In the Name of Legitimacy: Taiwan and Overseas Chinese during the Cold War Era

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Abstract

Population movement contains crucial implications to political entities. Remote areas, including overseas Chinese settlements, became sovereign shelters whenever political turmoil arose. Located peripherally, however, these regimes or political parties pursued legitimacy in a variety of ways. This article examines the use of collective memory by the Taiwan’s government under the Kuomintang (KMT, i.e., Nationalist Party) to link overseas Chinese communities during the Cold War era. Meanings and interpretations of the past were negotiated. The KMT regime redefined “Chineseness” by including along with it a tone of anti-communism, weaving it into the collective memory of overseas Chinese communities. The study examines various efforts made by the ROC government, including holiday celebrations, language and educational programs, baseball games, and overseas Chinese right of franchise. Nationalism, now without challenge, emerged as the central motif in the efforts of the ROC government. The clash between the

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overseas Chinese on one side, and the “motherland” in Taiwan on the other, was combined with a dynamic, interest-concerned model of creation of memory. In this model, forms of expression reflected official interests, expanding or defending cultural and political spaces.

China always has been a vital center of population in the world. Ever since the 5th and 6th centuries, increasing population growth has led to southward migration, evidenced by agricultural developments arising along Yangtze River. At times, the outward migration was triggered by social and political unrest. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties (ca. 14th to 20th centuries), southwestern regions, such as Yunnan 雲南, Guizhou 貴州, Sichuan 四川, Shaanxi 陝西, and the southeastern coastal regions (Minyue 閩粵), were populated with people moving out from the central parts of China. Also, Chinese people emigrated over the South and East China Seas to Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

These remote areas, including overseas Chinese settlements existing from the 17th century, became sovereign shelters whenever political turmoil arose. This phenomenon may be seen to have occurred during the Southern Ming period after the collapse of the Ming Dynasty,\(^1\) during the time of the Tungning Kingdom of Zheng (1661–83),\(^2\) and at the time of the baohuanghui 保皇會 and the Revolution Party near the end of Qing Dynasty.\(^3\) Located peripherally, these regimes or political parties pursued legitimacy in a variety of ways.

This article examines the Kuomintang (KMT, i.e., Nationalist Party) and its use of collective memory to create links both culturally and politically with overseas Chinese communities during the Cold War era, in its claim for legitimacy. After the loss of Mainland China and subsequent retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the KMT regime redefined its notion of “Chineseness” and weaved itself into the collective memory of overseas Chinese communities that might not even have known of Taiwan. One such manipulation of collective memory was the KMT’s emphasis upon the celebration of certain holidays and its preference for many other kinds of cultural and educational practices. Moreover, the government maintained and reactivated jus sanguinis laws in the constitution of the Republic of China. This meant that all overseas Chinese and their descendants were also citizens of China. These laws conferred dual citizenship upon overseas Chinese and allowed the government to involve overseas Chinese in the political system of Taiwan. This enticed overseas