

Chiang hall should remain empty

Written by Christian Fan Jiang 范江
Monday, 06 March 2017 07:11

The final point of transitional justice is the question of how to repurpose the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei once Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) statue is removed. It has been suggested that the space dedicated to the worship of a dictator could provide the grounds for a new Legislative Yuan building — a symbol of democracy. In other words, destroying the building would do away with the problem of how to repurpose it, as it would cover Chiang with a new Legislative Yuan.

Doing so would not only solve the issue of building a new legislative building, but would also allow everyone to breathe easier.

However, this brings to mind the Tianma Tea House (天馬茶館) on 189 Nanjing W Rd in Taipei — where government agents confiscated contraband cigarettes on Feb. 27, 1947, which led to the 228 Incident the next day — which was torn down and replaced in 2005. Local community leaders and culture and history experts who felt that the demolition was wrong reopened the tea house on the third floor of the new building, featuring a display of historical materials and photographs.

In 2012, someone discovered that the memorial plaque put up by the Taipei City Government to commemorate the site of the incident was in the wrong place.

This shows that the government and the public have a poor sense of history, and a rash decision can later be regretted.

When dealing with the hugely symbolic hall, some people follow their instincts and say that it would be better to demolish it. Following the same logic, would it not also be good to demolish the Executive Yuan, which used to house the chief executive's office, a position held only by Chen Yi (陳儀), who ordered troops to fire at the crowd in 1947? Obviously not.

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The National Theater and Concert Halls are focal points of the memorial. The plaza between the two cultural centers and their wide stairs provided the main stage for 1990's Wild Lily student movement, which led to the abolishment of the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion (戒嚴時期臨時條款), the lifting of the suspension on the National Assembly and paved the way for free legislative elections: all key milestones in Taiwan's democratic development.

It has been a long time since the hall was only concerned with Chiang. Looking out from inside the hall, the surrounding environment has undergone many changes.

The first was made in 2007 by then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) when the inscription dazhong zhizheng (大中正, which includes two characters of Chiang's honorific) on the park's main gate was changed to "Liberty Square."

As Taiwanese society continues to evolve, Chiang continues to be replaced by more liberal attitudes. Last month, Minister of Culture Cheng Li-chun (鄭麗君) announced that Chiang-related products, promotional materials and songs will be removed from the hall's gift store shelves, further removing Chiang's presence. Once the trend starts, nothing will stop it.

That is just as it should be. The spirit of the word "liberty" has a unifying concept for the entire hall. The National Theater and Concert Halls, the real focus of the public, treat creative freedom as their focal point, further consolidating the hall's liberal concept.

People should view the handling of the hall from the perspective of freedom. Chiang's statue will one day be removed by heavy machinery and people will find that ritual to be overwhelming and everlasting. As they turn their eyes back to the empty base, they will feel liberated as if shackles had been removed and they will shout out in joy: "Give me liberty or give me death."

If the hall is demolished, the issue will come to an end, and the sense of liberty brought by an empty hall would disappear with the building. People would not be able to learn from past mistakes, which is crucial in the push for transitional justice.

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Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) is right: The building should be kept.

However, his proposal that the statue should also be kept is wrong. All installations featuring elements of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) party-state and designs copied from the imperial Forbidden City in Beijing should be eliminated.

When the base of the statue is the only thing left in the empty hall, it will create a feeling of spaciousness because the "idol" no longer exists. It will be a temple of liberty that deliberately leaves an empty space. As future generations and visitors try to explain why there is nothing there, they will have to review the 228 Incident and Taiwan's transitional justice. They will repeatedly remind themselves that liberty does not come easily.

Should there be another statue of a great person or people in the hall? Replacing Chiang's statue with other statues will only create more controversy. Perhaps the guards should continue their duty at the hall to safeguard this temple to liberty, free of idols.

Democracy serves as a means to reach the goal of liberty. As for how to present the image of liberty through emptiness and the unlimited creativity it holds, that will be the job of artists.

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Translated by Eddy Chang

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2017/03/06](#)