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A BATTLE FOR TAIWAN'S PAST:

COMMEMORATING THE FEBRUARY 28TH INCIDENT, SEVENTY YEARS LATER

February 28th memorial, Chiayi (Taiwan).

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AN ANNIVERSARY UNDER PRESSURE

Taiwan recently commemorated the 70th anniversary of the February 28th Incident (or 2.28 Incident), as the 1947 revolt against Kuomintang (KMT) authorities is known. Following half a century of Japanese colonial rule between 1895 and 1945, the island recovered its status as a Chinese province following Japan's defeat in World War 2 – this time under the control not of the defunct Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) but of the Republic of China, a regime dominated by the dictator Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party (KMT). The corruption and authoritarianism of the Chinese regime (at that time mired in civil war with the communists) along with its mistrust of the Formosan[1] population, which it deemed to be too Japanized, quickly soured the hopes born out of decolonisation. At the end of February 1947, one too many police blunders – an instance of manslaughter following a crackdown on contraband cigarette sellers – sparked a general uprising. The movement was little armed and short lived: lacking organisation and logistics, the protestors were crushed in a matter of weeks by reinforcements sent from mainland China. Thousands of Taiwanese perished, the vast majority of whom had not taken up arms, or even, in many cases, taken part in the revolt.

Discussion of the 1947 events was strictly tabooed in Taiwan for around forty years, whether in their immediate aftermath or after 1949, when the Republic of China was toppled by Mao Zedong's forces and took refuge on the island. This changed dramatically with democratisation. Since the end of martial law in 1987, the February 28th Incident has been a central question of Taiwanese political debate and memory wars. Starting in the mid-1990s, victims were rehabilitated and offered financial compensation, the archives were opened, and the February 28th declared a public holiday, with memorials constructed across the island. The 2017 anniversary is thus by no means a first-time event. The forms of commemoration were also similar to those of the past twenty years: rallies, speeches by politicians, exhibitions and conferences by historians – with families of victims often taking pride of place. Just like previous commemorations as well, this anniversary gave rise to controversy about the nature of the February 28th Incident, and thereby about Taiwan's relationship with its modern history, its identity, and China.

Compared to the last ten years, however, the 70th anniversary was the focus of unusually intense media activity. Beyond the round number, this is largely due to the political context. In 2016, Tsai Ing-wen was elected president of Taiwan (officially known as the Republic of China, or ROC). Tsai is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the dominant actor in the Pan-Green coalition, which brings together pro-independence political forces. The Pan-Blue coalition, which seeks reunification with China – generally at an unspecified point in the future –, is still led by the KMT, the island's sole political party from 1945 to 1986, now a part of democratic life. The first member of the DPP to hold the presidency was Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008), whose separatist stance was much more pronounced. Tsai's approach is very different. A prudent technocrat, she generally refrains from provoking Beijing, which considers Taiwan to be a secessionist province destined for reunification, if necessary by force.

1. Derived from the 16th century Portuguese name for Taiwan, Ilha Formosa ('beautiful island').

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This was true, at least, until December 2nd 2016, when president Tsai telephoned president elect Donald Trump. This move was aimed at strengthening her domestic legitimacy and gauging the room for manoeuvre the election of a U.S. president openly hostile to China would afford her. Even more surprisingly, Trump played along, tweeting about his exchange with the "President of Taiwan". The wording was at odds with almost forty years of diplomatic practice: since 1979, the United States has recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legitimate incarnation of a single China including Taiwan de jure, in spite of the fact that Congress has also committed to providing the de facto independent island with the means to defend herself – presumably against PRC aggression. This show of bravado fizzled ount several weeks later when Trump, pressured by Beijing, realigned himself with the so-called "One-China policy". The phone-call nonetheless considerably angered Chinese leaders, who have been hostile to Tsai from the day of her election, and whose irredentist ambitions are growing increasingly impatient. It is against this tense backdrop that the 2017 commemorations took place.

"TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE" AND IDENTITY POLITICS

For the current Taiwanese administration, commemorating the February 28th Incident is part of a broader project to promote "transitional justice", a watchword of the Pan-Green movement since 1990s and an important tenet of Tsai Ing-wen's electoral campaign. The "greens" are not seeking to punish the perpetrators – most of whom are dead –, or even to establish the facts, since it is unlikely that decisive new findings will be made. Their main goal is attributing responsibility for the 1947 massacre. According to its proponents, transitional justice thus conceived would help ease the pain of victims and their relatives. More than that, it would free Taiwanese democracy from the spectre of the island's authoritarian past. This past includes both the February 28th Incident and the so-called martial law period (1949-1987). The KMT regime, confined to its Formosan refuge from 1949 onwards and threatened by its powerful communist adversary, stayed in power by means of a forty-year long state of emergency and a fierce repression known as the White Terror. The White Terror was more diffuse than the Incident. It also targeted different internal enemies, focusing on actual or presumed communists, including a large portion of people who arrived from the mainland after the war (mainlanders, or *waishengren*). By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the 1947 victims were indigenous Taiwanese (or *benshengren*), born on the island before 1945. While the authorities' main concern in 1947 had been to wipe out Japanese cultural heritage and/or pro-independence leanings in Taiwan, the White Terror was fully part of the Cold War.

Discourses about transitional justice in Taiwan tend to lump these two waves of repression together and place the blame on Chiang Kai-shek. While the dictator (who died in 1975) played a direct role in the elimination of opponents in Taiwan after 1949 – the island being equated with the ROC –, his part in the 1947 Incident is less clear. Chiang, a military leader of notorious brutality, indisputably supported the idea of an armed response to the Formosan uprising, but there is no proof of his personal involvement in the details and the excesses of the repression.

Making Chiang the main culprit for the 2.28 Incident (as he is for the White Terror) is not a historical stance but a political one, meant to cast scorn on the entire period of dictatorship and its contemporary legacy. Hence, for instance, repeated calls for demolishing the thousands of statues of the dictator scattered through the island. President Tsai did not go that far, simply announcing that memorabilia would not be sold anymore at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, in the heart of Taipei. She stopped short of planning to rename the monument like Chen Shui-bian had done, before his decision was overturned by the KMT government in 2009. Attacks on Chiang put the KMT in an awkward position. While it has adapted to democratic life, the former single party cannot entirely condemn the man who led it from 1927 to 1975, for fear of seriously damaging its historical legitimacy. For the ruling DPP, linking up the 2.28 Incident and the White Terror is also meant to create solidarity between the mainlander and native Taiwanese victims of the dictatorship, summoning a Taiwanese nation that is defined along civic rather than ethnic lines. This acknowledges the "Taiwanisation" of the *waishengren*, and counters the KMT's argument that the DPP is seeking to use the memory of 1947 to sow ethnic division, or even hatred, among the population.

The Pan-Green coalition is actually divided on this issue. Although Tsai and the majority of her supporters are in favour of an inclusive Taiwanese identity encompassing all groups on the island, Formosan nationalism is historically grounded in an opposition between *benshengren* and *waishengren*. The latter have long monopolised positions of power, and their political, economic, and cultural domination under the dictatorship has sometimes been denounced as a form of colonialism. In this perspective, the 1947 uprising, which saw the islanders clash with a recently arrived mainland government (although the influx of *waishengren* did not

become massive until 1949), has particular significance. For the Taiwan Independence Movement that appears in the 1950s, the revolt proves that there is such a thing as a Taiwanese nation. And it is clear that for many of his detractors, Chiang is stigmatised not simply as a dictator, but as a *Chinese* dictator, heading a regime built on the brutal negation of Taiwanese identity and autonomy. Thus, commemorations of the February 28th Incident have a distinctly nativist tinge, even when it is not explicitly formulated. The relatives of victims, for instance – who, by virtue of their age and status, enjoy considerable moral authority – almost always express themselves in Taiwanese (a language very similar to the Hokkien Chinese dialect) rather than in Mandarin, the "national" language imposed by the KMT from 1945 onwards.

TAIWANESE HISTORY OR CHINESE HISTORY?

While accusations of inciting ethnic hatred are mostly baseless, the KMT – for whom Taiwan is part of China – is not wrong to discern, in the repeated commemoration of 1947, a threat to its vision for the island and its future. This fear is shared by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose views on this issue now concur with those of its former arch-rival. The paradox is only apparent: now that the ideological rift of the Cold War has faded and that nationalism has largely replaced communism as the CCP's basis for legitimacy, Beijing no longer has any reason to castigate the KMT. The common enemy is Taiwanese "separatism". Since Chen Shui-bian's election in 2000, which provoked anger and concern in Beijing, this objective alignement has turned into a tacit alliance: the CCP does everything in its power to isolate political officials from the Pan-Green coalition, and maintains close ties with the KMT. This is why the official Chinese media makes similar accusations to those of "blue" politicians: the DPP is supposedly manipulating the memory of 1947 to pit "Taiwanese compatriots" (*taibao*) against one another, for base electoral purposes.

Conversely, supporters of Taiwanese independence now mobilise the memory of the February 28th Incident to counter the PRC's ambitions as much as the KMT's. The latter, while it is still embarrassed by mentions of the 1947 events, has nevertheless made major concessions since the 1990s, with President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016) going as far as a public apology and recognising his party's responsibility in the tragedy. Few DPP supporters, furthermore, still fundamentally dispute the Nationalist Party's right to participate in political life, as long as it behaves like a Taiwanese party. It is its links with Beijing that attract most criticism.

The increasing power of the PRC and the assertiveness with which it expresses its territorial claims put regional geopolitics at the forefront of Taiwanese memory wars. In 2004, the DPP chose February 28th to organise a human chain extending from the north to the south of the island, in defiance of intimidation from Beijing, which aimed to prevent the re-election of pro-independence Chen Shui-bian. The symbolic significance of the Incident in Cross-Strait relations (*haixia liang'an guanxi*) has not subsided: commemorating a Formosan uprising quelled in blood by mainland forces has strong evocative power in the current context, especially since 2005, when the PRC officialised its threat of military response should Taiwan make a decisive move towards independence. While only a minority ventures to suggest that the 1947 tragedy could happen again, the commemoration in itself gives credence to the existence of a collective Taiwanese subject, defined through its opposition to the mainland. Many pro-independence authors also see the Incident as the proof of an unbridgeable gap between Taiwan's peaceful "political culture" and China's essential brutality, at the risk of essentialising both. This view also relies on a selective reading of the 1947 movement, favouring the elite's demands for political autonomy over the uprising of the youth, which was more violent and had less well-defined objectives. In any case, whether in its ethnic or civic interpretation, the February 28th Incident is a central element in the affirmation of an properly Taiwanese identity.

This year, the mainland's response took the interesting form of a counter-commemoration of the Incident in Beijing. The Taiwanese uprising, with which the CCP had very little or nothing to do, was discretely but regularly commemorated during the Maoist period. Initially hailed as a rightful revolt against the KMT dictatorship, then claimed as a revolutionary movement loyal to Mao, and finally discussed in a relatively free manner during the 1980s, the Incident slipped out of communist discourse during the 1990s: it was poorly suited to the official nationalist discourse of the post-Tiananmen period, and to the necessities of the struggle against the ideology of Taiwanese independence. Nevertheless, mainland Chinese researchers and intellectuals continued to take an interest in the Incident, in terms increasingly convergent among Chinese nationalists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Since the turn of the century, advocates of unification have adopted an essentially negative view of the 1947 revolt, which they deplore as fratricidal violence and generally attribute to Japanese colonial influence, and the estrangement it created between the Taiwanese and their

mainland compatriots. They sometimes also blame the (largely imaginary) scheming of the United States to take control of the island in 1947. Pan-Chinese authors who take an interest in the February 28th Incident, based either in the PRC or in Taiwan, are for the most part also engaged in the historical polemics linked to Chinese territorial claims, defending for instance Beijing's stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. From a Chinese irredentist point of view, however, this reading of the Incident justifies talking about it – certainly not honouring it.

By commemorating its 70th anniversary (mainly in the form of a conference, widely covered in the media), the CCP gives back the Incident a status it had lost in mainland China. The spokesperson of the Beijing Taiwan Affairs Office has expressed an official position echoing that of the end of the 1940s: the Taiwanese uprising "against dictatorship", he said, was an integral part of the "Chinese people's struggle for liberation" (the communist revolution of 1949), and should therefore be praised; on the other hand, he firmly condemned its use "by certain Taiwan independence forces for ulterior motives". Such a declaration is implicitly severe for the KMT, cast in the role of the villain in 1947. This confirms that the CPP is no longer treating the Nationalist Party as considerately as it did. The KMT, profoundly divided following a series of electoral setbacks, does not currently appear to be an effective ally in the fight against the DPP. Xi Jinping, leader of the PRC since 2012, has moreover presided over a strengthening of the Communist Party and its historical mythology, a shift from the more state-centred and inclusive form of nationalism defended by the previous leadership. This Party-centred approach leaves less room for KMT patriots in the Chinese national narrative.

Beijing's interpretation has little chance of gaining any support in Taiwan, and PRC authorities know it. Their objective lies elsewhere: by commemorating the February 28th Incident, they are struggling with the DPP over the right to claim and define this founding event, and demonstrating that they have no intention of abandoning the battle for Taiwan's past – or indeed for its future.