

A Tinted Politics of Memory: Anniversaries Caught between Political Camps in Taiwan in 2017

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ABSTRACT: Thirty years after Taiwan lifted martial law in 1987, Taiwanese society today is open to a re-evaluation of its authoritarian past. Following the beginning of the Tsai presidency in 2016, Taiwan's quest for a national identity has become more perceivable in its memory culture. The year 2017 marked the 70th anniversary of the February 28 Incident as well as the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Questions of whether and how to commemorate the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, as well as the search for historical equivalences are overshadowed by the two large political camps and their respective allies. Third parties such as the CCP or Japan also offer conflicting narratives and seek to influence Taiwan's historiography, which will ultimately shape Taiwan's future. More than just vying for the prerogative of the interpretation of memory, these issues also led to a more fundamental question: What should be considered Taiwanese history?

Keywords: Taiwan, February 28 Incident, Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Politics of Commemoration, National Identity, Chthonic, Tsai Ing-wen.

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After Qing China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Taiwan fell under Japanese rule. Japan began numerous imperialist policies, focusing primarily on infrastructure and construction, but also education. Starting in 1937, "Japanization" efforts intensified under the slogan *Kōminka*. Following the Japanese surrender in World War II, the island became part of the Republic of China (ROC) after 50 years of Japanese rule in October 1945. In 1946 the civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of Mao Zedong continued. At the same time, the KMT rulers of Taiwan encountered difficult circumstances. Japanese colonialism had been met with benevolence by many Taiwanese and its results posed a great challenge to the new Chinese administrators. After all, Taiwanese by large had fought for the Japanese Empire and not for the ROC in the war. Up to 1945, the Chinese language had played a much less important role than Japanese. Other languages such as Minnan (today sometimes referred to as "Taiwanese"), Hakka and aboriginal languages further complicated the Sinicization efforts of Chiang's ROC. Last but not least, many Taiwanese were angered by the privileged treatment of newcomers from the Chinese

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mainland.

About one and a half year later, the tensions escalated. On February 27, 1947, one person was killed in a fight regarding monopoly regulations. The KMT authorities refused to deal with the case properly and Taipei's people rebelled. The same night, martial law and a curfew were declared. The next day, an island-wide uprising gained momentum. Also, Chinese civilians, who just recently had moved to Taiwan, fell victim to the violence of the rebelling Taiwanese. These newcomers were often targeted for random reasons, such as their lack of command of indigenous languages or Japanese. The insurgency was crushed with utter force by Governor Chen Yi (KMT). Chiang Kai-shek suspected his communist civil war enemies behind the uprising. On March 7, mainland KMT troops disembarked close to Taipei. The following military operation continued until May 12 and resulted, according to official estimates, in 18,000 to 28,000 deaths.¹

With the KMT's defeat on the mainland and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Taiwan became the last fortress of "Free China." At the same time, public discussion of the February 28 Incident, usually abbreviated as *228-Shibian* (228-Incident) was a taboo. The following "White Terror" of Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo (who after his father's death ruled the country until 1988) led to the persecution of an estimated 140,000 Taiwanese accused of dissident activities. More than 3,000 were killed, their deaths hardly acknowledged.

July 2017 marked the 30th anniversary of the lifting of martial law in 1987. Over decades, the KMT framed the 228-Incident as orchestrated by communists or ethnic extremists.² The beginning of democratization allowed a critical approach towards the 228-Incident and the "White Terror." The director Hou Hsiao-hsien cinematically discussed the 228-Incident in his 1989 movie *A City of Sadness*. The first public apology by then President Lee Teng-hui for the incident followed in 1995. Lee was the first Taiwan-born president, who in his youth had lived through the education system installed by the Japanese. While the two Chiang's clearly saw themselves as keepers of a Chinese tradition and a common Chinese cause, Lee's presidency (1988-2000) in general paved the way for a new separatist Taiwan Strait-policy.

As a key figurehead of democratization, Lee is held in high esteem, in particular by critics of the KMT-rule. Born in 1923, Lee was a short-time member of the Communist Party at around the time of the 228-Incident. His role in the 1947 uprising is disputed. Lee left the KMT in 2001 and now, despite his old age, serves as a father figure for the separatist currents in Taiwan's political landscape, the so called "green camp." This camp consists of a number of movements, organizations and political parties, all demanding a stronger political, cultural, and economic independence from the PRC. Taiwan's current

1 Chen Fang-ming, "Time for a new 228 Incident report." *The Taipei Times*, February 27, 2017, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2017/02/27/2003665769/2>.

2 Mo Yan-chih, "Remembering 228: Ghosts of the past are yet to be laid to rest," *The Taipei Times*, February 28, 2006, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/print/2006/02/28/2003295019>.

president, Tsai Ing-wen, and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are also part of the “green camp.” Opposed to them is the “blue camp,” consisting of the KMT and other organizations and parties who don’t support independence and, in some cases, even favor a political unification with China under the PRC’s “One Country, Two Systems”-policy.

These two camps dominate the politics of commemoration in recent decades. In 1997, February 28 was declared a national holiday. The presidency of the DPP-politician Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008) continued Lee’s separatist direction. At the same time, the struggle around the narrative revolving the event intensified further. Memorial sites were built,³ even politicians of the KMT (for the first time being in the role of opposition) expressed regrets and apologized. Since 2006, flags are raised at half-mast on February 28 and even after its return to power under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016), the KMT by large did not openly obstruct the re-negotiation of Taiwan’s authoritarian past. However, other groups and parties of the blue camp and their supporters keep the controversy going by downplaying the incident and defending Chiang and his policies.⁴

With the return of the DPP to power in May 2016, the 228-Incident became the focus of a green-nationalist commemoration policy. The focus on the domestic event of 1947 outweighs the traditional blue-nationalist commemoration of the Second Sino-Japanese War. A good example is the so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident. July 7, 2017, marked the 80th anniversary of an important escalation of the war when KMT troops clashed with Japanese forces close to Beijing in 1937.

Traditionally, July 7 was an important memorial day in Taiwan. Japan’s post-war role as an important ally for Taiwan, however, always overshadowed the rush of victory. In 2015, President Ma Ying-jeou stressed that neither he nor the festivities intended to convey anti-Japanese evocations.⁵ The same year, Japan had criticized the ROC air force for the historic paint job on its F-16 and Indigenous Defense Fighters displaying a design based on the Flying Tigers, a group of Sino-American fighter squads during World War II. On the planes’ fuselages, Japanese flags were used as kill marks.⁶ Apparently as a consequence, the memorial festivities of July 7 carefully avoided a common term for the Second Sino-Japanese War: *Kangzhan* (War of Resistance). To further protect himself against criticism, Ma avoided the dichotomy of pro- and anti-Japanese and referred to himself as Japanese-friendly.⁷ On a 2017 memorial conference hosted by the KMT, Ma again chose clement words. According to Ma, the commemoration was by no means an expression of anti-

3 Taipei 228 Memorial Museum [台北二二八紀念館], “關於紀念館,” last modified May 4, 2015, <http://228memorialmuseum.gov.taipei/ct.asp?xItem=1651473&ctNode=38985&mp=11900A>.

4 The Taipei Times, “Editorial: Working together to find the truth.” *The Taipei Times*, February 27, 2018, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2018/02/27/2003688322>

5 Pingguo Ribao [蘋果日報], “馬英九：我是友日派,” *HK Apple Daily*, July 7, 2015, <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/china/20150707/53941184>.

6 Deutsche Welle. “台湾纪念抗战 ‘异见’ ‘多,’” last modified July 4, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/zh/台湾纪念抗战异见多/a-18561050?&zhongwen=simp>.

7 Pingguo Ribao [蘋果日報], “馬英九：我是友日派.”

Japanese sentiment, but an acknowledgment of martyrs. He expressed hopes for an end of hatred between the two peoples.⁸ This clearly can be read as a commitment to a Chinese perspective on the war and the ROC as the main force of resistance against Japan in Asia.

Figure 1. Campaign logo of the Taiwanese Ministry of Defense for the 80th anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident



Source: Zhengzhan Zixun Fuwu Wang 政戰資訊服務網. “全民國防教育最新公告-七七抗戰80週年紀念圖徽.” May 12, 2017. <http://gpwd.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?cnid=107&p=4762>(Last accessed: 2017-07-10)

Ministry’s Office for Political Warfare proclaimed a detailed program with eleven points. The headline heroically called for “loyalty till death” and “a noble spirit which never perishes”. A closer look reveals: The several months long campaign covered different plans, ranging from special coverage to the production of 5,000 memory pins.¹⁰ However, the campaign hardly bears any political weight. International attention apparently is, unlike in the presentation of the 228-Incident, not part of the campaign’s objectives.

The Tsai government’s transitional justice approach, which primarily aims at evaluating the 228-Incident and the “White Terror” it entailed, helps the DPP and its allies to delegitimize the KMT as well as to dispose of the Chiangs and their political legacy. In this context one comes across the term *qu-Jiang-hua*, which can be roughly translated as “De-Chiang-ization.” The traditional narrative, which praised Chiang Kai-shek’s heroism in the Chinese resistance against Japan, does not fit into this agenda. Chiang fought the war with reckless and questionable means. In June 1938, he ordered the detonation of the Yellow River dams in a covert operation in order to slow down the Japanese advance. An estimated number of 800,000 casualties involving almost exclusively Chinese people were the result of the devastating floods and hunger that followed this desperate tactic. Its strategic effect is disputed up to this day.

8 Lin Sihui [林思慧], “馬英九:紀念七七事變非仇日·是感念先烈先賢奉獻犧牲,” *Ming Zhoukan* [鏡週刊], July 7, 2017, <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20170707inv002>.

9 Junshi Lishi Wenwuguan [軍事歷史文物館], “「國防部軍事媒體特展」訂106年7月7日1200時開展,歡迎各界參觀,” last modified June 29, 2017, <http://museum.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?cnid=1424&p=74195&Level=1>.

10 Zhengzhan Zixun Fuwu Wang [政戰資訊服務網], “全民國防教育最新公告·國防部「碧血丹心,浩氣長存」紀念七七抗戰80週年整體文宣綱要計畫,” Political Warfare Bureau, last modified May 12, 2017, <http://gpwd.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?cnid=107&p=4762>.

However, when Chiang's statues are scrawled on, defaced, damaged or thrown over nationwide every February in an annual (yet illegal) ritual, which started a few years ago, this does not happen because of the horrific casualties of Chiang's reign in China proper. The vandalizers, mostly supporters of the radical green camp, try to remind Taiwan of Chiang's post-war "White Terror." In addition to this revisionist historical argument, the defacing of Chiang ironically further aims at distancing Taiwan from Chiang's former archenemies and the greatest threat for Taiwan's sovereignty, the CCP of the Chinese mainland. In 2018, former President Ma personally doubted Chiang's role as mastermind in the 228-Incident's violent crackdown. Ma called for more historical research on the event.¹¹ What remains unclear is how much of this aims at a problematic restoration of Chiang's reputation as the KMT's figurehead and savior of China, whether this is appeasement to the PRC, and how much of it is actually a justified warning in face of an ideological overemphasis of the crackdown.

The fact that Taiwan's current government pays little to no importance to the July 7 anniversary is not a big surprise. The date marks the conflict between troops of the Japanese Empire and the KMT on the Chinese mainland—not in Taiwan. This however evokes dismay on the other side of the Taiwan Strait. The PRC's Office for Taiwan Affairs of the State Council proclaimed in May 2017 that this neglect of history equaled a betrayal.¹² The decision not to host any official festivities is justifiably seen as part of a larger *qu-Zhongguo-hua* (De-Sinization) in Taiwan, led and pursued by the DPP and its supporters.¹³ The differences between a "De-Chiang-ization" and a "De-Sinization" are intentionally kept fuzzy.

At the same time, Chinese demands for a shared commemoration is heavily shaped by CCP narratives. In this context, it is striking how Chinese officials simplify facts for their agenda: Just like the 228-Incident, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident is often referred to as *77-Shibian* (77-Incident). In more recent reactions over the last year, Beijing replaced this term with the term *77-Kangzhan* (77-War of Resistance). This is probably no coincidence but aims at stressing common struggle and sacrifice. Beijing willingly ignored that Taiwan, unlike the ROC, in 1937 did not fight on China's but on Japan's side.

If Taiwan now turns its back to this part of history, this entails further implications. First, Taiwan's historiographical discourse will be dyed in a heavier red, nationalistic tone through the PRC, especially outside of Taiwan. The instrumentalization of geriatric KMT veterans in the PRC's victory parade on 2nd September 2015 on the occasion of 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat and the end of World War II is just one odd example for

11 Stacy Hsu, "228 Remembered: Ma urges more efforts to 'uncover truth.'" *The Taipei Times*, March 1, 2018, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/03/01/2003688472>.

12 Cai Minzi [蔡敏姿], "台停辦抗戰80周年紀念 • 國台辦. 意味背叛," *Lianhe Xinwen Wang* [聯合新聞網], May 10, 2017, <https://udn.com/news/story/7331/2454532>.

13 Zheng Zhonglan [鄭仲嵐]. "「七七事變」80週年 • 兩岸依舊「不同調」," *BBC*, July 7, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-40529237>.

this.¹⁴ On July 6 in 2017, Taiwan's Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council, Katherine Chang, issued a sharp warning in regard to such a politicization of the PRC.¹⁵ The question which party—Mao's PRC and Chiang's KMT since late 1936 were formally allies in their struggle against Japan—can claim how much of the credit for the Chinese victory in World War II regularly sparks controversy. On July 6, 2017, the retired general, prominent KMT politician and former Taiwanese Prime Minister Hau Pei-tsun angered many observers with ambiguous remarks at a conference hosted by and in the PRC. Born 1919 in China, Hau fought during the war himself and embodies the old blue guard. Their often pro-Chinese views are highly welcome by the CCP. For their trips to the PRC, a common term surfaced in Chinese language coverage: *tuijiang fu Zhong* (retired generals journeying to China). When Hau was interviewed by the BBC in 2015, he presented a classic KMT perspective that the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek were to be credited with 95 percent of China's war efforts against Japan. In front of his Chinese hosts in 2017, Hau bowed to the CCP's narrative of a shared and mutual struggle of the whole Chinese people. He remarkably presented this view as an academically and ideologically neutral position.¹⁶

The memory revolving around the 228-Incident is also of concern for PRC historiography. J. Michel Cole displays the half-hearted Chinese attempts to commemorate and academically discuss the events as an attempt to approach the DPP and win sympathies in Taiwan.¹⁷ Yet, since the Taiwanese insurgents of 1947 also erratically deployed violence against the Chinese newcomers, the 228-Incident also offers an interpretation in which the Chinese and the KMT ultimately could be read as victims.

The new historiographical emphasis in Taiwan on the other hand resonates with a generally increasing pro-Japanese climate. The supposedly benevolent Japanese rule over the island is often mystified and conveniently levered against the Chinese legacy. This climate allows a revisionist re-balancing of some historic events as well as political and geostrategic interests. The aged Lee Tung-hui is often criticized for his remarks, not only by circles in proximity to the KMT, but also from the PRC.¹⁸

The young blooded pro-independence movement as well as the 2014 occupation of the Legislative Yuan contributed to the rise of a number of new and interesting political

14 Xu Jianhong [許劍虹], “唯一到北京看閱兵的台灣抗戰老兵,” *Zhongguo Shibao* [中國時報], March 31, 2016, <http://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20160331006967-260417>.

15 Ziyou Shibao [自由時報], “退將赴中紀念七七・陸委會：應注意言行及社會觀感,” last modified July 6, 2017, <http://m.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2123473>.

16 Huang Qijia [黃麒珈], “赴中出席抗戰學術研討會！郝柏村。研究抗戰要站在全中華民族立場” *Fengchuanmei* [風傳媒], last modified July 6, 2017, <http://www.storm.mg/article/294696>.

17 Cole, J. Michael, “China to ‘Commemorate’ Taiwan’s 228 Massacre,” *Taiwan Sentinel*, February 9, 2017, <https://sentinel.tw/china-228-massacre/>.

18 For example, in September 2002, Lee claimed that the uninhibited but disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands—claimed by the PRC, Taiwan, and Japan—belonged to Japan. See: Okinawa Times [沖繩タイムス], “沖繩の海図（64）・メッセージ復帰30年,” last modified September 24, 2002, <http://web.archive.org/web/20021026180419/www.okinawatimes.co.jp/spe/kaizu20020924.html>.

and cultural actors. One of them: the metal band Chthonic. They glorified the role of pro-Japanese forces in World War II in their 2011 concept album *Takasago Army*. In 2014, they dedicated a ballad to the events and the aftermath of the 228-Incident called *Defenders of Bú-Tik Palace*. Freddy Lim, the lead singer of the band, was previously chairman of Amnesty International Taiwan and co-founded the New Power Party (NPP) in 2015, a progressive party associated with the green camp and popular among young people. Lim is now a Member of the Legislative Yuan and an outspoken independence supporter. The DPP cooperated with the NPP in the 2016 elections. A few years ago, Lim's band Chthonic toured under the slogan "UNlimited Taiwan", a statement in the highly charged question of a renewed UN membership of Taiwan.¹⁹ Lim and his band support the Dalai Lama as well as the Tibetan Government in Exile and wave their flag on their concerts. In Japan, this anti-CCP and anti-KMT activism is occasionally welcomed by revisionists, eager to re-negotiate the Japanese role in World War II.

Decades of colonialism and authoritarian one-party rule are constantly being negotiated—with few common ground.²⁰ Just like the question of how Taiwan should be defined—an ethnically Chinese competition and model for the PRC (an increasingly unlikely option) or as a citizenship-based independent nation—the 228-Incident has not yet found a distinct reference point. This carries the risk of inappropriate and disproportional comparisons. The Taipei 228-Memorial, for example, on the one hand acknowledges the almost impossible task to draw clear comparisons. Yet, in the so-called "Human Rights Forest", one of the exhibition rooms, it only offers three model references: the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, the Osaka International Peace Center, as well as the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Even though the Osaka International Peace Center made headlines due to its presentation of Japanese war victims,²¹ the institutions are less remarkable than the choice of historical reference. The comparison with the Jewish Museum in Berlin²² (as well as common references to Nazi history) clearly suggests a scale of the 228-Incident, which can hardly be justified with historical evidence.

Freddy Lim and his band further exploit this parallel. In the music video to their song *Supreme Pain for the Tyrant* of the 2013 album *Bú-Tik* they equate the KMT with the German Nazi Party. With about one million views on YouTube, the video is set in 1930s Shanghai, at a time when in fact close relations between Nazi Germany and the KMT

19 The UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, passed on 25 October 1971, recognized the PRC as "the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations" and expelled "the representatives Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations." Since only the ROC and not a yet to be found Taiwanese nation state was expelled from the UN, one might argue that Taiwan, in fact, never was a member of the UN.

20 Jeremy Oliver, "How to Achieve Transitional Justice in Taiwan," *Taiwan Sentinel*, January 16, 2017, <https://sentinel.tw/transitional-justice-taiwan/>.

21 Philip Seaton, "The Nationalist Assault on Japan's Local Peace Museums. The Conversion of Peace Osaka," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, July 27, 2015. <http://apjpf.org/2015/13/30/Philip-Seaton/4348.html>.

22 It is remarkable that the primary reference is Berlin's Jewish Museum (which in parts also deals with the Shoah), but not Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

existed. The song's lyrics glorify an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Chiang Kai-shek's son and political successor Chiang Ching-kuo in New York in 1970.²³ The video ends in a gory violent showoff, in which the band members slay the Nazis and the KMT bigwigs.

Figure 2: Screenshot (01:14) from the music of Supreme Pain for the Tyrant²⁴



As a matter of fact, the violent 1989 events in the PRC probably offer a more appropriate reference. Traditionally, the anniversary of the bloody crackdown of the Chinese democracy movement was a welcome opportunity to commemorate what remains a strict taboo in the PRC. In recent years the Taiwanese interest has—especially in contrast to large commemoration activities in Hong Kong—faded. Yet, in 2017, President Tsai commented in a Facebook post on June 4 that China could learn from Taiwan and explicitly compared the Taiwanese discussion around the 228-Incident with China's Tian'anmen-taboo.²⁵

While self-righteous lectures from Beijing seem out of place, justified criticisms of Taiwan's politically charged commemoration culture do not become less right simply because they are shared by the CCP. However, at the same time, Taiwan should not bow to red-nationalist narratives from the PRC. In 2018 large parts of the green and the blue camp at least found common ground by expressing hopes for more historical research. Yet, the Act on Promoting Transitional Justice, passed on December 5 2017, has not shown much effect. On the one hand, concerns about the nine-member independent committee to further reevaluate the 228-Incident being led by political motives in the face of an increasingly aggressive Taiwan-policy by Beijing's leaders seem legitimate. However, when on February 28, 2018, protestors defiled Chiang's sarcophagus with red paint, voices from the blue camp blamed the Transitional Justice Act and the social divide it apparently had deepened in a political red herring.²⁶

It is evident that the sovereignty over interpreting certain events prior and after 1945

23 Chthonic [閃靈], "Behind the scene of Supreme Pain for the Tyrant 破夜斬MV幕後故事," YouTube, last modified June 6, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b81Ql9eipSs>.

24 Chthonic [閃靈], "CHTHONIC — Supreme Pain for the Tyrant — Official Video | 閃靈 破夜斬." YouTube, last modified June 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jYsu5-TJQ8>.

25 Tsai Ing-wen [蔡英文], "Facebook post, untitled," accessed: 2017-07-10, <https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/10154308350681065>.

26 Sean Lin, "KMT cries foul over defilement of Chiang's tomb," *The Taipei Times*, March 2, 2018, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/03/02/2003688531>.

is willingly given away in culture and politics due to a fading interest in Chinese affairs. On July 7, President Tsai in her only tweet that day sent her best wishes in Japanese to Northern Kyūshū because the Japanese island had been struck by disastrous rain falls. She called Japan an “important neighbor and friend of Taiwan”.²⁷ The outrage of patriotic Chinese internet users was guaranteed and followed immediately. It was also no coincidence that on February 28, 2018, a new group was formed under the name *The Island of Joy and Happiness Coalition*. It was joined by the two former Presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian as well as Freddy Lim’s NPP. The coalition’s primary goal is to push for a referendum on Taiwanese independence (which they hope to hold on April 7, 2019 – the 30th anniversary of the 1989 self-immolation of the democracy activist Cheng Nan-jung).²⁸ A closer and more critical look at the complex history of Taiwan, in the 20th century in particular, is crucial to grasp the instrumentalization through the parties involved. History in East Asia to a large extent determines the national identity of some of the most powerful nations in the world.

27 Tsai Ing-wen, “Tweet, untitled,” July 7, 2017, <https://twitter.com/iingwen/status/883285944878551040>.

28 Chen Wei-han, “Group urges independence referendum,” *The Taipei Times*, March 1, 2018, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/03/01/2003688460>.

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