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One Hundred Years of Controversy

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"History is never for itself; it is always for someone" — Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 16

Controversies about the past are nothing new to modern Taiwan, but this one is something completely different, centering not on how to remember the Japanese colonial era, the 228 Incident, or the White Terror, but the forthcoming 100th anniversary of the Republic of China’s founding on January 1, 1912 (建國百年).

At the center of the current *sturm und drang* is Taiwan’s *Academia Historica* (國史館), the putative successor to the imperial Historiography Institute (same Chinese name) established from the Song to Qing dynasties. In order to help celebrate the centennial, the Academia’s staff put together an *Internet poll* for the 100 most influential figures in ROC history, with the list of candidates including not only renowned ROC presidents like Sun Yat-sen (孫中山; 1886-1925) and Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石; 1887-1975), but also CCP leaders who had helped overthrow the ROC government in China, including Mao Zedong (毛澤東; 1893-1976), Zhou Enlai (周恩來; 1898-1976), and Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平; 1904-1997); even the last emperor Puyi 溥儀 (1906-1967) made the list.
Apparently the Academia staff was quite enthusiastic about this undertaking; in addition to organizing these 100 individuals according to their achievements in politics, military affairs, economics, foreign policy, religion, academia, the arts, etc., there was even talk of establishing a category for the best-looking.

Regrettably, the road to political controversy is paved with good intentions. To the great consternation of both pan-blue and pan-green political elites, by early December the poll’s results had taken an unexpected turn, with Deng topping the list as the most influential figure in the military category and Chairman Mao ranking third in the category of political leaders, ahead of his longtime rival Chiang (One should note that this poll does not seem to have attracted much attention: Sun received the most votes (2800+), while Deng’s #1 ranking was based on a mere 90-vote total).
Regardless of how popular the poll might have been, it clearly touched a raw nerve. The situation started to spin out of control on December 9, when KMT Legislator Justin Chou 周守訓 questioned Deputy Minister of National Defense Chao Shih-chang 趙世樟 about the propriety of listing people like Deng, with Chao responding that it was “absolutely inapprpropriate” (絕對不合適). Other outraged KMT elites referred to the poll as “child’s play” (兒戲), while others noted that it touched on sensitive issues of Cross-Straits relations and national identity. Many of these sentiments were summed up by Chou, who recalled the men and women who had laid down their lives for the nation, exclaiming “How can the ROC bear this!” (中華民國情何以堪!).

For its part, the Academia Historica appears to have been caught off guard, initially issuing a statement explaining that the Internet poll had been planned as a lesson in historical objectivity by including ROC and PRC leaders who had helped shaped ROC history (at a 60::40 ratio). Shortly thereafter, a decision was made to delete controversial figures like Deng and Mao from the list, but it was too late. By the evening of December 9, the entire poll had been removed from the public sphere, apparently on orders from President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 himself (Academia Historica is under the jurisdiction of the Presidential Office). Sources close to the issue indicated that Ma was “extremely concerned” (非常重視) about this matter, ordering that it be “dealt with seriously” (嚴肅處理). Some Academia staffers were subjected to demotions, demerits, and other administrative punishments, but that proved insufficient to quell the rage. Following a stormy interpellation session featuring intense questioning by both KMT and DPP lawmakers, the Legislative Yuan voted to refer Academia Historica President Lin Man-houng 林滿紅 (a leading economic historian) to the Control Yuan for impeachment proceedings. Lin chose instead to submit her resignation, which (not surprisingly) the Presidential Office has accepted.

Apart from being a fascinating case study of Taiwanese academic and identity politics, the above controversy also raises a number of key questions about how to commemorate the past 100 years of modern Chinese history. To begin with, whose history is meant to be written? Should historical studies of Cross-Straits relations and national identity. Many of these sentiments were summed up by Chou, who recalled the men and women who had laid down their lives for the nation, exclaiming “How can the ROC bear this!” (中華民國情何以堪!).

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All this indicates that modern Chinese history continues to be a contested arena. As Keith Jenkins points out, "History is a shifting, problematic discourse...subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment". It looks to be a year of raucous historiographical debate. Stay tuned.