

Transitional justice more than statues

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Gao Jyh-peng (高志鹏) on Tuesday announced the winners of a banknote design contest, which he held up as part of an effort to remove authoritarian symbols from the nation's currency.

The DPP has over the past year taken aim at various authoritarian symbols as part of implementing transitional justice, most notably calling for the removal of statues and other references to Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) from the nation's schools. The issue has been a major point of contention as activists vandalize statues and push the government to act quickly to remove them, while the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and older veterans strongly condemn such actions.

A pro-independence group called the Taiwan Nation Founding Engineering Team (台灣國創始工程師團隊) in April last year decapitated a statue of Chiang on Yangmingshan (陽明山), in December student activists broke the cane off of a bronze Chiang statue on the Fu Jen Catholic University campus, and activists believed to be members of Taiwanese independence group From Ethnos to Nation splashed paint on Chiang's sarcophagus in Taoyuan.

Removal of the statues is inevitable, but the removal of symbols from currency, the postal service, and other things encountered on a more frequent basis is of even greater importance. Unlike statues of former leaders, money is used on a daily basis and can even be found outside the nation.

The fifth series of the New Taiwan dollar banknote removed most depictions of Chiang, but his image remains on the NT\$10 coin and the NT\$200 banknote, while the more ubiquitous NT\$100 banknote features Republic of China founder Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙). While Sun is more fondly remembered than Chiang, his image on the nation's currency serves more to facilitate China's "one China" assertions than to represent the nation's modern values.

Part of the aim of transitional justice efforts is to remove all symbols of historical oppression and authoritarianism, which would ultimately require renaming the nation. The name "China" itself is a symbol of authoritarianism, originally in the form of the brutal oppression imposed on Taiwanese by the former KMT administration after World War II, and today in the form of the People's Republic of China squeezing Taiwan out of the international community and continually threatening military conflict.

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Truly achieving the aims of transitional justice therefore means that the nation will need to be renamed, but getting there must be done one step at a time as Taiwanese slowly remove the symbols that confuse the national consciousness.

The DPP is doing this by renaming institutions and reducing the emphasis placed on classical Chinese texts in high-school literature classes. These and other efforts will mean that future generations will not need to question why they are required to honor historical figures and cultural ideas with which they share no connection.

When symbols of China are fully removed from the nation, China's "soft" unification strategies will be rendered futile. When Taiwan in the future shares nothing in common with China outside of language, China's leadership talking to Taiwanese youth about unification will sound as nonsensical to them as Australia suggesting unification with Canada.

In the interim, the government wants to continue reforming education, relegating Chinese history to the world history curriculum, teaching classical Chinese as an optional class, and removing the word "China" from the names of all public institutions and organizations.

Former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) attempted to rename Chunghwa Post as "Taiwan Post," but KMT opposition stopped him. It is now time to revive the issue, to put it to a public vote and to show the KMT that in a democracy, government parties work for the people, not the other way around.

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