Reinterpreting a dictator's legacy

By Huang Chang-ling and Yeh Hung-ling 黃長玲，葉虹靈

The National Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall is running a competition — the CKS Design Competition — to mark the 10th anniversary of the death of Soong Mayling (宋美齡), the third wife of dictator Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石). The objective of the competition is to "re-establish an emotional connection between the public and the CKS Memorial Hall, and to produce an identification with emotional and cultural values."

As members of a civic group long concerned about transitional justice, we cannot agree with this, and we also strongly object to official attempts to re-interpret the despotic leader who presided over the Martial Law era in Taiwan in this fashion, utterly devoid of any historical or political basis.

We would like to remind the government that one of the main ways to encourage people to explore history is to open up more of the political archives buried deep in various government departments' vaults, and that this process has to go through the premier, or even the president, so that it be coordinated. A democratic government should clarify the historical status of the previous regime and its leaders, and encourage the public to explore the nation's recent history.

For us, the most important aspect to all this is that the officials should release a substantial amount of information in government archives that is still locked away, purportedly to protect national secrets or the privacy of individuals.

Former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) instructed the Ministry of National Defense to conduct a major audit of the political archives. Since then, there has been no investigation of the archives of comparable scale or thoroughness. If Taiwanese need to establish a feeling for and an identification with a set of cultural values, it should be a feeling for democratic values and an identification with the democratic system of government, not with a despotic ruler.

After the news appeared in the papers, Minister of Culture Lung Ying-tai (龍應台) said she felt that the contest was inappropriate and that she would take up the matter with the people concerned. However, she also said during an interview that it was too simple to lay the blame for an event in history entirely at the feet of one individual, a point that we feel is worth addressing.

Of course, other individuals working within the dictatorial system need to take some responsibility for what went on, but that is not to absolve Chiang, or lessen his responsibility, given that he was the one in charge.

Lung has written in the past about how seeing a portrait of Chinese leader Mao Zedong (毛澤東) hanging on the wall of a German friend's home sent shivers up her spine, and she said, in a critical tone, that Mao had blood on his hands. She has also talked of how she was moved to tears when she

handed a farewell letter written by political dissident Chiang Ping-hsing (江炳興), killed 42 years ago during the White Terror era, to Chiang's elder sister.

However, what the public really cares about is how Lung proposes to address, through policy and resource allocation, the way national exhibition institutions under her purview — the CKS Memorial Hall, the Jing-Mei Human Rights Memorial and Cultural Park and the Green Island Human Rights Culture Park — only present a one-way narrative. The CKS Memorial Hall only talks about Chiang's achievements, and is silent on his transgressions, while the Jing-Mei and Green Island parks focus exclusively on the victims, and have nothing to say about the individuals or the system that victimized them.

Academics in Taiwan and abroad are still studying and debating the complex question of how Chiang's role in history is to be evaluated. However, few would dispute that even though the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government on Taiwan had eliminated the threat of underground Chinese Communist Party (CCP) activity as early as the mid-1950s, and that assistance from the US army following the outbreak of the Korean War to a considerable degree ensured political stability and consolidation here in Taiwan, Chiang continued to hold on to power in Taiwan for several decades.

With thousands of people thrown into jail for their political beliefs, resulting in countless families being torn apart, Chiang presided over a regime that trampled on basic human rights for years. Even after Taiwan became a democracy, the imposing memorial hall named after Chiang reveals nothing of the darker aspects of his rule.

Even now, Taiwan, a country upheld as a model for how democracy can work in a Chinese society, retains this artifact that keeps it apart from other emerging democracies around the world. That is, it still has this building, located in a prime location in the capital, that drains huge amounts of money from the public purse, commemorating a dictator who destroyed the lives of so many of its citizens. This is not the first time Chiang and Soong have been promoted in a lighthearted way. The design company run by Demos Chiang (蔣友柏), Chiang's great-grandson, has tried to market a gold and silver pendant themed on the dictator. One could say that it was just the descendant of a famous individual exploiting his pedigree to sell a few products, but as we have written elsewhere, this behavior is not only historically myopic, it is also offensive to the families of those executed for their political convictions by the regime, and is therefore totally inappropriate.

And if a private company is criticized for such behavior, why shouldn't a democratic government, which should be shining a light on a murky part of history and learning from its past? And, if this government is trying to re-brand a dictator, in the name of developing products to help out the national coffers, at the expense of failing to reinforce the ethical values that should be promoted in a democratic society under the rule of law, then that government should be roundly chastised.

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