

Ink against death penalty

BY CAMILLE REYNAUD

On March 1, 2019, the Malaysian Coalition Against the Death Penalty organized a forum at Wisma WIM (Women's Institute of Management) in Kuala Lumpur, city where the first regional Conference initiated by the French NGO Ensemble contre la peine de mort was held in 2015 together with local organizations. And in 2015, as in 2019, visitors could discover, in-between conferences, the work of Taiwanese artist Ewam Lin.

Ewam Lin is a prison guard at Yilan in the east of Taiwan. For twenty years, he has documented day-to-day prison life in ink drawings that are accompanied by explanatory notes. Within the confines of a sheet of paper, often in A4 or A5 format, his fountain pen recounts the daily lives of inmates within the confines of their cells. The solitude of an elderly man awaiting a visit from his granddaughter for the New Year, the posture of a man doing his morning prayers, the suffering of a sick inmate who does not receive the necessary treatment: all these portraits demonstrating how legal decisions affect prisoners, and that denounce the weaknesses of the Taiwanese penal and penitentiary system. Ewam Lin publishes these illustrated accounts on his blog in defense of a more humane vision of prison. From his point of view as both a guard and an artist, he makes a case for justice reform, particularly for abolishing the death penalty, because he believes that reparation and re-integrating prisoners to society could be more effective form of justice.

In 2017, Cheng Hsing-tse was recognized as innocent after eight appeals and fourteen years behind bars, ten of which were spent on death row. He was not the first victim of judiciary error. Since 2012, four other cases have been reviewed in Taiwan. This case re-opened the death penalty debate in a geographical zone that is for the most part in favor of capital punishment.

If stakes are high in Asia for the abolitionist movement, it's because the region is still home to many retentionist countries, that is, ones that remain resistant to abolition and also have a high rate of execution. China alone counts thousands of executions, a country where the death penalty is used as a tool for political oppression. According to an Amnesty International report published April 12, 2018, among the 55 states throughout the world that still use capital punishment, 16 are in the Pacific Asian region, and 10 of them are likely to use it for drug trafficking offenses.

In fact, explains Ewam Lin in an interview with the newspaper Free Malaysia Today, the majority of inmates in the prison where he works are there on drug use charges but do not have access to medical care for their addiction. Rather than sending them to rehab, they are

imprisoned, even executed, by a government that believes this is the cheapest way to reduce the risks of repeat offense: it costs less to eliminate than to treat.

His impressive political artistic practice is rooted in this context. By drawing the inmates and recounting their stories, he challenges the Taiwanese public to see the human beings who are stuck behind bars. By revealing the eyes that the execution squad has smothered by a blindfold before firing, he forces Taiwanese society to confront its own guilt. His gesture of empathy, without denying the crimes committed, re-questions the system while restoring personhood.

With the recognition acquired through his drawings, Ewam Lin has been invited since 2017 to participate in the National Conference on Judiciary Reform organized by the Malaysian president who, after voting in favor of a moratorium on the death penalty on November 13, 2018, is taking a first step toward complete abolition, perhaps forging a road for the rest of Asia.