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What Shall We Do with the Dead Dictator?

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One of the thorniest problems facing fledgling democracies involves how to cope with memories of their former dictators. Attempts to assess this aspect of a country’s history are especially problematic due to the fact that the trauma many citizens have suffered is tempered by the lingering impact of indoctrination and hero worship (consider the debates over Suharto’s rule now that he has just passed away). Add to this mixture of emotions the spices of identity formation and electoral politics and its volatility can increase exponentially.

For the past year, Taiwan has been in the throes of grappling with the legacy of former ROC President Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975). One aspect has involved a “rectification of names” (zhengming 正名) campaign (for example, renaming CKS International Airport as Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport), which also includes affixing the word “Taiwan” to as many state organizations as possible (a case in point being Taiwan Post). At the same time, government officials and scholars have been striving to achieve some degree of transitional justice (zhuanxing zhengyi 轉型正義) by holding Chiang and other former ROC leaders accountable for human rights abuses, especially the death and imprisonment of thousands of Taiwanese during the 228 Incident of 1947.

The debate over these issues reached a crescendo last month, when the government renamed and redesigned the sacred space of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (now National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall), while also withdrawing funding and the military honor guard from the Cihhu Presidential Burial Palace (Cihu qinling 慈湖陵寢) in Daxi (Dasi 大溪) where both the elder Chiang and his son, former President Chiang Ching-kuo (1910-1988), had been temporarily laid to rest. Both of these sites are powerful symbols of the presence the Chiang’s continue to exert over Taiwan. The mammoth Memorial Hall, modeled after the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing yet also resembling an imperial palace, was constructed over a three and a half year period extending from 1976 to 1980, with the imposing bronze statue of Chiang weighing in as the fourth largest in the world. The Cihhu mausoleum was built on land originally belonging to the renowned Lin family of Banqiao (Panchiao 板橋), which was presented to the state in 1955 and used as a site for one of Chiang’s residences since the summer of 1959.

Plans to rename the Memorial Hall were announced in May 2007, but the formal opening of the new site and the replacement of the renowned characters “Great Centrality and Perfect Uprightness” (dazhong zhizheng 大中至正) adorning the site’s main gate with “Liberty Square” (Ziyou guangchang 自由廣場) did not take place until the end of the year. There had also been fears that Chiang’s statue would be demolished or enclosed in an iron cage, but when the hall reopened on New Year’s Day it was found to have been surrounded by kites and photographs commemorating Taiwan’s arduous struggle towards democracy. Even these alterations caused considerable furor, especially after strongly worded statements in their favor by leading officials from the Ministry of Education and Government Information Office.

The government’s decision to withdraw its support from the presidential mausoleum, which was made at the same time the Memorial Hall was being rectified, sparked a different set of rhetorical fireworks, especially when Chiang Fang Chih-yi 蔣方智怡 (Chiang Ching-kuo’s third daughter-
propose having both Chiang’s remains reburied in their native home of Fenghua 奉化, Zhejiang. President Chen Shuibian 陳水扁 immediately voiced his outrage, pointing out that the government had already spent NT$30 million (approx. US$925,000) in taxpayers’ money to build permanent tombs for the former leaders at the Wuzhishan (Wuchishan 五指山) Military Cemetery in Xizhi (Hsi-chih 汐止; suburban Taipei). With elections for the Legislative Yuan fast approaching, the above issues became subjects of an increasingly acrimonious debate. One of the few voices of reason was none other than one of Chiang Kai-shek’s descendents, Demos Chiang (蔣友柏), who posted thoughtful entries on his own blog pointing out that while his great-grandfather had been responsible for great suffering, he neither merited deification nor deserved demonization.

Now, with election fever (temporarily) subsiding, so has the controversy over the Chiang’s legacy, although some have blamed the DPP’s stunning defeat as being in part due to the clumsy way in which the government handled this issue. The transformation of the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall is largely complete, although its website still features the hall’s former abbreviation. The mausoleum is now being managed by the Taoyuan County Government, while a new park in Daxi has been built to hold hundreds of discarded statues of Chiang Kai-shek. The wounds caused during his rule remain, but many still regard him as a great leader, and there is even some nostalgia for the rule of his son. However, the question of how to come to grips with this facet of Taiwan’s modern history remains unanswered. While archives have been opened and studies published, the past has been politicized by both the DPP and the KMT, and Taiwan’s sole “Truth Commission” was created by the pan-Blue camp merely to investigate the shooting of Chen Shuibian and Lu Hsiu-lien 吕秀蓮 prior to the 2004 election. However, while both democracies and dictatorships attempt to manipulate the past to serve the present, Taiwan deserves credit for allowing such topics to be the subject of free and freewheeling discussion.