

Taipei and Beijing: attitudes to historical truth

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In 1995, a group of historians from the People's Republic of China (PRC) visited Taiwan to take part in a conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of victory in the war against Japan. As they entered the Academia Sinica, a young Taiwanese scholar jokingly called out: "The communist bandits are here!" Although the words were only spoken in jest, academics from both sides of the Straits found them extremely interesting and made them a subject of discussion.

At its conclusion, the mainland scholar Yang Tianshi said: "In the past, both the Communist Party and the Kuomintang [12] referred to each other as 'bandits'. History has shown they were both wrong." For his part, the Taiwanese academician Chang Yu-fa argued that the words reflected what he called the "bandit view" of history, and that this view had coloured the work of scholars from both sides for decades. Both mainland and Taiwanese scholars agreed that this prejudice had to be broken down, and modern Chinese history [13] rewritten.

In spring 2006, an opportunity for just such a rewriting was provided by the release of Chiang Kai-shek's diaries.

The history man

Chiang Kai-shek [14] is the most important historical leader of the Kuomintang, barring only Sun Yat-sen. His ideas, his policies and his personality shaped the fate of China for half a century. Luckily for future historians, Chiang kept a diary every day for fifty-five years, never allowing affairs of state or war to divert him from his task. He always had a strong feel for history, and knew that an accurate personal record would be of immense historical value. His awareness of the secrets they held led Chiang to stipulate that the contents of his diary were only to be released after his death.

The diaries that Chiang kept up to 1945 have now been released. The mainland and Taiwanese historians [15] who were scrambling to be first to read the diaries have come to surprisingly similar conclusions on their worth. Mainland scholars have said that "modern Chinese history has to be revised", while their Taiwanese counterparts have stated that "Kuomintang history has to be rewritten."

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This response shows that the diaries are highly honest and truthful, and Chiang's records will help to solve many historical mysteries. As his more recent diaries continue to be released, more historical truth will emerge. What's more, the diaries kept for forty-three years by Chiang's son and heir, Chiang Ching-kuo [16], are due to be released soon. They too are certain to be revelatory.

It is impressive that, in 2004, before the release of the diaries, the Kuomintang came to an agreement with the Hoover Institution [17] in the United States, whereby that body would arrange and preserve microfiches [18] of the Kuomintang records from the past hundred years, and gradually release them to the world. This proves that the Kuomintang has completed the transition from secret society, to dictatorial political party, to modern democratic party. The publication of party records means that the Kuomintang leaders have finally relieved themselves of a heavy historical burden, and no longer need fear the past [19].

The amnesiac party

In comparison with the Kuomintang leadership, senior Communist Party figures [20] continue to maintain an air of mystery. There has never been any hint that Mao Zedong ever kept a diary. Moreover, he was always very wary of those around him writing their own records. Yang Shangkun [21] once made secret attempts to record meetings with Mao, in order that he would not forget any of the Chairman's important points. When Mao found out, he was furious, and had all the equipment and recordings destroyed. Yang's attempts at "bugging" the meetings later got him into serious trouble.

No evidence has ever emerged that any of Mao's contemporaries at the top of the party, such as Liu Shaoqi [28] or Zhou Enlai [29], kept a diary. After Zhou died, a report emerged that on the most recent page of his desk calendar were written the words "Afternoon: meet Chairman." Checks revealed that he indeed had a one-on-one private meeting with Mao on that afternoon, and the two had talked for two or three hours. It was the last meeting they ever had, and no one knows what they discussed. Communist Party history is full of such tantalising morsels that fuel speculation about what really happened.

Why didn't the Communist Party leaders keep diaries? Is it because they did not realise the historical value of such documents? Of course not. My own guess is that with all the cruel power struggles that went on within the party, any honest diary would contain too many unpalatable truths, and reflect badly on its author. Who would want to leave behind such a negative historical image? None of the top party figures, whether Mao, Liu, or Zhou, or the more recent Deng Xiao-ping, Hu Yaobang [30] and Zhao Ziyang [31] have even written a memoir.

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There are still many taboo areas in research into party history. Even specialist researchers find it hard to get hold of primary source material, and secondary sources, such as essays, books, films and documentaries, have to receive approval from the Party Literature Research Centre before publication. A professor from the Central Party School [32] once reeled off a whole list of obscure areas of party history. They included:

- * the party founder Chen Duxiu
- * the elimination of counter-revolutionaries in communist-controlled areas
- * the long march [33]
- * the Yan'an rectification campaign
- * the Korean war
- * Gao Gang and Rao Shushi's anti-party group
- * the anti-rightist movement
- * the great leap forward [34] and people's communes
- * the Lushan conference [35]
- * the reasons for the cultural revolution [36]
- * Lin Biao's attempted escape from China
- * the gang of four.

All of these issues and events are shrouded in mystery, to such an extent that even senior party leaders are not really sure of the details.

History's balance-sheet

The former chairman of the Kuomintang and its presidential candidate in the 2008 elections, Ma Ying-jeou [37], once publicly apologised for the crimes committed by his party during the days of totalitarian rule in Taiwan. The Taiwanese authorities have carried out substantive rehabilitation and compensation of dissidents, including Communist Party members who were illegally persecuted by the regime. In doing so, they have unburdened themselves. The new generation of Communist Party leaders need to understand true party history in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Unfortunately, all we see is the mistakes of previous leaders being covered up. It is forbidden to discuss the mistakes made by the party; even the cultural revolution, which has been universally and comprehensively repudiated, cannot be mentioned. The result is that history has become a millstone around the neck of the party, and will one day drag it to its knees. The Kuomintang [38] may have lost the mainland to the Communists, but in facing up to their party's past, its leaders have scored an impressive victory.

This article was translated from Chinese by Chris Allen

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