

A Political Death and a Media Casualty

by Tina Chou

In 1981, Professor Chen Wen-chen returned home for a triumphant visit from the United States and was found dead on the grounds of Taiwan University. His death was widely assumed to be the politically motivated silencing of dissent. Covering this case as a journalist in search of a good story, I found myself reluctantly thrown into an intrigue which ultimately changed my life.

Twenty-two years have since passed, but the Chen case is still alive in people's memory, invoked off-and-on as a larger-than-life event during a troubled time when Taiwan was struggling to reinvent itself. Over these years I was not completely forgotten either. I have seen my name sympathetically mentioned in occasional newspaper reports seeking to get to the bottom of the unresolved murder case. To date, I am still recognized as the reporter who used the word "autopsy" in reporting the Chen case and paid dearly for it.

Chen Wen-chen was a political unknown when he was murdered at age 31. In life he was one of many discontented, outspoken overseas Taiwanese academics with a passionate longing for a better homeland. In death, he became a hero, eulogized alongside those martyrs who gave their lives to the cause. By comparison, I was a young, rising correspondent for the Associated Press, eager to make a name for myself. I wrote about political developments with an unbiased outlook. Reporting the Chen case interrupted my career, initially through the revocation of my press credentials for over a year, and then subsequently forcing me to leave Taiwan to pursue my journalistic career abroad. I was a victim of the government's paranoia about the perceived threat of a free press.

I never met Chen or his wife, and knew relatively little about the man. While Chen was a passionate idealist, he was never really a political activist, nor involved in any subversive activities. He was an accomplished, hard-working mathematician with a promising career at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Underneath his quiet and serious persona, he kept alive an interest in Taiwan's politics. At the time of his death he still possessed a Taiwanese passport and had not become a naturalized American. In his spare time in the United States, Chen enjoyed going to meetings convened by like-minded Taiwanese academics who shared his dream of a free, democratic homeland. During heated discussions, he would speak out against the ruling government in Taipei. He also sent personal cheques from the USA to the burgeoning democratic movement in Taiwan. From what I could gather, this was as far as he went in his effort to promote a better homeland.

Unfortunately, his frank, sincere and critical speeches, which to him were based on good will, reached the ears of what were then commonly known as "campus spies".

These spies were Taiwanese intelligence personnel sent abroad to monitor and suppress overseas support for the democratic movement. Chen's speeches were placed on a file highly critical of him. Subsequently on July 2, 1981, as he was visiting Taipei from Pittsburgh, Chen was picked up by the now-defunct Taiwan Garrison Command. Hours later, he was found dead. Foul play was suspected but never proven. For a long time Chen's death alienated the Taipei Government from Taiwanese people on the island and overseas. To a certain extent, it also temporarily hurt relations between Taiwan and the United States.

While reporting the murder case I had opportunities to meet and talk to Chen's father, Mr. Chen Ting-mao. The senior Chen never volunteered personal information about his son. He used to come to my office to give me updates about the case, believing that I was the only reporter he could trust to report the facts. I did write a few reports which quoted him. I believed the down-to-earth, somewhat unsophisticated senior Chen was seeking justice for his son but had no idea how to do it or to whom he should turn. At no time did he try to manipulate me.

It was a report based on an interview with the father that started my troubles. Quoting Chen Ting-mao, I wrote that two Americans who came to Taiwan to investigate the case performed an autopsy on the body of Chen Wen-chen. The visitors were Prof. Morris DeGroot, Dr. Chen's colleague at the Department of Statistics at Carnegie Mellon University, and forensic expert Dr. Cyril Wecht, who had examined the body of President John F. Kennedy. Chen Ting-mao escorted the Americans during their time in the morgue, watching as Dr. Wecht took a scalpel out of his pocket and made at least two incisions on the body. At the conclusion of the morgue visit, the senior Chen telephoned to tell me what had happened. I questioned him repeatedly to make sure he had not fabricated the story, and tried in vain to telephone the Americans who were staying at the Grand Hotel. Later, quoting Mr. Chen, I filed a report which said the Americans performed an "autopsy" on the body. In the report I also said the Americans were not immediately available for confirmation. It was a short, straightforward spot story without any commentary from me.

Later that day, I finally got hold of Prof. DeGroot by telephone. DeGroot was unwilling to say much on the phone, suggesting that we meet right away at the coffee shop of Grand Hotel. So I went. When we met, he would not confirm if Dr. Wecht had done an autopsy, claiming that if he did, they would not be allowed to leave Taiwan under the rules and regulations of Martial Law then in force. I told him he was being ridiculous, but he asked me not to prod him further, promising to confirm the facts with me after he had left Taiwan.

Two days later DeGroot did telephone me while on a stopover in Hawaii. He told me explicitly that they did cut open Chen Wen-chen's body to ascertain the cause of his death. He apologized for not confirming it personally to me and at a subsequent departure press conference at Taiwan's airport. He asked for my understanding. DeGroot's confirmation came too late. When I answered the long distance call in the AP office, I had already been stripped of my press credentials, barred from engaging in any form of

journalistic duties. The publicly announced reason for this was that there had been no autopsy done by the Americans on Chen and that I had written an untruthful report.

My ordeal began the day after I filed the autopsy report. A telephone call came from the Government Information Office (GIO), inviting me and my immediate supervisor for a talk. The caller gave no hint of what lay ahead and I did not expect anything unusual. When my colleague and I arrived at GIO, we were told immediately that I had written a non-factual report, and that I had to correct it as soon as possible, either by writing another report to say there was no autopsy, or by writing an open apology on AP's international wire services.

Explaining that the second solution was unprecedented and not in line with international journalistic norms and practices, I stated that a correction was possible but had to follow clearly defined procedures. I emphasized that I would need a quotable source. As my report was based on an interview with the father of Chen Wen-chen, I asked to be allowed to contact the senior Chen first for further verification. This request was turned down outright. Then I suggested quoting GIO for a denial of autopsy. This again was rejected on the ground that the Taiwan Government was not involved in it. Finally, I suggested querying the departing DeGroot and Wecht at their airport press conference which was to take place in two hours. I was told that I would not be allowed to go to the airport either. The message conveyed to me was loud and clear: I was to correct myself or face undefined, but serious consequences.

Humiliated and confused, I returned to my office and contacted my supervisor in Hong Kong. I could not understand why those GIO officials, who had been open and friendly with the foreign press in Taipei, would react so forcefully to a truthful report which they knew followed all known journalistic guidelines. Equally, I could not comprehend why these western-educated officials with foreign working experience would demand a corrective solution which was absurd and undemocratic. Was I targeted for punishment for past mistakes, or was there something more to their actions?

Over the years I have hypothesized but have yet to understand why GIO reacted the way it did. Similarly, the murder of Chen Wen-chen remains unresolved, with no evident hope of being resolved. No one has ever been able, or willing, to explain how he lay dead in his Alma Mater, the Taiwan University, after being interrogated by intelligence officials.

Examining the possibility that GIO's action reflected its displeasure with me, I looked back at what I had written. Before the Chen case I had written several widely-read reports about Taiwan's political, economic and social issues. These included an interview discussing Taiwan's unpopular Martial Law which was picked up by the International Herald Tribune. Being the first Taiwan-born non-Mainlander Taiwanese ever recruited to work for a foreign news agency in Taipei, I was regarded with suspicion by the then Mainlander-controlled GIO. I took my job seriously and was head and shoulders above all my competitors. However, to some people I was too liberal.

The Chen case was not my only unpleasant run with GIO. Earlier, I received a stern warning from GIO when I organized a dinner speech to the foreign press club by a Taiwanese-American political scientist, who now is a member of the Legislative Yuan. The speaker discussed Taiwan-US relations with a title that identified Taiwan not as Republic of China, but as Taiwan.

On the day of the talk, two GIO officials came for the pre-dinner drinks. Stone-faced, they came straight to me and conveyed the government's displeasure with me for not calling Taiwan by its official name. They left right after delivering the verbal warning, without giving me a chance to explain that I did not develop the title. Dumbfounded, I thought they could have easily telephoned me earlier to express their concern in a casual way. If they did, I would have done my best to accommodate them. I was interested in doing a good job, not in inviting unnecessary trouble. It is interesting to observe that after 20 years, a democratic Taiwan is now eager to pursue a different identity.

It is possible that my punishment by the government because of the autopsy report was the result of a culmination of past indiscretions. Furthermore, there may have been more at stake than a murder case, or the issue of the freedom of the press. While I do not think I will ever find out the truth, I admit to still being haunted by the ordeal and harassment I was put through for writing the autopsy report.

Right after I was summoned by GIO and told I had to correct myself, I returned to my office in frantic search of ways to salvage the unfavorable situation. I was no longer interested whether DeGroot and Wecht had broken Taiwan's law, or a previously agreed understanding, when they cut open the body of Chen Wen-chen. In my mind, the immediate solution would be to write a follow-up report by interviewing a local journalist friend who had been to the Americans' airport press conference. This I did over the phone, although the friend had heard of my trouble and was scared to talk to me, asking not to be quoted by name. As I had anticipated, the Americans said they did not perform an autopsy on Chen Wen-chen.

When I was typing out a report refuting my earlier autopsy story, I heard my name spoken by the prime-time evening news anchorwoman of a local state-controlled television station. She announced that my press credentials had been suspended on the ground that I wrote a fabricated report.

I could hardly believe my ears. After I left GIO a few hours ago, there had been no further communication from the government to indicate the upcoming of a severe punishment. Justifying its decision against me, GIO cited the already-departed Americans' claim which denied an autopsy. It appeared that someone high up at the government had decided that I was unrepentant, deserving to have my press card taken away.

A couple days later, again without any forewarning, GIO announced that it had canceled my press credentials altogether. I knew about this from the local media. There

had been no official communication to me or the AP to this effect. I was in effect a sacrificial lamb.

To rationalize the action against me, the government told the Legislative Yuan that my autopsy report was a fabrication by a foreign news agency and living proof that foreign imperialism once again was plotting to manipulate the Republic of China! With TV reporters told to expect and report this address to the Parliament, the official lamented previous imperialistic invasions and interferences in China, vowing to protect Taiwan from further advances.

At this point, what began as a simple press issue had evolved into a bigger issue between Taiwan and an imagined imperialism led by the United States. It was forgotten that I was a patriotic Taiwanese citizen.

Unsatisfied with the government's reasoning, three opposition lawmakers took up my case and in a parliament session questioned the government's handling of it. This well-intentioned action unfortunately added an unwelcome twist to the matter: the cancellation of my press card was now also an issue between the ruling government and the opposition.

It made no difference at all that Prof. DeGroot and Dr. Wecht announced their finding that Chen Wen-chen was a victim of homicide, suffering severe beating prior to his death.

To bail me out of the dilemma, the AP had tried all available negotiation channels, which included appealing to the highest authority in Taiwan's government. It was also in AP's own interest to reestablish a good working relationship in Taiwan.

As I watched my case evolve into a tragic comedy with dramatic twists and turns, I was powerless to help myself. I was banned from carrying out any form of journalistic duties. In a way I was being punished for doing my job.

After a year of inaction, one day I was suddenly informed that the government would quietly reinstate me, on condition that AP would not publicize it and that I would refrain from discussing my case with the local media. Thus I became an active journalist again, as if nothing had happened.

A few months later, in 1983, I was reassigned to India in what I believed to be a compromise decision reached between the AP and Taiwan's Government. In 1986, after obtaining GIO's consent, the AP relocated me back to Taiwan to head the Taipei bureau. On my first day at work I received an instruction from GIO, informing me that I would not be allowed to work as a journalist because I had never been reinstated.

Thoroughly dismayed and frustrated, I packed up my bags and left Taiwan, for good.

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