direction of my girlfriend’s flat, 10 or 15 minutes walk away on the same road, Hoping East Road. The doctor’s surgery Michelle worked at as a nursing assistant broke for a long lunch of three hours, as many do in Taiwan, and we would always meet up at this time, as schools like the IFC also had no classes at lunchtime. However, while passing a bookstore, I noticed a rack of English-language newspapers and magazines at the far end of the store, and decided to take a closer look. Both the two local English-language newspapers, the China Post and the China News, consisted merely of two folded sheets, making a total of eight pages of very basic, heavily censored news. Like most of the foreign national English teachers and Chinese students I knew, I felt somewhat starved of outside news.

At one point, while perusing the English publications on offer in the book shop, by chance I turned my head to glance back in the direction of the shop’s open entrance, and to my surprise saw Denny on the other side of the street, riding his scooter at a snail’s pace while scanning the street visually from left to right as if looking for something. Suddenly, I realised what it was he was looking for: me! I kept myself out of sight and moved only slowly towards the shop entrance, feigning interest in other publications to keep out of Denny’s line of sight. By the time I stepped out onto the street, Denny was just a couple of hundred metres further down the street, still apparently searching. I felt a strong sense of foreboding. Could it be, as I suspected, that Denny was actually trying to follow me in order to find out where my girlfriend lived, and if so, why was he doing this? What possible reason was there for trying to find out where my girlfriend lived and her precise identity? Certainly, he didn’t strike me as some kind of sexual deviant, but rather than that making me feel at ease, it had the opposite effect. So, assuming this information was not for Denny himself, who was it for and what would they do with it?

But I could not be entirely sure he had been following me without trying the same routine again. The following morning, at the end of morning class at IFC, Denny asked me where I was taking lunch? I told him I would be meeting my girlfriend shortly and he pretended disappointment that we couldn’t take lunch together. “Maybe tomorrow, if you’re taking morning class?” I suggested.

“OK”, Denny agreed, and we both made to leave (as there were no classes during lunch hour, Denny really had to leave anyway). Fortunately, I entered the lift to the ground floor a few moments before Denny tried to, and it was too full to take Denny and the others waiting with him. I needed a couple of minutes to get ahead of him, and I had got it. What happened next was a repeat performance of the previous day’s circumstances, with the exception that this time I was not in the bookstore by accident, and felt a lot more nervous about my deliberate attempts to stay out of sight.

But all went smoothly, and confirmed to me beyond reasonable doubt that Denny was deliberately going to some lengths to find out where my girlfriend lived. I kept Denny in my line of sight as far away as possible, so that if he suddenly backtracked, I would be able to dive down an alley before he had a chance to see me. I related all this to Michelle when I finally got to her flat, and even suggested we not take lunch outside (there was nothing in the flat in the way of food) for a further 20 minutes or so, as I suspected Denny may still be in the vicinity. Michelle told me I had to avoid talking about politics when Denny was present in my class or within earshot.

I didn’t like the suggestion. “I don’t care less what Denny thinks about my politics,” I protested, “I don’t have any secrets; I’ll say whatever I like, whether he’s there or not!”

"You have to think about your students, not just yourself", Michelle insisted. "If you encourage some student to say something that makes Denny think he's a communist, or that he supports Taiwan independence, then Denny will note that, and the student is in big trouble. He doesn't really have to openly support Taiwan independence, just say something that makes Denny think he is sympathetic, or even that he doesn't support the KMT."

I paused to think over what she was saying. "What do you mean, the student would be in big trouble?" I finally asked. "What kind of trouble?"

Michelle went on to explain that this would depend on who the student was, what their background was, what they wanted to do in life, and exactly what they had said. I asked her to give me some examples, and she did. She told me a student from a good family background, especially a mainland Chinese family with a history of party support would get off lightly. Other students would encounter problems, especially if they didn't recant their views.

What kind of problems, I asked? I was more than a little dubious of her assertions.

"Well, for example, if they wanted to go abroad to study, they wouldn't get a passport, at least not until they showed that they had changed their views. Or, if they wanted to study for a master's degree here in Taiwan, they would find no university that would accept them."

"C'mon, that's up to the university", I said, finding Michelle's notions of the reach of the party's tentacles hard to accept, and a little naive. I told her as much, but she insisted it was I who was being naive. There was only one political party in Taiwan, she pointed out, and every university principal was loyal to it. Some university principals were even important figures in government. If they were told not to accept a student, they wouldn't.

She went on to claim that at the other end of the extreme, a student who didn't have a good family background, especially a native Taiwanese, would get much more forceful reminders to change his views. And if they didn't, 'accidents' might be arranged.

She gave as an example, the case of a local farmer from her own home village in southern Taiwan who had repeatedly claimed publicly that a local KMT politician was corrupt. Until that was, a van crashed into his wife and daughter on their way home from school, putting his wife in a wheelchair and killing his daughter.

These 'accidents', Michelle claimed, always looked like they could really be genuine accidents, so the party was always able to deny having anything to do with them.

Maybe the incident she had related really had been an accident, I suggested, always keen to play devil's advocate. Michelle then told me then about the case of a Taiwanese professor, Chen Wen-chen, working in the United States who had openly advocated Taiwan independence while in America. He had returned to Taiwan a few years previously and committed suicide. The party had suggested smugly that he probably felt guilty of his unpatriotic crimes and killed himself.

"Well, maybe he really did commit suicide!" I insisted.

"Maybe he really did. But I can tell you, if the party didn't want him dead, he wouldn't have 'committed suicide'. They are experts in making 'accidents' and 'suicides' happen, so that naive people will still believe they really are accidents or suicides, and that the party would never do such things. Too many anti-KMT activists end up committing suicide or in fatal accidents." She paused, then added that the party doesn't always do the actual 'dirty work', triads often did it for them.

At the time, all this sent me into a depressed mood. I knew there had to be some truth in what Michelle was telling me, though I hoped that what she claimed was an exaggeration. I knew that such things happened, especially in one-party states where the party did not want to have to contend with competition and threats to its vested interests. But I hoped that no such things really happened in Taiwan, the place I wanted to make my base for work and for future travels in the region. It wouldn't be until many years later that I would come to know a triad hitman who claimed to have killed about a dozen Taiwanese abroad, several of them for 'political crimes'.

I decided to befriend Denny, rather than let him jump to conclusions about me that may be to my detriment. I felt that I had no secrets, and though Denny was obviously to some extent brainwashed, he did not seem to be an unreasonable man. At the time, my Chinese was not good enough to carry out discussions on political

issues in any depth, but this was to my advantage. I was certain I could argue all my political views in English and see off any challenges to them, even from a native English speaker, let alone from a non-native speaker.