TRANSCENDING WHOSE PAST?
A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE POLITICS OF FORGETTING IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN

• CHIEN-YUAN CHEN •

ABSTRACT

The repeated renaming of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and ensuing debates (2007–2009), reveal the multiple presences of collective memory and the ongoing ideological struggles between the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party in contemporary Taiwan. This paper examines the dynamic and intertwined relationships between collective memories and competing histories which are exposed by the renaming and its aftermath. An emphasis on forgetting as well as 'transcending the past(s)' (*chaoyue guochu*) have become common strategies that function to incorporate the two contradictory versions of national history in contemporary Taiwan—implying not only amnesia about the other side's past but also the suppression of diverse voices. Moreover, both parties compete to narrate a 'national history' from victimized perspectives, resulting in the adoption of different periods of Taiwan's past to support their political assertions.

Keywords: Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, collective memory, national history

Introduction

Accompanying Taiwan's democratic movements in the 1990s were demands for the re-evaluation of the historical role of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chiang-administrated Kuomintang (KMT)[1] in Taiwan, with contradictory discourses about Taiwan's history being narrated both within Chiang's KMT and by the opposing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Regardless of ideological struggles and debates over independence and unification, the DPP and the KMT have had to negotiate between, and gain support from, both mainlanders and the local Taiwanese. Unable to deny its association with Chiang Kai-shek and China, the indigenized KMT has to deal with issues concerning its authoritarian rule in Taiwan under the administration of Chiang Kai-shek and his son since 1949, during which Taiwanese society experienced one of the longest periods of martial law in the world, lasting until 1987. The party now needs to participate in democracy to win support among the Taiwanese. On the other hand, although the opposing DPP has attempted to break the solidary links between Taiwan and China and claim 'indigeneity', the party has been unable to do so because it has sought to replace the Republic of China in Taiwan—a nation established in China in 1911. These limitations have forced both parties to search for more pragmatic strategies when dealing with sensitive issues concerning Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT.

Figures 1 and 2: The Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (CKSMH), rechristened the Taiwan Democratic Memorial Hall (TDMH) in 2007 and reverting to its original name in 2008, represents the process whereby two competing histories and identities confront each other.

Because of its aim to (re)write a Taiwan-centered history, and the tendency to associate mainlanders with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the DPP has often been accused by the KMT of discriminating against Taiwan's forced immigrant population. Therefore, both sides are very sensitive to the issue of 'ethnic homogeneity' and, from this perspective, contemporary debates over Taiwan's history can be roughly essentialized as a confrontation between mainland and Taiwan-centered narratives. In response to this, and targeting the presidential election of the following year, in 2007 the DPP (in power for eight years by this stage) initiated renaming the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall the Taiwan Democratic Memorial Hall, in order to remind the Taiwanese people of the KMT's authoritarian regime.

In this paper, I focus on the debates concerning the renaming of the Memorial Hall and how this process relates to the manipulation of current politics of remembering and forgetting in Taiwan. In a broader sense, this paper not only presents the complicated interactions between national identity, history and collective memories in contemporary Taiwan, but also explores the dynamic process of how multiple collective memories have been trimmed and then incorporated into two major but contradictory narratives, both of which have claims to being national histories. Indeed, the concept of national history itself is still under debate in contemporary Taiwan and could refer to either Taiwan's history or that of China, into which the history of Taiwan has been incorporated. Using an anthropological approach, this paper presents this case in three contexts: 1) diverse memories coexisting around the site of the Memorial Hall; 2) opposing political discourses between central (DPP) and local Taipei governments (KMT); 3) the remote and the recent within larger debates about the national past.

The Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (CKSMH) in Taiwan was designed to memorialize Chiang Kai-shek after his death in 1975. This memorial site has become a site of memory[2] (Nora 1996: xvii) for many Taiwanese for two contradictory reasons: the CKSMH has been remembered not only because the Taiwanese have been taught never to forget their national hero, but also because this site witnessed the democratic movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Known as the 'Wild Lily Movement', this protested the KMT's long-term authoritarianism in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the CKSMH is a popular tourist destination in East Asia, especially for Japanese and, more recently, PRC visitors, who are interested in the life story of a former enemy leader. For the Japanese tourist in particular, the CKSMH along with its daily military honor-guard performance has long been a must-see highlight in their sightseeing schedules.

From May 2007 through 2009, the repeated renaming of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall has reflected the heated debates between the KMT and the DPP concerning the 2008 presidential election and its aftermath. The initial renaming in 2007 revealed not only the tensions caused by ideological opposition in Taiwan between the DPP and the KMT, but also their conflicting intentions to rewrite or to sustain Taiwan's official history which was until recently controlled by the KMT. The frequent challenges to the official version since the 1990s reflect both the conflicting past(s) of Taiwan's postcolonial and post-Cold War situations, and the two contradictory memories which coexist at the CKSMH: one associated with memorializing Chiang and one with the democratic movements which opposed the KMT's authoritarianism. Questions concerning how to remember and who holds the right to narrate Taiwan's past have made the CKSMH a contested site. In order

to win the presidential election, the DPP reminded the Taiwanese of the KMT's long period of martial law regulation (1948–1987), the cruel murder of Taiwanese during the so-called 'White terror' period and the bitter struggles for democracy. The KMT, on the other hand, accused the DPP of trying to 'tear apart ethnic homogeneity', mainly that of the two major populations of local Taiwanese (*bensheng*) and mainlanders (*waisheng*) in Taiwan (see Ching 2001; Chen 2002 for discussion of the distinction). Both parties were competing to claim their 'victimhood' in contemporary history. Intriguingly, during the debates, neither showed any clear intention to defend their assertions but rather, presented themselves as the passive receivers and victims of dominant ideologies—although these ideologies have never been clearly defined. This situation in turn has prevented the parties from engaging in joint construction of Taiwan's past but instead has urged each to prove the other's abuse of Taiwan's contemporary history.

The renaming of the CKSMH in 2007 and its return to its original title in 2008—and conflicting takes on Taiwan's past from remembering Chiang Kai-shek as Taiwan's national hero to remembering the February 28th Incident in 1947 (an anti-government uprising that was violently put down by KMT troops) and Chiang's martial law—serves to illustrate Taiwan's incongruent past(s). I suggest that attempts to control the meaning of the Memorial Hall reveal the absence of unitary collective memory of Taiwan's past; contradictory narratives have been associated with this site and thus challenge homogeneity in national history.

Coexisting collective memories connected with the CKSMH

Two months of fieldwork in the summer of 2008 revealed the intriguing absence of Chiang Kai-shek in both discourses. During this time, I presented myself as a researcher, a visitor, a Taipei city citizen, and a tour participant at the site. I observed and talked to different people including curators, tourists, volunteers, tour guides for Japanese tourists and the organizers and staff from the two political parties who were directly involved in the renaming dispute. While highly aware of the Chiangs' controversial role in Taiwan and their governmental legitimacy, the discourses of both the DPP and KMT concerning the CKSMH purposely avoided clarification of the historical role of Chiang Kai-shek. In so doing, this ironically constructed a memorial site that memorialized no one, something I discuss in more detail below. I also found that the vocabularies used by the two opposing camps had already been fixed by Taiwan's mass media and operated within an oversimplified binary relationship, sustained by an ideological opposition between affinity and enmity toward China. Instead of fully understanding and answering the other side's interrogations during the debate, each side has to play the game in an oppositional setting. Finally, rather than achieving consensus, I found that unresolved ideological opposition over the site was dismissed by leaving interpretation of its diverse readings up to the public—and ambivalence.

Alongside the memorial's renaming, different exhibition strategies in the hall above the museum were planned to downplay the significance of Chiang Kai-shek inside the 'temple' (the mocking term coined by younger generation Taiwanese). As Figure 3 illustrates, the statue of Chiang Kai-shek is flanked by posters of people who suffered

Figure 3: The statue is flanked by huge posters of suffering faces which reference Taiwan's democratic movements since the 1980s, mostly protesting against the KMT.

during Taiwan's democratic movements, mostly protesting against the KMT. The hall has also been decorated with hundreds of colorful kites, and on one occasion, I heard an inexperienced Taiwanese tour guide attempting to explain to confused Japanese tourists why the military honor guard had been replaced by these distracting flying kites and giant posters: she flushed and presented the situation as '*seito no kenka*' (quarrels between two political parties). Without explaining further, the tour guide immediately stopped her introduction and led the tourists down to the ground level for the museum exhibition of Chiang Kai-shek, which has remained almost unchanged during the debates.

After observing this scene, I checked the website of the central-government tourist office, the Taiwan Tourism Bureau,[3] to investigate official representation of this complicated case and whether a more comprehensive or unitary explanation for the changes were available. I found nothing about the name change.[4] Neither the central nor local government had developed a sound narrative about this change. Their reluctance seems to carry different messages: the DPP-led central government needs to take into account touristic promotion of the CKSMH, which has attracted international visitors for more than 30 years. Meanwhile, the KMT-led Taipei city government, the local level, initially rejected the rename and ignored the central government's request to change the nearest subway station from 'Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall Station' to 'Taiwan Democratic Memorial Hall Station'. Staff at the administration office of the CKSMH were also reluctant to respond to the renaming as is further indicated by the envelope in which they sent me

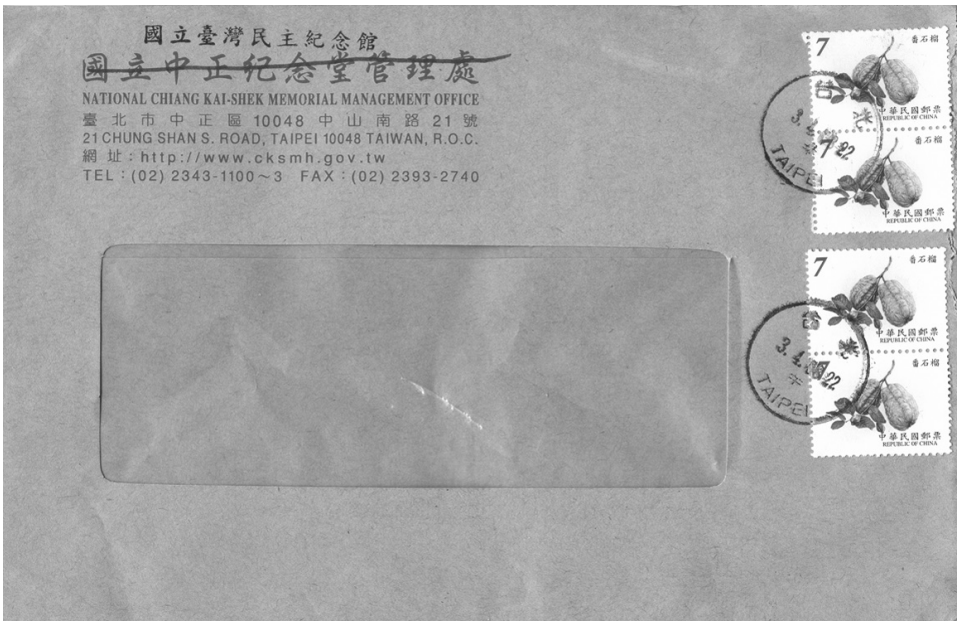

Figure 4: The envelope that the TDMH sent me. During the transitional period the title, Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, remained on the envelope with the new title, TDMH, stamped above.

correspondence, some five months after the May renaming (Figure 4). Instead of using a newly printed envelope with the formal title 'Taiwan Democratic Memorial Hall', the TDMH was still using the CKSMH envelopes superimposed with a blue-ink stamped 'TDMH'. When the new government proclaimed the restoration of old title in May 2009, one reason for procrastination became clear: the administration office may always have regarded the name change as temporary.

In contrast to the hesitation presented in governmental settings, the determinist actions taken by some CKSMH volunteers seem to suggest that the renaming process brought no radical changes to the memorial, while ironically intensifying emotional attachments to Chiang Kai-shek as well as to a romanticized past. One day, I talked to a middle-aged female volunteer in the exhibition hall who said: 'Many of us quit after the renaming. They were here to help people to understand more about Chiang Kai-shek. Who would want to do that if they didn't feel the greatness of Chiang Kai-shek?'

The volunteer also pointed to the empty pamphlet corner and added: 'During the debates, we had to hide those flyers which recounted Chiang Kai-shek's merit, and we are waiting for the new-version story of Chiang Kai-shek.' In response to the changes in the exhibition in the hall, an unconcerned, detached attitude was presented by a domestic tourist, who said: 'I really don't have any comment. This doesn't matter. I saw the news, I just want to be here and witness how they are going to deal with this mess.' It seems that diverse perceptions attach to the site and the memory of Chiang, despite the two contradictory, clear-cut narratives presented by the two political parties and debated in the mass media.

Binary histories and the remote and recent pasts

The diversity of response to current political wrestling concerning the renaming led me to revisit the polarized discourses created by the DPP and KMT and I interviewed several officials from both the DPP-led central government and the KMT-led Taipei city government. By re-claiming the CKSMH as a national historical relic, the central DPP took over the administration of this site from the KMT city government. The DPP has long history of resisting the KMT's patriotism education and its China-centered historiography, which aimed to strengthen Taiwan's historical solidarity with mainland China. Therefore, when the DPP began its administration in 2000, Chiang's symbolic position and association with China became part of the DPP's de-Sinicization project. The 2007 rename can be understood as a symbolic action directed towards discrediting the KMT and its authoritarian rule in light of the upcoming presidential election. That they also intended to de-center the focus on Chiang Kai-shek in the memorial can be discerned in the treatment of his gigantic statue, located in the great hall (Figure 3).

The main purpose of the additions is to direct visitors' attention away from the statue of Chiang Kai-shek in an effort to demystify him and redefine his role as a normal figure in Taiwan's history and, furthermore, one who brought sorrow to the country. As my interviews demonstrated, different and contradictory memories of Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT are held by ordinary Taiwanese, both mainlanders and locals; however, by forgetting certain parts of the past that do not fit their political agendas both parties pay little attention to the other side's stories in their attempts to legitimize their own versions of a unified history and a homogeneous collective memory.

Because of the different emphases of the KMT and DPP, the debate intriguingly has become a fight not only between Taiwan's central and local governments but also between its recent and remote past as both sides have striven to create a broader discourse about the site without directly referring to Chiang. The DPP has never intended to remove Chiang's statue; rather, the renaming was a symbolic action meant to challenge the KMT's avoidance of discussion of Chiang's actual merit. One important informant who participated in the renaming initiative, explains the implications of this symbolic action as follows:

> I don't personally hate Chiang Kai-shek, but somehow he reminds me of the Nazi's nationalist regime. To be honest, we all know that he is not that noble and worthy of respect. However, it is also unthinkable to remove his statue. Because it's really… really politically sensitive.

On the other hand, the KMT certainly perceived this political sensitivity regarding Chiang and also intended to avoid articulating the debates about Chiang Kai-shek himself. To create an alternative, the KMT defined the area as a historical relic established since the late Qing dynasty (19th century) and strongly asserted that in addition to its role as the CKSMH, it deserved preservation as such. Thus, the focus shifted from the main memorial buildings to the historic Qing city gate and walls, built outside the memorial hall area. This move betrays the KMT's anxiety to preserve the hall without touching on the figure of Chiang Kai-shek. In an interview with an informant, an employee of the Taipei city government whose responsibility is to assist preservation of the CKSMH, an inclusive, though remote, historical narrative concerning Taiwan's past was suggested:

> [Out of similar motivations as the central government,] [w]e also want to preserve this area, because it witnessed not merely the 80s and 90s Taiwanese democracy movement, but more importantly this place symbolizes history since the Qing dynasty when the wall surrounding this memorial park area was built.

Apparently the KMT utilized the 'more remote past' of the historical area, lasting from the late Qing (19th century) to the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945), to counter the DPP's 'recent past' discourse concerning the democratic movements of the 1980s. This discursive strategy does not mean the KMT is ignoring the recent past; rather, it reveals that the party has faced huge difficulties in narrating Taiwan's past without denying its own. Since Lee Teng-Hui's 'indigenization and localization' of the KMT in the 1990s, the party has been unable to clearly present the past as they used to: that of the Republic of China in exile. They have also hesitated to accept the reversed historical reputation of Chiang Kai-shek. Simply put, Chiang Kai-shek's contribution to the anti-Japan war is the essential part of the KMT's glorious past, and yet Chiang's authoritarianism in Taiwan has set restrictions on this historical narrative. Therefore, the new KMT faced the dilemma of either protecting its party history and losing support from the majority population of Taiwanese or choosing to downplay the importance of Chiang and impressions of the KMT as the foreign regime from China and emphasizing its indigenization. As an alternative, selecting to highlight the remote past to counter the recent past seems feasible. As my informant continued:

> Of course, we know the role of Chiang is debatable and sensitive, but we are trying to say that if you are talking about preservation of the historical site, you should not change anything, including its name and the plaque.

The marginalized position of Chiang Kai-shek in the debates

Intriguingly, since the debates were initiated, and while the statue of Chiang Kai-shek in the great hall has remained in place, the importance of Chiang Kai-shek himself has been gradually shifted to a marginal position in the major discourses. As demonstrated by the comments of the two informants mentioned above, the sensitive quality of Chiang Kai-shek's historical role has actually prevented both sides from directly evaluating Chiang's deeds and then using this in their arguments about Taiwan's official history, though open discussions about Chiang Kai-shek and re-evaluation of his historical position would help both sides. If they refuse to do so, neither (particularly the KMT) can claim objectivity in assessing Chiang Kai-shek's role in contemporary Taiwanese history. As a result, polarized identity struggles have created a discourse about Chiang Kai-shek in which Chiang Kai-shek himself seems to be absent. While alluding to Chiang's historical reevaluation, both sides, the KMT in particular, have chosen not touch upon Chiang's historical role but utilize an alternative drawn from a different historical period to defend their statements. Accordingly, I contend that collective memory is not absent; but rather, multiple collective memories have resulted in Chiang Kai-shek being marginalized in his memorial hall debates. Chiang Kai-shek was also absent from the debates for a more pragmatic reason: in order to win the presidential election in 2008. However, his absence raises a crucial question for the KMT: if the memorial is not for the purpose of memorializing then what

it is for? Even though the KMT candidate and winner of presidential election, Ma Ying-Jeou, successfully renamed the Democracy Memorial the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall after his May inauguration in 2008, the KMT administration's inability to claim that the function of the CKSMH is a memorial site has become quite apparent. The CKSMH could merely rearticulate its multi-functions and recreational purpose within the memorial park area.

Concluding remarks: transcending whose past?

In this project, I have traced how Chiang Kai-shek and Taiwan's past were remembered at the memorial site during these debates and how the two political parties strategically utilized remembering and forgetting to create relatively homogenous, if oppositional, narratives about Taiwan's past. However, these debates seem to witness an absence of Chiang Kai-shek and, more importantly, the politics of forgetting in the name of 'transcending the past' have become a discursive weapon for both political parties in constructing a desirable history.

The debates concerning the repeated renaming of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall from 2007 to 2009 specifically reveal the multiple presences of collective memory in the ongoing ideological struggles between Taiwan's two major political parties. As discussed above, the parties' anxiety about homogeneity in collective memory led them to avoid directly mentioning certain embarrassing aspects of the past. Although diverse in contents and agendas, voices calling for 'great conciliations' (*da hejie*) or 'transcending the past' (*chaoyue guoqu),* which also existed prior to the CKSMH debates, seem to constitute the main theme of current Taiwanese society.[5] During the debates, recurring calls to ease the tensions around the memorial became quite common. However, I contend that the oversimplified demands for transcending the past represent attempts to eliminate the past of certain populations. Instead of overtly focusing on the absence of a unitary collective memory connected with the CKSMH, I would suggest that we examine case by case how the aim—and tensions—of creating an official history lead both sides to narrate an exclusive past by engaging the politics of forgetting—that is, by telling people what to forget.

I would suggest a new focus for collective memory studies: that of examining not only the politics of remembering but also of forgetting.[6] In the name of transcending the past(s), the politics of forgetting have been constantly adopted in the construction of Taiwan's contemporary history. Both political parties have realized the impossibility of presenting a unified—or at least homogenous—perspective on Taiwan's past by simply presenting memory as a whole. Therefore, instead of focusing on the need to collectively narrate a unified history of Taiwan, both the DPP and the KMT regimes have utilized a rather devious way to narrate Taiwan's past(s). That is, they have called for 'transcending', which seems to imply not only forgetting the other side's past but also suppressing diverse voices to create a unified past on their own side.

Coexisting collective memories generate difficulties in the problematic process of constructing any kind of unitary collective memory, though the memories of two major populations are frequently utilized to achieve political purposes and can evolve into a

homogenous story that echoes the national past. According to interviews I conducted in 2008 with participants and organizers, an oral history project involving survivors and victims of the February 28th Incident has been reconstructed as the valuable and collective experiences of encounters between the Taiwanese and the PRC mainlanders. It claims universal applicability of the February 28th experience to Taiwanese understanding of mainland Chinese in future encounters across the Taiwan Strait. Diverse life trajectories have been dismissed in efforts to form a collective memory: one of loss and suffering. The other side follows a similar trajectory. The mainlander (*waisheng*) memories recorded by Waishengtaiwanren Xiehui (Association of Mainlander Taiwanese)—which aims to record the memories of Chinese refugees and their life stories in Taiwan—successfully displayed diverse memories shared by middle and lower generations of the exile population.[7] However, most of the time these oral historical accounts were merely utilized to prove that the suffering of mainlanders and the KMT was no different from other victims of contemporary Taiwan history. Both homogeneous representations of Taiwan's past eliminate the diversity existing within the memories of the past.

With this elimination of diversity, a homogenous and unified collective memory can provide the foundation of an official history. In other words, by actively and strategically engaging forgetting, a relatively homogenous discourse of the past can be constructed by not mentioning its undesirable aspects. In my ethnographic research in and around the Memorial Hall, I encountered suppressed voices which actively sought to avoid being forgotten in the historical vacuum which has been created by the strategy of 'transcending the pasts' in political debate and through the writings or exhibitions from both the February 28th Incident Foundation and Waisheng Taiwanren Association.

NOTES

[1] I refer to 'Chiang's KMT' in this paper to distinguish the two KMTs: 1) the KMT that lost China and retreated to Taiwan and began its authoritarian rule in Taiwan in the 1950s; and 2) the KMT that completed its indigenization through congress and presidential elections and has become one of Taiwan's democratic parties. The former KMT, led by mainland China elites, excluded political participation by Taiwanese and emphasized its legacy and roots in China. After its indigenization, the latter KMT has had to face the dilemmas of dealing with issues of transformation justice for its authoritarian rule and gaining support from local Taiwanese. The distinction between the two major ethnic groups, the mainlanders and the local Taiwanese, has become one of the perplexing issues and the origin of ideological struggles in Taiwanese politics.

[2] 'A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.' (Nora 1996: XVII)

[3] See online introduction page to the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall; the content of the page has been rewritten several times since first access in August 20 2007. <http://www.taiwan.net.tw/m1.aspx?sNo=0001090&id=73> (accessed April 25th, 2010).

[4] In later interviews about national tourism policies with some TTB officers, I confirmed the fact that they were also confused at the time; they refused to further comment on the renaming.

[5] In a special issue of the journal *Sixiang* on transitional justice and the politics of memory (*zhuanxing zhengyi yu jiyi zhengzhi*), authors called for engaging the transitional justice process and to some extent looking for conciliation in the future. In this special issue, cases drawn from the two Germanys and

the US Lincoln Memorial serve as examples for Taiwan's reconciliation between local Taiwanese and mainlanders and a greater understanding of Taiwan's past. See *Sixiang*, 2007.

[6] As correctly pinpointed by our panel discussant, Dr. Christina Schwenkel, the 'mutually constitutive and dynamically interdependent' nature of remembering and forgetting is often ignored (Society for East Asian Anthropology panel: The Politics of Memory and the State in East and Southeast Asia, July 2nd, 2009).

[7] See home page of the Waisheng Taiwanren Association: http://amtorg-amtorg.blogspot.com/search/label/%E9%97%9C%E6%96%BC%E6%88%91%E5%80%91 (accessed June 30th, 2009)

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CHIEN-YUAN CHEN, Ph.D. Cand.
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY OF JAPAN
cychen@hawaii.edu