12-17-2010

One Hundred Years of Controversy

Paul R. Katz

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/644

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
“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 趙世璜 about the propriety of listing people like Deng, with Chao responding that it was “absolutely inappropriate” (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-huong 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 honor the ROC’s founding focus solely on its heroes or also key figures traditionally labeled by the ROC state as bandits (fei匪)? Another tricky issue for President Ma and other KMT pro-unification elites is how to go about celebrating this anniversary without offending pro-unification voters and PRC leaders by reminding them of the fact that the ROC (Taiwan) is an independent country. The Internet poll also proved offensive to DPP and other pan-green elites by treating Taiwanese who lived under Japanese colonial rule as ROC figures, while overlooking pro-independence figures like Lin Yi-hsiung 林義雄 and Peng Ming-min 彭明敏. Even the term “founding the nation” (jianguo 建國) is not without its share of controversy. The ROC may be getting ready to celebrate its 100th anniversary, but in the PRC the term refers to an event that took place 61 years ago.

Both ROC and PRC historians clearly recognize the significance of the past 100 years and have launched massive writing projects, but based on very different perspectives and agendas. One such effort, organized by the Department of History at Nanjing University (南京大學) but also including some Taiwanese scholars, focuses on the 100 years dating from the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命百年). The leader of this project is the senior modern Chinese historian Zhang Xianwen 張憲文, who edited a four-volume magnum opus on ROC history (中華民國史) published in 2006. For obvious reasons, the book’s time frame only extends to 1949, and the definition of ROC history underlying the forthcoming project should not be much different. A second and somewhat similar project is also being put together by the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing (北京中國社會科學院近代史研究所).

Taiwanese historians are hardly sitting on the sidelines waiting for their Chinese counterparts to complete their “spin” on the past century. Many leading scholars here have initiated a mammoth ROC history writing project (the 中華民國發展史撰寫計畫), which is being funded by Taiwan’s National Science Council (行政院國家科學委員會) and should result in another set of volumes covering a very different time frame and definition of modern Chinese history. In the interests of full disclosure, I should also point out that my own institute (the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica;  中央研究院近代史研究所) is planning a conference to discuss key topics in ROC history and set new agendas for the field.
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.