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Everything Old is New Again

January 28, 2009 in [Tales from Taiwan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

One year ago today, I posted an essay entitled “What Shall We Do with the Dead Dictator?”, which discussed the DPP government’s efforts to further the cause of transitional justice (轉型正義) by reexamining the legacy of former ROC President Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975). A number of related policies ended up sparking considerable controversy, included renaming the CKS International Airport as [Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport](#), and especially changing the name of the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall.

The KMT regained power just two months later, following which things began to move in reverse. Most recently, the Ministry of Education, in one of its last policy decisions during the Year of the Rat, announced that in July 2009 the Democracy Hall’s name plaque will be [removed](#) and the original plaque [restored](#). This was based on an Executive Yuan decision to withdraw the former government’s request to [abolish the Organic Statute of the CKS Memorial Hall](#) (國立中正紀念堂管理處組織條例廢止案), as well as a resolution by the Legislative Yuan that the Hall’s name be changed back to Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall.

Although the Ministry of Education had originally proposed holding a public forum to discuss whether or not to change the plaque, no such event was arranged. According to one top-ranking official, this was due to concerns that such a forum might spark tensions between DPP and KMT supporters. While it is true that political discussions in Taiwan tend to be heated, and can even turn violent, one cannot help but recalling the observation that Judge Damon Keith made in a 2002 federal appeals court ruling, namely that “[Democracies die behind closed doors](#)”.

Another rejuvenation of the past involves the [redeployment](#) of the Hall’s [honor guard](#) in time for the [Lunar New Year](#) holiday, which means that tourists and other visitors can once again see soldiers marching (goose-stepping?) in front of Chiang’s statue (an image of the guard also adorns the new home page of the Hall’s [website](#)). One of the few things that will not change is that the Liberty Square (自由廣場) inscription at the entrance to the hall is to remain untouched.



Party politics aside, one cannot help but wonder when Taiwan’s leaders will choose to promote the examination of the complex facets of Chiang’s rule, positive and negative alike. In contrast to nations like Argentina, Rwanda, South Africa, South Korea, etc., Taiwan has yet to entrust a [truth and reconciliation commission](#) with the task of investigating past wrongdoings (its sole “Truth Commission” was created in order to delve into the 2004 presidential election shooting). Fortunately, scholars have made considerable efforts to pick up the slack, with Jeremy E. Taylor and his colleagues organizing a conference entitled “Reassessing Chiang Kai-Shek: An International Dialogue” to be held at Queen’s University, Canada on August 7-9, 2009. In addition, the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica has organized a Chiang Kai-shek [Research Group](#), which includes participants from Taiwan, China, Japan, and the United States. Perhaps with time some form of justice will prevail, for only after a nation’s triumphs and tragedies have been accorded the thorough study they deserve can true reconciliation take place.

