THE CHIANG KAI-SHEK MEMORIAL HALL IN TAIPEI: A CONTESTED PLACE OF MEMORY

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The Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei is dedicated to the memory of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), the paramount leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang; KMT 國民黨) and president of the Republic of China (ROC) from 1950 to 1975. It was built after his death in 1975 and is one of the architectural landmarks in Taipei. In 2007, the Executive Yuan, the executive branch of the government of the Republic of Taiwan—then under the leadership of President Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP 民進黨)—decided to rename the hall “National Taiwan Democracy Memory Hall.” Their intention was to diminish the memory of Chiang Kai-shek, whose rule was judged more and more critically in society after the peaceful transition from single-party rule enforcing martial law to a pluralistic democracy since 1987. The name change instigated wide-spread protests and demonstrations in Taiwan, leading to an open and heated discussion on the historical significance of Chiang Kai-shek and his rule in Taiwan. Members of the KMT opposed the measure of the DPP, fearing that by removing Chiang from the public memory and by rendering place names and symbols explicitly Taiwanese, a treacherous de-Sinicization would take place.

The following study on the memorial hall basically addresses two issues. First, it assesses the role of Chiang Kai-shek in the discussions on identity taking place in current Taiwanese political discourse. Second, considering that this place of memory is currently contested by various political, social, and ethnic groups with different agendas, it will shed light on how visions of the collective identity of the people on Taiwan developed and changed since the collapse of the ideological hegemony of the KMT in the 1980s. In order to do so, we need to ask how Chiang Kai-shek is represented by this memorial and how his rule is remembered in public discourse. Further, by assuming that the current discussions do have

1 In the following, I am using Pinyin as the primary system of transcription, except for personal and geographical names in regard to Taiwan.
implications for determining his historical significance, the focus on the contested memorial hall helps to determine how this place is inscribed into the cultural memory of the people living in Taiwan.

Issues of Memory, History, and Identity

The French historian Pierre Nora expresses in his seminal work *Realms of Memory* (1996) his concern that in the process of modernization, memory, as one marker of identity, is replaced by history. According to him, memory and history do not complement one another, but rather oppose each other: while memory is fundamental for culture, history is not. The most characteristic community of memory is, in his eyes, the rural community where its members know each other and the community can be emotionally felt (as in the case of a face-to-face community). The acceleration of history in the process of modernization destroys this community. Tradition and local customs are thus forgotten, and emotional attachments are lost. The acceleration of history leads to an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear—these indicate a rupture of equilibrium. The remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility.²

As a consequence, a collapse of memory takes place in many societies that once had long “assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state.”³ The profound dilation of the mode of historical perception, as Nora calls it, substitutes for a “memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage the ephemeral film of current events.”⁴ This then leads to the eradication of memory by history by separating both from each other. Their opposition, Nora holds, transforms the past into something unrelated to the present, with only memory able to keep the past alive.

In the following, I am going to analyze the current discussions on the collective identity of the people on Taiwan in regard to the reassessment

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³ Ibid., 7.
⁴ Ibid., 7–8.