

Chiang still rules our subconscious

Written by Chang Kuo-tsai 張國才

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The Act on Promoting Transitional Justice (促進轉型正義法) passed the third legislative reading on Tuesday last week.

The question now is what should be done with the remaining symbols related to Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) that accumulated during his 26 years of authoritarian rule over Taiwan: all the Chiang statues, roads and schools named after him, the NT\$1 and NT\$5 coins, the NT\$10 coins issued before 2011, as well as the NT\$200 bills featuring his image, the compilation of history textbooks and even his ostentatious and extravagant mausoleum in Cihu (慈湖) in Taoyuan's Dasi District (大溪).

The removal of these symbols of past authoritarian rule is an issue that the transitional justice process must confront head-on.

If we view the issue from an objective and factual perspective, without deliberately glorifying or trashing Chiang, compared with other rulers of Taiwan over the past century and more, he is neither qualified nor entitled to be put on a pedestal and worshiped. Removing the crown wrongly put on his head is not a matter of confrontation, struggle or hatred. Rather, it requires nothing else than exposing the truth.

Over the past few years, the presence of Chiang statues at school campuses and public places has repeatedly been challenged, and the quicker these statues are removed, the quicker Taiwan will regain peace.

Not long ago, Veterans Affairs Council Minister Lee Hsiang-jow (李相璋) publicly pledged not to remove Chiang statues, pictures and commemorative installations at veterans' homes nationwide if the transitional justice act were passed.

While Lee's move takes the feelings of veterans and their memory of their past leader into consideration, it will also perpetuate the alienation of veterans from the general public, as it leaves the seeds of conflict between the two sides in place.

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As the saying goes, we can always learn from others' mistakes. Perhaps things would become clearer if we viewed the issue from a different angle. Would Germany allow World War II veterans or neo-Nazis who worship Adolf Hitler to install statues of Hitler or put up his photos or Nazi flags in communities or at public places?

When a road or a school is named after someone, there is some educational intent behind the decision, such as showing appreciation, remembrance, admiration or commemoration.

In the authoritarian atmosphere during the rule of Chiang and his son Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), many roads and schools were named after the older Chiang, who is also known as Chiang Chung-cheng (蔣中正). When schools and roads were named "Chung-cheng," what precisely was it that Chiang Kai-shek had done that was appreciated, remembered, admired or commemorated?

Some have said that renaming these roads and schools is an insignificant detail in the push for transitional justice and that it would be blowing things entirely out of proportion, but we must not forget that the devil is in the details: Details rule our subconscious.

Looking at the implementation of transitional justice in education, the reluctance and indecisiveness of Minister of Education Pan Wen-chung (潘文忠) and many educators who were steeped in authoritarian party-state era thinking during their formative years make clear that thinking outside the box requires an exceptional ability to think critically.

Without it, the invisible influence of this system of "education" with its ulterior motives has resulted in symptoms of Stockholm syndrome, which influences the thinking and behavior of whole generations. Knowing this, can we still say that changing names of roads and schools is an insignificant trifle?

Chiang Kai-shek's diaries reveal many terrifying stories, and they show us the true face of Taiwan under his authoritarian rule. There is no reason why history textbooks should not present these stories truthfully. That being so, why have we failed to recall and replace all the coins and bills featuring the image of the prime suspect in the 228 Incident?

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Chiang Kai-shek was certainly not Taiwan's George Washington, and the honor guards stationed at his Cihu Mausoleum are bestowing honor and recognition on a dictator. Saying that stationing honor guards at the mausoleum is necessary to promote tourism is simply a way to shift attention away from the real issue.

Eliminating authoritarian symbols in the transitional justice process will allow us to see the true face of Chiang Kai-shek as he is being removed from his pedestals. It is about time that we make a final judgement on his position in Taiwan's history.

Chang Kuo-tsai is a retired associate professor at National Hsinchu University of Education and a former deputy secretary-general of the Taiwan Association of University Professors.

Translated by Eddy Chang

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