

Terror in Taiwan reveals the meaning of life

Writer Lan Po-chou's work reverses revisionist history to reveal the tragedy and torment caused by the KMT, writes Yenni Kwok



Lan Po-chou. Photo: Yenni Kwok

History, it's said, is written by the winners. But Taiwanese writer Lan Po-chou prefers to uncover the lives of the suppressed and defeated. His *Song of the Veiled Carriage* is about several people persecuted during the White Terror era of 1949-1954. During those years, the Kuomintang (KMT) secretly arrested and executed thousands of people suspected of being opponents - intellectuals, artists, workers and peasants alike.

The book – published in 1991, four years before then-president Lee Teng-hui made the first public apology for the persecution – not only stirred the public but also made the self-taught historian an authority on the Taiwanese people.

The White Terror era looms large in much of Lan's work. His novel, *The Vine Entwining a Tree*, is a tale of a young Hakka writer who investigates the death of a childhood friend in the political witch-hunt.

The book's title comes from a Hakka folk song, which also reflects the intertwined aspects of life. "It describes the love between a woman and a man," says Lan, 46, while visiting Hong Kong. "It also reflects how the past and present, history and politics are adjoined, just like a vine entwines a tree."

In Taiwan, Lan is a well-known intellectual, writer and journalist, conducting historical research and making documentaries - but it took a while for him to decide what he wanted to do.

Born in 1960 into a Hakka family in Miaoli County, Lan became intellectually restless at just 15 years old. "I was reading a book, and suddenly I started to wonder about the meaning of my existence," he says. "People would die, so what's the meaning of one's life? I pondered and pondered, but I didn't find the answer until years later."

He enjoyed literature and studied French at university. "Compared with Chinese literature, French was a less restricted and less censored subject," he says. He read books by French existentialist thinkers, such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, seeking answers to his philosophical riddle.

He started writing at university. "I wrote a short story of 10,000 characters in just one night," he says. He produced four more short stories and a novel, although he dismisses his early work as being "about growing up and experiencing love. I considered it practice. I knew this style wouldn't last."

Lan also became politically active, distributing anti-KMT propaganda, but he quickly realised that partisan politics wasn't for him.

In the spring of 1987, months before then-president Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law, Lan joined the editorial team of *Renjian*, a magazine that specialised in reporting about what he describes as "the lower-classes and the other dark, hidden sides of society".

Lan's first assignment was investigating the 228 Incident, an uprising of local Taiwanese that began on February 28, 1947, and ended with 30,000 deaths when the KMT repressed the movement.

His work at *Renjian* not only gave new direction to his literary ambitions but, more importantly, he says, also to the existentialist question that had troubled him since his teenage years.

Lan has published about 20 books, most dealing with Taiwan's forgotten heroes. *The Good Women of Taiwan* is about five women who fell victim to the White Terror. *Wheat Wave Chorus* sheds new light on the little-remembered pro-China student movement, the brutal repression of which on April 6, 1949, marked the start of the White Terror.

Although Lan has written books critical of the KMT, he is also a fierce critic of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which he sees as having played a part in the manipulation of history. "The DPP claimed that the 228 Incident was the beginning of Taiwan's independence movement," he says. "But it's not true. The 228 Incident was anti-KMT,

not anti-China.

"The real history is not according to what politicians describe. The KMT has cheated the people by suppressing history. The DPP did the same thing."

Despite pushing for an alternative account of Taiwan, Lan makes it clear he disagrees with calls for independence.

"If we look at history, Taiwan is never independent by its own decision," he says. "Its independence has always depended on whether China is strong or weak."

"If we declare independence, war is inevitable. So why don't we strive for a peaceful solution and have an exchange between the two sides of the strait?"

The interview was published in the South China Morning Post daily (www.scmp.com), 4 June 2006.