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Holy Ground, Haunted Past

Religious Responses to Ghost Stories and Political Memory on Green Island

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Summary

Across Taiwan, ghost narratives function as everyday means of engaging in a past marked by authoritarian violence. Where transitional justice policies and "sites of injustice" initiatives encounter political contestation and public unease, memory often surfaces through ghost stories and haunted experiences, even as sites and landscapes linked to the authoritarian era have been radically transformed. This article unpacks these narratives and then focuses on a series of transformations on Green Island—a former political prison complex now integrated into a human-rights museum and a tourist economy. Ethnographic vignettes follow tourism entrepreneurs, political victims and human-rights educators, residents, museum staff, and visiting religious groups as they negotiate spaces in and around the former prison. Entertainment-driven "execution-site" rumors and night tour formats clash with the archival record of long-term incarceration; islanders' cautious rituals for the dead reflect concerns about those who died under state violence; and the museum's own offerings for lingering spirits reveal a religious concern for respecting the authoritarian past. Taken together, the study shows how beliefs about the restless dead in Han-Chinese popular religion are intertwined with heritage conservation and tourism markets, offering indirect avenues of recognizing the residues of the authoritarian past.

About the Author

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Cover picture: The final stage of a ghost-pacifying ritual on the beach of Green Island, Taiwan. A resident burns various joss paper as an offering to the ghosts in the sea.
Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu

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Introduction

In Taiwan, the integration of large-scale death into daily life through religious practices is not uncommon in Han-Chinese popular religion. Examples such as the Yimin Temple (義民廟) and Wanying Gong (萬應公) reflect how the spirits of the dead have been collectively accommodated. Since the 1990s, even the Shiba Wang Gong (十八王公)—a temple associated with ghosts—has gained popularity among those seeking morally ambiguous fortune. The Ershiwu Shunu Mu (二十五淑女墓), a memorial for twenty-five female ferry workers who died in a tragic accident in 1973, has been reinterpreted through feminist discourse and urban development projects.[1]

Yet, when it comes to the most far-reaching episode of collective suffering in modern Taiwan—the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang (KMT)—there is no temple or shrine to house its dead. This absence reveals a deeper difficulty: many in Taiwan still struggle to fully articulate what they lived through, let alone form sustained relationships with the spirits of those who died under state violence. In other words, historical consciousness surrounding the authoritarian era remains fragmented and unresolved. Meanwhile, the absence of the dead from that period continues to evoke awareness and unease: some spirits are believed to remain unsettled since the authoritarian era and thus continue to haunt particular places. In Han-Chinese popular religion, these unsettled spirits could pose risks and create disruptions in the everyday lives of the living. As a result, some ghost stories, haunted experiences, and religious practices have become subtle, ambiguous, and often emotionally charged approaches to coping with the past.

This article explores why and how the difficulty of memorializing the legacy of authoritarianism in Taiwan impacts a set of spiritual practices and beliefs. It then examines how ghost stories and haunted experiences of the deceased are widely mentioned, focusing on a case study from Green Island, a former prison island turned tourist site, where the remains of political violence are embedded in everyday local life. On the island, different religious practices, carried out by various actors, including tourism entrepreneurs, advocates of historical education and human rights, residents, and non-local religious groups, have each developed their own forms of awareness and practices toward the deceased victims of state violence. Their diverse attitudes reflect how religious beliefs continue to intertwine with the legacy of authoritarianism in Taiwan's democratized era.

[1] Robert P. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (The Macmillan Press, 1994); Anru Lee, *Haunted Modernities: Gender, Memory, and Placemaking in Postindustrial Taiwan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2023).

A Difficult Reckoning

Taiwan continues to grapple with the legacy of authoritarian rule under the Kuomintang (KMT) party from 1945 to 1992. One ongoing challenge is confronting the physical and symbolic traces of that regime, most prominently those linked to Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–1988). Their presence still permeates public life through statues, street names, currency, and imposing memorials.

Alongside these enduring symbols of power, various social movements have sought to highlight the stories of those who suffered state violence during that era. Activists, historians, and artists have used oral histories, archives, protests, and commemorative events to center the voices of political victims.[2] Through these efforts, many recognize that space and landscape are not merely backdrops to memory: they are instead active mediums for remembering. Physical sites where political violence occurred carry the weight of injustice and offer opportunities to confront the past.

During a human rights educational trip to Oasis Villa, a former political prison, a child looks into a cell through a narrow window. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

Since 2014, Taiwan's transitional justice initiatives have formally identified several of these locations as "sites of injustice." These include spaces where arrests, interrogations, torture, and imprisonment occurred. According to the government's official explanation, preserving

[2] "About Us 網站簡介," Taiwan Human Rights Memory Bank 國家人權記憶庫, accessed August 8, 2025, https://memory.nhrm.gov.tw/NormalNode?MenuNode=16 ; Chen Delun 陳德倫, "Commemorating the Dead and Continuing Life: When Art Engages with Local Communities to Open a Dialogue on the White Terror 悼亡與續命: 當藝術走向地方打開白色恐怖的歷史對話現場," *The Reporter* 報導者, February 23, 2022, https://www.twreporter.org/a/228-2022-white-terror-conversation-through-art.

and revitalizing these sites serves as both a symbolic gesture of redress and a crucial step in building a national network for human rights education.[3]

Yet implementing these goals has not been easy. Despite Taiwan's democratization at the end of the 20th century, efforts to institutionalize these projects must navigate legal complexities and partisan resistance. The KMT, a major political force to this day, has often resisted or downplayed such initiatives. For many supporters of transitional justice, the refusal to acknowledge the KMT regime's unique role in Taiwan's political trauma remains a major obstacle to systematically address the residues of the contested history. In 2024, during a consultation on a draft bill for preserving sites of injustice, KMT representatives downplayed the specific legacy of the KMT regime by comparing it to traumas caused by other ruling powers, such as the Japanese colonial administration or the Qing Dynasty.[4] In response, Taiwan's Minister of Culture publicly clarified: "This bill is not about political purges or settling scores—every party should support its passage."

In 2025, the KMT continued to obstruct attempts to pass legislation, minimizing the historical significance of the authoritarian period.[5] Legislator Fan Yun (范雲) criticized the delay, warning: "The clock is ticking."[6] The urgency to legally preserve Taiwan's sites of injustice lies not only in the aging population of political victims but also in the rapid disappearance of the original sites themselves. Many of the locations associated with the authoritarian Kuomintang (KMT) regime have already been damaged, remodeled, or completely demolished. Some have been replaced with office buildings, schools, or shopping malls—leaving little physical evidence of their historical significance.[7] This transformation makes it increasingly difficult to connect these places to the violence that once occurred there. The rupture between past and present, in both architectural and emotional terms, continues to widen.

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[3] "About Sites of Injustice 關於不義遺址," Historical Sites of Injustice Archive 不義遺址資料庫, accessed August 8, 2025, https://hsi.nhrm.gov.tw/nhrm/zh-tw/background.

[4] Lin, Jingyin 林敬殷, "The Preservation of Injustice Sites Act; Lee Yuan: All Political Parties Should Support Its Passage 不義遺址保存條例. 李遠: 所有黨派都應支持它通過," *The Central News Agency* 中央通訊社, October 30, 2024, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202410300215.aspx.

[5] Wang, Qianhao 王千豪, "Refuting the Blocking of the Injustice Sites Act, Lo Chih-chiang: The DPP Ignores the History of Indigenous Persecution 駁斥擋不義遺址條例, 羅智強: 民進黨無視原民迫害歷史," *United Daily News* 聯合報, February 27, 2025, https://udn.com/news/story/6656/8575317.

[6] Legislator Fan Yun 范雲_立法委員 (@fanyunig), "When it comes to the 'Preservation of Injustice Sites' 講到'不義遺址保存'," Instagram, January 25, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DEmuDXTy0M1/.

[7] Siku Yaway 林瑋茜, "Disappearing White Terror Landscapes: Can Transitional Justice Be Achieved? 消失的白色恐怖地景: 實現轉型正義?" CTS News CH52 華視新聞 CH52, posted on July 23, 2022, YouTube video, 15: 48, https://youtu.be/pdECjYS0d-w?si=QT0GHC6DQqQkYaq-.

This gap is further reinforced by decades of silence. During the KMT era, state violence was a taboo topic. People avoided speaking openly about arrests, disappearances, and political repression. Even after democratization, such conversations have remained rare in everyday life. Many people who live or work near these sites of injustice have only a vague awareness of their historical context. Though they may have heard the term “White Terror” (白色恐怖), a common shorthand for the violence of the KMT regime, they often fail to associate it with the very places they pass by daily. The concept of authoritarianism becomes abstract, severed from the local and spatial realities in which it was once enacted.

Beyond physical erasure and historical amnesia, political sensitivity continues to cloud public engagement. Like many democracies, Taiwan faces increasing political polarization. With this comes a reluctance to openly state one’s political stance, let alone discuss the painful legacy of authoritarianism. In this environment, even referencing the KMT’s past can trigger tension or conflict.

Even professional institutions such as the National Human Rights Museum must navigate this sensitivity. During fieldwork, staff shared stories of uncomfortable or even hostile encounters with visitors. One museum guide described how some tourists expressed support for the White Terror era, claiming it was a “necessary evil” to protect Taiwan from communism. Another staff member recalled a 90-year-old visitor who grabbed her badge and challenged her credibility, asking, “What do you know about the White Terror?” Although the man’s family later sent an apology, the incident prompted museum leadership to create a formal response protocol—one that now includes the possibility of contacting the police.

In a political climate where historical memory remains contested, and public acknowledgment can provoke confrontation, finding ways to engage with the past remains a delicate task. One pathway that has quietly emerged involves a subtle, ambiguous, and emotionally charged set of beliefs and stories, those centered on ghostly encounters and haunted places.[8] These metaphysical narratives offer an indirect means of reckoning with the legacy of authoritarian violence. Rather than addressing history through formal education or political discourse, they channel memory through bodily sensations and spiritual unease, allowing the past to surface in ways that are often more intuitive than explicit. Nevertheless, such religious awareness could also complicate the circumstances, as shown in the following section.

[8] Xie Yi-Aan 謝宜安, “If I Cannot Find You, Call to Me as a Ghost: 228 Paranormal Stories 如果我找不到你, 請你以鬼身呼喚我: 二二八靈異故事,” Story Studio 故事, accessed August 8, 2025, https://storystudio.tw/article/gushi/ghost-story-of-february-28th.

Sacred Place and Haunted Site

At National Taiwan University (NTU), a student campaign began in 2011 to build a memorial for Chen Wen-chen (陳文成), a highly educated political victim whose death remains a symbol of injustice in Taiwan's authoritarian past. In 1981, after being interrogated by the Taiwan Garrison Command, a notorious military security force during the Kuomintang (KMT) regime, Chen's body was found on the university campus. It wasn't until 2021, after a decade of pressure by activist groups, that a monument was finally erected to commemorate his death.

Yet not all welcomed the idea. At the beginning, NTU's conservative administration expressed concerns that commemorating Chen might compromise the university's politically "neutral" position. Among the criticisms raised, one opponent stood out for its religious undertones. A professor, whose department was located near the proposed monument site, voiced concern that the area might become spiritually disturbing—especially for young women students in the department, who she claimed were more susceptible to fear of ghosts. Her comment suggested that the presence of a memorial could bring unease, as if the spirit of Chen Wen-chen were lingering nearby.

This statement sparked outrage among supporters of the monument. It was seen not only as reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes but also as deeply disrespectful to the deceased, associating him with ghosts.

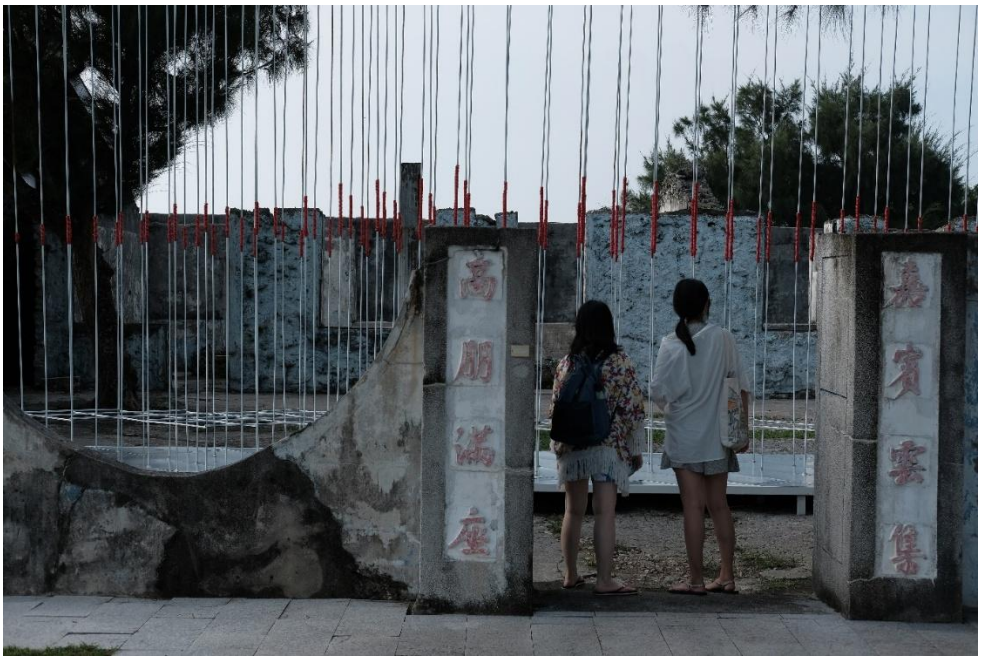
In Han Chinese popular religion, deities, ancestors, and ghosts are different categories of spiritual beings, many generated from the deceased. Their existence in the afterworld overlaps with the realm of the living. These spiritual beings all need spiritual remittances for their well-being in the afterworld. Therefore, the living are responsible for fulfilling these spirits' needs. In return, each of the spirits may provide blessings. Such relationships maintain different forms of reciprocity between the spiritual beings and the living. Sustaining these relations, as a result, formulates the rules and order of a family or a society.

Among these beings, ghosts are the most pitiful and terrible: they are often displaced souls, lacking stable shelter, regular offerings, and ongoing remembrance from the living. Unlike ancestors in a patrilineal family or deities rooted in local communities, ghosts do not receive sustained worship. Eventually, they may manifest before the living, creating chaos, seeking offerings or attention for temporary relief. In short, the professor had described the political victim, Chen Wen-chen, as a chaotic, low-status, and potentially dangerous spirit, despite the strong efforts of his family to honor his memory. Such arbitrary framing not only contradicted the rational posture expected of academics, but also reduced a political martyr to something ominous and taboo.

In a 2018 commemoration, scholar Chen Fang-ming (陳芳明) directly addressed the issue: "The Chen Wen-chen incident is a political wound of its time. There are no ghosts in this

world, only oppressive regimes are the true devils. If ghosts exist, I hope they visit the perpetrators."[9] When the monument was finally unveiled in 2021, media outlets revisited the controversy. One headline reads, "How absurd are NTU's reasons for opposing the Chen Wen-chen Incident Memorial Plaza?" A sharp critique of how superstition had been used to obstruct public remembrance.[10]

This incident illustrates the ongoing struggle over how Taiwan processes its authoritarian past. On one side, activists and scholars advocate for sacred remembrance, constructing memorials that honor political victims. On the other, lingering religious and cultural beliefs sometimes resist this framing, interpreting sites of injustice not as sacred, but as haunted.



Two tourists visit an artwork situated in the ruins of the photography department in the political prison complex on Green Island; the entrance states, "Distinguished guests and esteemed friends filled the venue." Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

This tension is visible not only at NTU but in other urban spaces. In 2019, a television news segment focused on Shizi-lin (獅子林), a shopping mall in central Taipei, describing it as

[9] "NTU Professor Fears Ghosts, Opposes Chen Wen-chen Plaza; Chen Fang-ming: 'Haunted by a Guilty Conscience' 台大教授憂怕鬼不設陳文成廣場, 陳芳明: '心裡有鬼'," *Liberty Times News* 自由時報, October 20, 2018, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2586535.

[10] Liao, Yuhan 廖昱涵, "How Absurd Are NTU's Reasons for Opposing the 'Chen Wen-Chen Incident Plaza'; Dept. of Library and Information Science Professor Huang Mu-Hsuan: Female Students Are Afraid of Ghosts 臺大校方反對'陳文成事件廣場'的各種理由有多瞎? 圖資系教授黃慕萱: 女學生怕鬼," *Watchout* 沃草, February 3, 2021, https://watchout.tw/reports/2h6uOuFS1qN88CCwLDnI.

"eerie" and "gloomy."[11] While urban planning flaws such as poor circulation design contributed to the atmosphere, the story pointed toward a deeper cause: the mall was built on the site of a former military interrogation center, the Taiwan Garrison Command. Even though the original facility was torn down and the land sold to developers in the late 1960s, many locals continue to associate the space with state violence.

As recently as 2025, a popular YouTube channel revisited the shopping mall's "haunted" reputation. One elderly interviewee emphasized that the unease people feel isn't just psychological, but truly spiritual in nature. He recalled that before construction began, trucks arrived at night to burn large quantities of joss paper, a traditional offering to appease wandering spirits.[12]

The resonance of such beliefs shows that, despite progress in transitional justice, Taiwan's authoritarian past continues to manifest in the spiritual landscapes of everyday life. These haunted narratives often reveal a contrast between different attitudes toward historical memory. On the one side, activists and intellectuals hope to honor those who suffered under the KMT regime through respectful remembrance. On the other, many ordinary people continue to view these spaces as ominous, not just metaphorically haunted, but also literally.

In these ghost stories, the deceased—some of whom have been identified and studied by scholars but remain largely unknown to the general public—become the center of attention. Yet this attention does not always lead to critical reflection on the authoritarian past. Instead, the focus often shifts to bodily sensations and subjective experiences: a chill in the air, feelings of unease, or unusual dreams. Unlike researched historical narratives, these ghost stories are fluid, fast-spreading, and emotionally charged. Behind these stories lies an ancient belief: injustice breeds spiritual unrest. Such a belief is rooted in older Chinese cosmologies and later absorbed into Daoist thought.[13] It is widely believed that those who die violently or unjustly may return as ghosts to demand attention. These spirits, regardless of their identities in life, are entitled to haunt the living until their grievances are addressed. In this sense, ghosts become a mirror of the society that produced them: manifestations of unresolved conflict and unhealed wounds.

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[11] Zhang, Yanqing and Zhiwei Zhong 張硯卿 鍾至瑋, "Fire Reveals the Eerie Past of Ximending's Lion Forest Building: Once a Prison During the 228 Incident 大火燒出詭, 西門町獅子林大樓陰森森: 228 時曾是監獄," *SETN* 三立新聞網, July 1, 2019, https://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=563289.

[12] HahaTai 哈哈台, "A Curious Case File from Taipei and New Taipei! Is the Public Art at Banqiao Station Used for Eating? What's the Story Behind Taipei's Mysterious Graffiti? The Truth About the Shizi-lin Building's Past? 雙北的奇聞軼事大搜查: 板橋車站公共藝術是拿來吃飯的? 台北神秘塗鴉是什麼? 獅子林大樓的過去真相," posted January 1, 2025, YouTube video, 22:17, https://youtu.be/9Vz7bxVGb6E?si=TSbNsJCCltqQNpZ9.

[13] Poo Mu-chou 蒲慕州, *Ghosts and Religious Life in Early China* 中國古代的鬼魂與宗教生活. trans. Zixuan Huang 黃姿玄 (Linking Publishing, 2024), 56–59; ibid., 221–222.

Island of Prisons

One well-known rumor on Green Island centers on an enormous sea cave known as Swallow Cave (燕子洞), situated on the island's northeast coast about a 20-minute walk from the former political prison complex. Locals say it was once an execution site where victims died with deep resentment. Their spirits are believed to linger in the cave, and those who enter without proper caution may be haunted by ghosts.

Two tourists approach a cliff where Swallow Cave (the shadowed area in the center of the photo) is located. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

During fieldwork, a woman I met at a local church recounted a ghost story she had heard from a tour guide. According to the tale, a group of students once tried to visit Swallow Cave at night. As they approached the cave, they heard a strange metallic sound—like someone tapping a metal lunchbox, a common container among students. Alarmed, they decided to leave immediately. But the sound continued to follow them. Suddenly, one of the girls fainted, and the rest of the group fled. One older boy stayed behind to help, dragging the girl away from the trail. Once they rejoined the others, the girl slowly regained consciousness and explained what had happened: she had seen a pair of feet trailing behind them, bound in chains. The knocking sound, she realized, was the clinking of those chains.

After telling the story, the woman added, "Swallow Cave was a place where executions were carried out. That's why a story like this exists."

The rumor and the ghost story encapsulate two important aspects of contemporary Green Island. The ghost—partial, bound in chains—symbolizes how many local people intuitively understand the island's past: as a site of isolation and punishment under authoritarian rule.

At the same time, the students' late-night visit speaks to the island's current reality: a popular tourist destination, where adventure and entertainment intersect uneasily with sites of historical violence.

The rumor of executions and the recurring figure of the prisoner-ghost both reflect the island's carceral history. Green Island has long served as a site for relocating those deemed undesirable by the state. Between 1912 and 1920, during the Japanese colonial period, authorities detained *furosha* (浮浪者), or "vagrants," on the island. After the Chinese Civil War broke out and the Kuomintang (KMT) fled to Taiwan in 1949, Green Island once again became a primary site for incarcerating so-called political dissidents. At the same time, the island also held habitual offenders and members of criminal organizations. Over the years, multiple prisons were established to separate different categories of inmates. This legacy earned Green Island its lasting reputation as the "Island of Prisons"—a label that carried a heavy social stigma for decades.[14]

After the end of Martial Law in Taiwan in 1987, the political prison complex on Green Island was shut down. In response, some former political prisoners and activist groups began advocating for the preservation of sites tied to political persecution. It was not until 1992 that one particular prison, the Oasis Villa, was saved from demolition. In 2004, preservation efforts expanded to include another earlier facility, the New Life Correction Centre. Over the next several years, the 31-hectare prison site was given various heritage designations and underwent environmental surveys. In 2011, the central government launched a plan to integrate the Green Island prison complex into the newly proposed National Human Rights Museum. After years of negotiation, the museum was formally established in 2018.[15]

Today, the former prison site is officially institutionalized as part of the National Human Rights Museum. At the same time, Green Island became a tropical tourist hotspot. Beginning in the 1990s, the island's lush scenery and clear coastal waters have been attracting visitors and entrepreneurs from Taiwan's main island. Many came in search of opportunity, and together with residents, they developed a growing tourism economy, opening bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants, car and scooter rentals, and diving tours.[16]

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[14] Intriguingly, the original stigma of being correlated with crimes and violence can sometimes be turned into a self-identified character. For instance, one islander jokes about his self-introduction when he was in the army: "When I said that I am from Green Island, no one dared to bully me."

[15] "Taiwan Takes a Big Step for Human Rights: Legislative Yuan Passes the Organic Act of the National Human Rights Museum in Third Reading 臺灣人權邁大步: 立法院三讀通過國家人權博物館組織法," National Human Rights Museum, accessed August 8, 2025, https://www.nhrm.gov.tw/w/nhrm/News_21090614080216108.

[16] "Green Island 綠島思想起," Wu San-Lien Foundation for Taiwan Historical Materials 吳三連史料基金會, accessed August 8, 2025, https://www.twcenter.org.tw/thematic_series/history_class/tw_window/e02_20010716.

Scuba divers follow a designated entry trail that both protects the fringing reef around Green Island and ensures diver safety. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

By 2024, Green Island was drawing more than 230,000 visitors annually, despite its small size of just 15 square kilometers.[17] Local guides often included stops at the National Human Rights Museum as part of their tour packages. “How can I not be optimistic [about the growth of the museum]?” one senior museum manager once told me, referring to the stream of tourists.[18] Yet for all this promise, not every visitor shows a deep interest in the lives of the political victims, let alone Taiwan’s authoritarian past. Many tourists spend fewer than thirty minutes at the museum. One local guide admitted to me that the site is often treated more as a pit stop—with air conditioning and restrooms—than as a place of reflection.

In addition, some local tourism businesses have incorporated the museum’s atmosphere into a different kind of storytelling: ghost stories. Night tours known as *ye you* (夜遊) have been a major drawing in recent years. These tours are usually offered by hosts when tourists check into their accommodations. Originally designed to showcase Green Island’s nocturnal wildlife, like the endemic peppermint stick insect (*Megacrania tsudai*) and herds of Sika deer, some guides now include a ghost-story segment near the museum division. These stories often center on alleged paranormal encounters in and around the museum complex.

[17] “Scenic Spots 觀光遊憩據點,” Tourism Statistic Database of the Tourism Administration 觀光署觀光統計資料庫, accessed August 8, 2025, https://stat.taiwan.net.tw/scenicSpot.

[18] “Business Statistics 業務統計,” National Human Rights Museum 國家人權博物館, accessed August 8, 2025, https://www.nhrm.gov.tw/w/nhrm/Statistics.

Tourists enjoy nighttime activities, such as setting off sparklers on the beach. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

It was under these conditions that ghost stories about Swallow Cave, like the story at the beginning of this section, began to circulate more widely. A local teacher once remarked that the cave had always been distant from any village, and islanders rarely visited it in the past. But after Green Island's tourism industry began to flourish, some tourist guides began promoting the site as a dramatic destination. According to these stories, Swallow Cave was once used for executions, complete with a guillotine. It soon became one of the island's more popular spots for curious visitors.

In recent years, however, after a string of accidents, many residents have warned tourists to avoid the cave, or at least only visit during daylight hours. Still, the site remains a regular stop on the island's informal ghost map.

Other places have also been absorbed into this growing patchwork of imagined violence. One islander told me about a "made-up ghost story" he heard from a local tour guide. In this story, political prisoners were thrown into a reservoir on the island, and their bones are said to remain submerged in the water. The islander immediately stood up and objected: "That's impossible."[19] But the guide quickly hushed him, worried about disappointing the nearby tourists.

While ghosts may draw curious attention, their presence also signals a deeper tension between remembrance and entertainment, political history and market-driven tourism. For

[19] The reservoir was built in 1993, after the end of the authoritarian era.

example, while rumors about execution sites on Green Island feed a sense of emotional intrigue, they do not match the documented history of how the prison system operated during the authoritarian era. In fact, most political prisoners who were sent to the island had already escaped death sentences, which were more commonly carried out in Taiwan's major cities. Green Island, in contrast, was primarily used for long-term imprisonment and "re-education," albeit under harsh conditions, with significant risks of illness, accidents, suicide, or continued abuse. These stories reflect a sharp contrast with how the museum seeks to present the island's political history.

The rumors of executions may capture something of the arbitrary violence of the regime, but it glosses over the ways the Kuomintang maintained its rule through a highly systematized legal process. This legalism—however unjust—was part of what made the regime's authoritarian control so difficult to reveal, let along combat. And because this complexity is often missing from ghost stories and tourist narratives, efforts to explain the full historical reality can require significant patience and care.

Green Island seems to exist in two separate worlds. On the one hand, it is a sunny, carefree destination, a place of scenic vacations and outdoor adventure. On the other, it carries the heavy legacy of Taiwan's authoritarian past. The gap between these two realities is not easily bridged. As noted earlier, political history remains a sensitive topic in Taiwan, shaped by decades of complex party politics. Within this context, ghost stories offer a controversial—but revealing—means of connecting the island's dual identities. They blur the boundaries between the present-day tourist landscape and the traces of historical violence. Yet, under the pressures of the tourism industry, these stories are often reduced to dramatic backdrops; simplified accounts that generate thrill, not understanding.

Eventually, these ghost stories reflect a sharp contrast with how the museum seeks to present the island's political history, because such narratives tend to emphasize individual emotion and imagination rather than historical depth or ethical reflection. Ghost stories about the authoritarian era rarely lead tourists to question the regime's legacy or develop empathy for its victims. Instead, they enhance the excitement of a nighttime tour or add suspense to a scenic hike.

For many visitors, the official narratives presented by the museum remain distant, disconnected from their experience of the island. This emotional and intellectual detachment can be discouraging for those committed to raising awareness about the Kuomintang dictatorship. As one museum guide admitted, she had grown tired of correcting misleading stories about a local sea cave: "It was not a place of execution. But I've almost given up trying to explain it."

Honoring the Deceased

Some ghost stories on Green Island are best understood as rumors. These tales, often circulated through tourism or popular media, may distort the historical realities of state violence. They tend to blur the defining features of authoritarianism, transforming tragedy into spectacle. However, other narratives, especially those rooted in religious belief, reveal deeper forms of engagement with the dead. These beliefs often inspire practices, which express concern for the spirits of those who perished under political persecution. Unlike rumors that sensationalize, such practices reflect more respectful and meaningful interactions with the deceased.

Modest graves scattered throughout the Thirteenth Squadron. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

Many of these beliefs and rituals center around a cemetery near the Swallow Cave, known as the Thirteenth Squadron. It refers to the cemetery of the New Life Correction Camp, a political prison camp that operated on Green Island between 1951 and 1970. The name comes from the prison's internal structure during the early years of its operation. At the time, inmates were divided into twelve squadrons. The cemetery, unofficial, yet widely acknowledged, came to be known as the "Thirteenth Squadron," a symbolic space for those who did not return home.

Situated on the eastern slope of the island, the cemetery overlooks the sea and is scattered with modest graves. It reflects the lonely and tragic ends many prisoners faced: they died far from home, often from illness, suicide, or accidents, without proper funerals or the presence of family. Due to the island's remoteness and subtropical climate, the bodies of

the deceased were temporarily stored in the nearby Swallow Cave. If no family members arrived to claim them, their remains were cremated and buried in the cemetery with minimal ceremony. In some cases, military personnel who died on the island were also interred there.

Today, the Thirteenth Squadron holds deep significance for former political prisoners, museum staff, educators, and human rights advocates. Even though many of the original remains may have been relocated, visitors continue to make pilgrimages to the site. For them, the cemetery represents a lasting emotional connection between the living and those who died under authoritarian rule.

In the documentary *Forgetting and Memory in Taiwan*, former political prisoner Tu Nan-Shan (涂南山) visits the Thirteenth Squadron with fellow survivors and families of victims on a drizzly day. Holding white lilies, he calls out into the cemetery: “Wang Yu-Qi (王玉棋)! Shi Qiu-Lin (施秋霖)! Tu Nan-Shan and Zhang Can-Sheng (張燦生), along with our friends and relatives of victims, are here to mourn you! Do you hear us?” His words echo with the grief and solidarity that continue to connect the living with those who died under the authoritarian regime.

During her own time on Green Island, the author witnessed another moment of deep remembrance. A political victim, in his eighties, stood before a group of young students. With his back to the cemetery, he and other former prisoners sang a Japanese song, Sen no Kaze ni Natte (“I Am a Thousand Winds”), also known in the English-speaking world as *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep*: “Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there. I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow... Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die.”

These commemorations reflect not only enduring bonds but also a sense that the deceased continue to engage with the living. Some narratives even portray the spirits as unsettled, playful, chaotic, or insistent on being acknowledged. One interlocutor, Cao Qin-Rong (曹欽榮), recalled organizing a memorial concert on Green Island in 2005. Just before the event, a sudden storm knocked down the stage lights. Interpreting the chaos as a sign from the spirits buried in the Thirteenth Squadron, the organizer and his friend rushed to the cemetery. They prayed, acknowledging that they had failed to notify the dead in advance. In a gesture of atonement, they poured a can of beer over a boundary marker in the cemetery, one that had been placed there by another former political prisoner, Wang Wenqing (王文清). “We prayed for peace and for the concert to proceed smoothly,” he said. The event continued without further interruption.

Cao Qin-Rong (曹欽榮) recalls his anxiety and his decision to show his respect to the deceased at the Thirteenth Squadron cemetery. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

In another story, a team leader from a youth camp on Green Island described a series of unsettling events that unfolded after a visit to the Thirteenth Squadron cemetery:

> On the third day of our camp, we visited the cemetery to mourn the political victims. I saw a bag of Doritos and a pack of cigarettes left on the ground. Without thinking, I picked them up—then suddenly realized they were offerings. I quickly put them back. Later, I heard that some members of our team had actually eaten the offerings. That night, our camp leader appeared to be possessed. She kept saying there was a voice in her head, telling her over and over that we needed to return to the cemetery and apologize.

After the camp ended, the interlocutor left Green Island to join another activity on Taiwan's main island. But that same night, he developed a high fever and began vomiting. He was taken to a local hospital and placed on a drip. He eventually recovered but soon learned that two thirds of the camp organizers had come down with similar symptoms. "The political victims [now elderly] and other trainees were all fine. We had eaten the same food, so I don't think it was food poisoning," he recalled.

Both interlocutors who shared these experiences are highly educated individuals involved in historical education. They have worked closely with former political prisoners and expressed deep respect for the victims of state violence. Neither of them is prone to superstitious belief. Yet in their narratives, the spirits of the Thirteenth Squadron are portrayed as having clear agency, capable of expressing displeasure, demanding attention, and disturbing those who fail to act respectfully.

Such stories reveal that, for these intellectuals, the relationship with the dead is not merely symbolic. The living continue to negotiate memory through emotion, interpretation, and intuition, recognizing the presence of the deceased not only as victims of history but as spiritual actors in the present. Furthermore, these interactions are shaped by both rational knowledge of history and an emotional, at times spiritual, responsiveness to the presence of the deceased. The dead are not only remembered; they are encountered. And in these encounters, the line between history and haunting grows thin.

Living with ghosts

Unlike political victims and intellectuals, many Green Island residents are less familiar with the details of the state violence that occurred during Taiwan's authoritarian era. They do not share a strong emotional bond with the deceased in the Thirteenth Squadron. Yet they do not take the presence of the dead lightly, especially when it comes to tourists or guides who treat these sites with carelessness or irreverence. For islanders, the concern is not necessarily about remembering history but about maintaining balance: allowing tourism to flourish while ensuring that the dead are respected and spiritual order is preserved. Religious beliefs and rituals become the practical tools for negotiating this boundary.

For many islanders, ghosts are negotiable agents, much like street toughs who can create problems yet also extend favors when treated well. A local fisherman explained that spear fishers always prepare joss paper before entering the water, bringing small gold- and silver-patterned sheets about 7 × 9 cm. Standing where the sea begins—never on a dry reef—they scatter the paper onto the waves as an offering to the "good buddies," (好兄弟) a polite term for ghosts.

Surrounded by residents, a local ritual expert guides ghosts from the sea to shore, marking a seawater path with joss-paper lotuses. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

A boat owner confirmed the practice, noting that spear fishers typically offer paper money worth NT $5–10 (≈ USD 0.16–0.3), while boat owners spend NT $20–30 (≈ USD 0.6–1) just before leaving the harbor. As he casts the sheets, the skipper addresses the "good buddies" with respectful words: "Grant us peace and safety, and help us bring home a plentiful catch." Crews also scatter joss paper when a boat runs aground; without this gesture, it may stay

stuck even after the tide rises, so most vessels keep a packet on board for moments of ill fortune. From the above description, it is clear that ghosts—though chaotic and at times troublesome—can still be incorporated into a reciprocal relationship. Through such everyday transactions, islanders maintain a functional alliance with the unseen beings who share their waters.

For islanders who are not fishermen, participation in ghost-related rituals often takes place during the seventh month of the lunar calendar, commonly known as Ghost Month.[20] During this period, it is believed that ghosts are released into the world of the living to vent their grievances. On the final day of Ghost Month, each family prepares offerings in front of local temples so the "good buddies" can enjoy a last meal before returning to the underworld. This ritual is called *pai-bio-khau* (拜廟口), ("showing respect at the temple gate") in Taiwanese Hokkein.

The local deity Tudi Gong, with offerings placed on tables. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

During *pai-bio-khau*, ritual hierarchy is emphasized. Offerings are first made to the temple deities, such as Tudi Gong (土地公, or "Lord of the Land"). These offerings include large, ornate joss paper, three incense sticks, animal sacrifices (chicken, pork, and fish), and three cups of rice wine, all arranged on a large table inside or near the temple. After waiting for

[20] For more discussions about the Ghost Month, see Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*.

about fifteen minutes—during which rice wine is poured three times—offerings to the "good buddies" may begin.

The offerings for the "good buddies" typically include five small bowls of cooked dishes (known as *goo-miih uann* in Taiwanese Hokkien), cookies, candies, rice wine, and animal sacrifices that had been served to the deities. In general, these offerings are either less costly than those for the deities, or they are items the deities have already "enjoyed." The joss paper for the "good buddies" is also smaller in size. These offerings are traditionally placed on the ground rather than on a table. Taken together, these practices express a hierarchy between deities and ghosts, even as they remain acts intended to appease the "good buddies." Once everything is set, worshippers may say, "Please come and eat." Rice wine is poured again—ideally three times, though once is acceptable—before the joss paper is burned.

During pai-bio-khau, an islander places offerings for the "good buddies" on the ground in front of a local temple. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

It is important to distinguish between joss paper for deities and for spirits: the former is larger, often decorated with golden foil or intricate designs; the latter is smaller, usually bearing silver foil. They must be burned in separate containers. Similarly, incense sticks for deities are inserted into fixed burners, signifying that the deity's presence and power remain rooted in the village. In contrast, incense sticks for the "good buddies" are temporarily inserted into the ground and later removed, then burned in a designated burner. Some islanders even refuse to insert incense sticks for the "good buddies" into the ground at all,

instead leaning them against a rock or similar object. Such practices are meant to prevent the creation of a permanent ritual spot that might encourage spirits to linger and expect future offerings.

Through this hierarchical distinction between deities and ghosts, visible in the sequence of offerings and the material differences in ritual items, these unruly spirits are symbolically placed within a controlled social order. For these islanders, spiritual respect is not abstract; it is a matter of lived knowledge passed through experience and belief. When confronting those who died under state violence, locals may not frame their relationship in terms of political memory, yet their actions reveal a wish to coexist with the past, carefully, cautiously, and with dignity. Yet this delicate order is often overlooked, or even disrupted, by tourists unfamiliar with its significance.

One islander expressed frustration with tourists who had failed to show the proper respect. His neighbor had once brought a group of visitors to the Swallow Cave. Upon arrival, the neighbor saw the “good buddies”: countless human heads staring at him from the slope of the mountain. He knew to stay calm and act as if nothing had happened. But the tourists behaved differently. He described them using the Taiwanese Hokkien term *giat-siau*, a way of saying someone is so mischievous they lose all awareness of their surroundings. As the group left the cave, the tourists began laughing and crying simultaneously, as if they had lost their senses.

Another islander suggested to the author to visit the Thirteenth Squadron in the early morning darkness “to feel what it’s like.” In the dark, he lit a bundle of incense sticks and offered them in silence. He warned against going alone: “You should let someone lead; someone who has deities worshipped in their home.” He also shared a story of a group who had once skipped this step. “They didn’t bring incense,” he said, “and the next day, the whole group got into a car accident.”

For residents, the state’s legacy includes not only the prisons and political prisoners it once imposed, but also the dead, the spirits whose presence may still be felt today. Islanders are not unfamiliar with living alongside ghosts; they have long developed ways of managing such relationships. Yet, these culturally grounded practices are often overlooked in contemporary memorial politics. In a top-down, state-led process of heritagization, islanders’ religious understandings of the former prison are easily dismissed as superstition—something unreliable and best left unspoken. Such dismissal risks excising a vital layer of community memory. For islanders, ritual interactions with the dead translate political violence into a spiritual register that can be negotiated day by day. These vernacular frameworks offer an indispensable lens through which the island’s contested past can be acknowledged and interpreted.

Keep a Respectful Distance

Despite the presence of religious guidelines and practices, many Green Island residents still keep a cautious distance from the two sites most associated with death: the Swallow Cave and the Thirteenth Squadron cemetery. At the heart of their hesitation is a simple truth: they are not familiar with the deceased. This attitude contrasts sharply with the strong emotional ties felt by political victims and their supporters, for whom the deceased are remembered as former comrades and friends. Yet the islanders' wariness is not always directed toward a particular agent such as a ghost; at times it centers on death itself, viewed as a source of ritual pollution that must be symbolically cleansed.

During one conversation, a woman casually remarked that she used to catch goats wandering near the Thirteenth Squadron. Another islander recoiled: "I'd rather not go there. You can go by yourselves." Her reaction reflects a broader belief that death is contagious, something that, if mishandled, can harm the living.

A different interlocutor added that tourists often suffer ill effects after visiting the museum. When he guides visitors around Green Island, he avoids the museum altogether, especially if children are present. Children are considered "clean," given their unformed propensity, and therefore can be easily affected by the influence of ghosts. If they do enter the museum, he noted, youngsters frequently burst into tears. One islander even told me his parents forbid him from taking children to the museum, insisting it is "filthy."

This unease extends to the entire museum, which many residents view as an inauspicious space tainted by death. In local custom, death requires careful handling. The bereaved are expected to withdraw temporarily from communal life, and any space touched by death must be ritually purified before it can be safely re-entered. One man recounted a dispute in which a neighbor blamed him for the loss of a deer simply because he had walked past the farm shortly after a family member's funeral. Aware of his ritual "filthiness," he had kept moving, hoping not to linger.

From this perspective, the state's past violence generated not only political trauma but also lingering spiritual pollution. The dead were never fully purified by trusted ritual specialists, and their burial sites were left in isolation. As a result, the island bears a persistent unease, avoiding places deemed spiritually unclean and lacking proper closure. Although the authoritarian era has ended and the government now promotes these spots as sites of education and remembrance, many residents remain cautious. Recasting them as tourist destinations or museums cannot easily erase the older associations.

Beyond concerns over such pollution, residents also worry about ghosts. For them, the former prison complex is more than a looming landmark; it is haunted by *wu xing* (無形), a term often used to refer to unidentified, wandering ghosts. Many islanders associate these *wu xing* directly with those who died in the prison complex. One interlocutor mentioned

that he seldom goes to the museum, “only two times in the past two years.” He said that he is sensitive to the *wu xing*, so when he enters the museum, he feels very uncomfortable, becomes very irritated, and experiences symptoms like dizziness and nausea. When asked whether these situations could be caused by the hot and humid air in the museum, he denied this, relaying he had similar reactions when visiting other famous haunted places on the island.

The lingering spirits are not just vague superstitions: they represent a deeply held belief in the spiritual consequences of injustice and unacknowledged suffering. A ritual specialist told the author, “Prison is ominous because there’s bound to be injustice.” A retired police officer who had once worked in prisons admitted, “When people die with resentment, they become fierce ghosts (厲鬼 *ligui*).”

The lingering presence of these ghosts reflects broader political anxieties. The authoritarian past of Taiwan remains a contested subject, and many aspects of that history remain unresolved. The more aware islanders become of the injustices endured by political victims, the more they seem to imagine the island’s ghosts as restless, resentful presences.

A pu du *ceremony held inside the museum, specifically for the spirits in the prison complex. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.*

This interpretation of the museum as spiritually unsettled is most clearly expressed during the museum’s *pu du* (普渡) ceremony, a ritual held in the seventh month of the lunar calendar to honor wandering spirits. Both the museum’s director, who is not originally from

the island, and local staff acknowledged that the offerings were intended for those who died within the former prison complex. The director hesitated to specify whom the offerings were for, vaguely referring to "something inside the complex." In contrast, a local cleaner was more candid: "We're worshipping those imprisoned here." She clarified that they face the prison's inner yard when placing offerings, not the road outside. In other words, these offerings are not for random spirits just passing by, but for those who died within these walls. A security guard echoed this view, noting that *pu du* is necessary "because some have died unjustly, and their souls may linger."

In a museum typically cautious about addressing ghost stories, this ritual stands out as a rare, formal acknowledgment of the dead. It reveals how local concerns about the site's inauspiciousness continue to shape the space, even under the structure of a national institution.

It is particularly striking that the prison complex—a symbol of state discipline, order, and control—is now understood by many as a haunted, resentful place. In Han-Chinese popular religion, ghosts are often viewed as the most marginal and chaotic of spirits. They are neither deities worshipped in temples nor ancestors venerated at home. Like prisoners, ghosts exist in isolation. Their presence is marked by transience and instability. Both groups are seen as marginal and potentially unruly. Just as people suspect that prisoners may not be fully "tamed" by incarceration, ghosts are also feared for their capacity to disturb the living. They remain unpredictable, existing at the edge of control.

In this light, despite being designed as tools of state power, prisons can never fully guarantee order. They may confine bodies but not always spirits. Both the memories and the ghosts of injustice can linger, challenging the security they were meant to enforce.

Strangers and Their Worship

While state violence brought death and inauspicious associations to Green Island's prisons, a different kind of unease has emerged with the arrival of strangers, especially religious practitioners from outside the island. One museum guide recalled seeing a Buddhist monk in the museum. He was holding a prayer wheel, wearing a pointed hat, chanting mantras, and eventually thrusting a paper lotus forward, as though attempting to purify the space. Another guide remembered that some new religious groups had requested to perform rituals inside the museum division, but these requests were denied.

These groups often come either by invitation from a few local devotees or on their own initiative. Regardless of how they arrive, their purpose is usually the same: to offer spiritual aid or salvation to the lingering spirits of the deceased. Their activities reflect a broader trend in Taiwan that emerged in the 1980s, part of the rise of new religious movements.

Unlike traditional Han-Chinese popular religion, which is deeply embedded in community life and grounded in relationships within local society, these new religious groups focus on individual spiritual cultivation. Through discipline and devotion, members aim to achieve personal enlightenment or salvation.[21]

During fieldwork, the author encountered such groups on several occasions. They were easy to distinguish from regular tourists. Typically made up of adults between the ages of forty and seventy, they wore plain uniforms in soft colors like white or yellow. Some tied red cloths around their waists, a gesture believed to protect against evil forces. These groups often moved and spoke in unison, reinforcing a sense of ritual order. Although they may appear similar, they are not necessarily connected.

A new religious group takes group photos on the lawn across from the museum division. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

During one ritual, the author was invited by ritual specialists to chant Buddhist scriptures for lingering spirits on Green Island. The goal was to offer salvation and purification, allowing these souls—particularly those of the prisoners—to leave the island peacefully. A spirit medium prepared cooked food as offerings to appease what they called "spirits of bad death." These ritual experts were mostly from Taipei City or Taitung County and had minimal interaction with residents during their stay.

[21] Ting Jen-Chieh 丁仁傑, "Plausibility for the Belief Systems of New Religions in Contemporary Taiwan: A Comparative Study of Five New Religious Groups 當代台灣新興宗教的信仰體系及其可信性: 五個新興宗教團體的考察." *New Century Religious Study* 新世紀宗教研究 12 no. 3 (2014): 15–16.

A similar religious gathering was documented by anthropologist Fabian Graham, who has conducted long-term research on mediums and new deity cults in Taiwan.[22] In this case, participants gathered on Green Island to "invite the souls of the dead to partake of offerings and to receive religious teachings." These mediums deliberately visited several ominous locations, including the Thirteenth Squadron cemetery and Swallow Cave.

Despite the ritual intention of offering comfort and spiritual release to the dead, most local residents showed little interest in participating. In some cases, they even mocked the unfamiliar visitors. One Green Islander remarked that a small temple near the museum division had become more ominous because so many outside groups came to worship there, frequently summoning ghosts. This local perception sharply contrasted with the purpose of the rituals, which was to purify the island and reduce its haunted reputation.

A museum guard, once watching one group perform their rites, expressed frustration: "They hold rituals without informing anyone. And who knows what might appear after they finish?" In the eyes of many islanders, these religious groups introduced more uncertainty than comfort. By offering sacrifices or invoking spirits without local consent, the rituals risked calling forth ghostly presences at inappropriate times. Since the worshippers soon left the island, it was ultimately the residents who would have to deal with any lingering spiritual effects.

Standing inside the Swallow Cave and looking toward the entrance. Credit: © 2020 Fang-I Chu.

[22] Fabian Graham, "Inviting the souls of the dead on Green Island to partake of offerings and to learn religious teachings, 2019," Facebook, April 26, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/groups/205149456202422/permalink/3276912312359439/, accessed April 27, 2020.

Conclusion

Although authoritarian rule is no longer a political taboo topic in Taiwan, its legacies remain difficult to process. The trauma it left behind is deeply entangled with broader issues such as party politics, national identity, historical memory, heritage conservation, island development, and human rights. These complexities generate ongoing debates and, within this contested landscape, religious beliefs and related rumors may appear superstitious, or even misleading. Yet, whether embraced or criticized, such beliefs are widespread and cannot be ignored. They signal unresolved questions and underscore the fact that many victims of state violence have yet to be properly recognized.

On Green Island, religious (re)interpretations offer a lens into how various groups perceive and engage with the past. Some tourism businesses capitalize on tragic histories by circulating sensational ghost stories. Political victims and intellectuals maintain deep emotional ties to the deceased, while many residents adopt a cautious and respectful distance, wary of stirring unrest. Meanwhile, new religious groups arrive with the intention of purifying the island, inadvertently reinforcing the island's haunted image.

These religious responses are embedded within Taiwan's politically charged post-authoritarian landscape. They reveal how state violence continues to affect the fabric of society, even on such a remote island. Its impact is not only visible in the physical remnants of prisons and cemeteries but also palpable in the intangible fear, unease, and spiritual uneasiness that linger in the landscape.