

Two anomalies troubling Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating
Sunday, 10 August 2014 02:19

The nation of Taiwan is again preparing for a democratic election. This one is set for Nov. 29 and whether described as the seven-in-one or nine-in-one elections, a lot is at stake.

Many say this election could be seen as a bellwether for the coming presidential elections in 2016 as well as an indication of the direction in which Taiwanese identity continues to develop.

However, regardless of whether the pan-green or the pan-blue camp wins, there are other factors continuing to surface in Taiwan that point to its ever-present problem with identity.

Wrapped up in the issue are two great anomalies that Taiwan must eventually solve. Both are part and parcel of the residue of the one-party state era and the past dreams of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) diaspora that fled to Taiwan from 1945 to 1949.

The first problem addresses what should be done with the “Monument to the Dead Dictator,” Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), in Taipei, and the second relates to what should be done with the National Palace Museum.

The first great anomaly resurfaced when Taiwanese high-school students recently began a campaign to remove all statues of Chiang from campuses across Taiwan. Students at Taipei Chenggong High School led the way, and were quickly followed by numerous other schools across the nation.

This is not the first time that statues of Chiang have started to “disappear.” The main exodus dates back to 2007 when several statues of Chiang, under the direction of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), were removed from public places and sent to the Cihu Memorial Sculpture Park in Taoyuan County’s Dasi Township (大溪). The largest contribution from that time was the 8m high statue from the Kaohsiung Cultural Center. In that period, well over 150 statues quickly found their way to Cihu.

Today’s student movement has once again brought to light the ironies and complexity of

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Chiang, a man who despite his public professions in favor of democracy, was anything but democratic.

He came to Taiwan defeated and on the run. While his forces subsequently lost Hainan Island in 1950, Taiwan escaped only because of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) intervention in Korea and the subsequent placing of the US 7th Fleet in the Taiwan Strait. To solidify his position in Taiwan, Chiang in that period imposed martial law and the White Terror era in Taiwan and even had his main competitor for leadership, General Sun Li-jen (孫立人), falsely accused of a coup in 1955.

All these "achievements" were intact in Taiwan for more than a decade after Chiang's death in 1975.

The above is certainly not much of a legacy for the 30-year rule of a man supposedly dedicated to democracy. Moreover, the contrast is all the more poignant when one realizes that Taiwanese had already been moving toward self-government during the Japanese colonial era and that they had won the right to elect their own officials to the Japanese Diet. Taiwanese were ready to implement democracy, but Chiang was not.

So, what to do with this monument to a dead dictator? In 2007, the area around the memorial was finally renamed Liberty Square and the hall was given a new name, National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall. This seemed all well and good. However, Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) and the KMT had the memorial's name changed back to the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to preserve the KMT's memories of the dead dictator.

In this flux, one can only wonder if members of the KMT are still concerned over Chiang's deathbed wish. That wish was that he be buried not in Taiwan but in Fenghua County of Zhejiang Province, China. That was supposed to happen when the KMT finally "retook" the China that it was kicked out of. That remains a pipe dream well worthy of examination and documentation.

The second great anomaly that Taiwan must deal with is, ironically, one of its current great tourist attractions, the National Palace Museum.

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The location of this museum in Taiwan is again closely associated with the dead dictator. Though driven out of China, Chiang did not leave empty-handed.

He may have lost China, but he managed to bring with him most of the treasures of the National Palace Museum. A new museum was then built in Taiwan in the 1960s.

This is, of course, not the first time that a country's museum has housed looted treasures. The British Museum is famous for the treasures its armies brought home from the numerous places they had fought in. However, with nearly 700,000 artifacts, this was the first time that almost the entire contents of a museum were looted.

So this remains a problem for Taiwanese. While it is nice to have this tourist attraction, it is awkward because these treasures date back thousands of years in Chinese history and are not part of the history of Taiwan. Even the PRC faces the problem of how to handle this. If they are too vocal in demanding the artifacts be returned, they would be admitting the reality that Taiwan is a separate nation from China.

These two great anomalies are certainly not set to be resolved in a day, a month or a year and the upcoming Nov. 29 elections are a more pressing matter for both political parties.

However, sooner or later, these anomalies need to be faced and solved.

In the meantime, Taiwan also needs to consider a different question. Who are its real heroes and whose statues should mark the countryside?

Taiwan certainly has memorials and monuments to the many that died during the White Terror era and the Martial Law era when the nation struggled for democracy. One can visit Jingmei Prison, Green Island, the 228 Peace Memorial Park and so on, but nowhere does one find statues to the individual heroes of Taiwan's democracy.

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That could be because it was a joint effort, and as such the recognition belongs to all Taiwanese. The statue of one particular person could be confusing.

Instead, perhaps Taiwanese should reclaim the name National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall and place in the vestibule a statue dedicated to the common Taiwanese man and woman. They are the ones who created Taiwan's democracy and will be responsible for protecting it in the future.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/08/10](#)