

**BETWIXT AND BETWEEN:  
Subjective Experiences of “Taiwanese Identity”**

By  
Annie Chou  
「周家安」

Senior Honours Thesis submitted to the  
Department of Anthropology  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Approved by:

Faculty Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #1: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #2: \_\_\_\_\_

## Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
<b>INTRODUCTION: Experiencing Taiwanese Identity</b> .....	4
I. Introductory Vignette .....	4
II. Research Questions and Methodologies .....	7
III. Overview of Chapters .....	9
<b>CHAPTER ONE: The Historical and Political Conditions of Taiwanese Identity</b> .....	11
I. Taiwanese Encounters with Japan and China (1895–1949) .....	14
II. Taiwanese Identity Enters the Political Arena (1949–Present) .....	16
<b>CHAPTER TWO: Overpowering Pan-Identities Part I</b> .....	21
I. The Concept of Identity .....	22
II. Asian Identity .....	26
<b>CHAPTER THREE: Overpowering Pan-Identities Part II</b> .....	34
I. Chinese Identity .....	34
II. Liminality .....	36
<b>CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: Locating Taiwanese Identity “Elsewhere”</b> .....	44
REFERENCES .....	48

## Acknowledgements

— — — — —  
*I would like to dedicate this thesis to my homeland and to any self-identified Taiwanese out there. I feel so proud to call Taiwan my home and I hope my research succeeds in making a worthwhile contribution towards the fight to establish a powerful, distinct Taiwanese identity.*  
— — — — —

First, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Valerie Lambert – this thesis would not have been possible without her continual support and guidance. I cannot thank her enough for motivating me to take part in writing an honours thesis so early on in my undergraduate career, for believing wholeheartedly in the value of my research, and for giving me the confidence I desperately needed to complete this project. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for all your positivity and encouragement – not only throughout this journey, but throughout my entire anthropological career here at UNC.

Next, I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Mark Driscoll and Dr. Colin West, for the integral roles they played in the completion of my thesis. I appreciate them for participating in this process, for their time, and for the unique perspectives they offered during my defense.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Townsend Middleton for helping me narrow my research focus and for his overall guidance during the first part of this project. More importantly though, I want to thank him for kick-starting my career in anthropology after a rough first year and subsequent time off – it was through the courses I took with Dr. Towns that I was first introduced to ethnographic research, that I fell in love with anthropology, and that I found my sense of purpose in school again.

Finally, I am eternally grateful for my family – for my mother and father, especially, who have both sacrificed so much of their lives for mine. Everything that I do, including this thesis, is a reflection of their unconditional love, support, and sacrifice. Also, I want to give a huge shout out to my younger sister, Jun, for being the best sister and friend I could ask for. Thank you for all that you do and for inspiring me every day with the light you bring into my life. None of my accomplishments would have been possible without my family so it seems appropriate to end this section by thanking them for always being there, no matter what.

---

INTRODUCTION

**Experiencing Taiwanese Identity**

---

*Another hour had passed and it was now nearing six o'clock at night. I realise that I've been stationed at the same spot in the library for seven hours now. Increasingly frustrated that I was spending such a lovely day indoors and disheartened by the lack of progress I was making, I decided that it was finally time to give up. As I walked through campus on my way to the bus stop, I noticed an abundance of students lying out on the quad, taking advantage of this beautiful weather. Since I was already feeling guilty about not getting any work done and was now somewhat reinvigorated by the sunshine, I figured this would be the perfect opportunity to conduct some ethnographic research.*

*So I ran back to the library from the bus stop, printed out a map of Asia, and hurried back to the quad before people started leaving for dinner. With my notebook in hand and a few simple questions in mind, I proceeded to stumble awkwardly around the crowd of students before working up the courage to intervene in their conversations. Once I was able to do so, I asked sixteen people the following questions:*

1. Judging solely from my physical appearance, how would you describe my race and/or ethnicity?
2. What are the first three subcategories of "Asian" that you can think of?
3. Can you locate Taiwan on this map of Asia?

*After an hour or so, I wrapped up my impromptu investigation and thanked the final few participants for their time. Setting into a comfortable position on the grass, I began sorting through my notes and watched as the crowd slowly dispersed with the setting sun. Though I was thrilled by the valuable data I was able to acquire, the entire experience left me with emotions similar to the ones I felt exiting the library a couple hours earlier; and I walked away from the quad that night with a slight sense of disillusionment.*

---

The responses I received during this ethnographic blitz were unexpected and as mentioned above, somewhat depressing: Nearly all the students I interviewed described my race

and/or ethnicity as Asian; none of them included Taiwan as one of the top three subcategories of Asian; and only one was able to precisely locate Taiwan on a map of Asian (most pointed to China instead).<sup>1</sup> Through these results, we are able to observe the marginalisation of Taiwanese identity. For example, notably absent from the responses to the first and second questions were unprompted mentions of Taiwan. Instead, students typically responded in favour of the “Asian” or “Chinese” label — symbolic of the ways in which Taiwanese identity often becomes subservient to these larger, more powerful identities. This omission of Taiwan, along with the inability to locate its geographic position, makes disturbingly clear the public ignorance surrounding Taiwanese identity (and Taiwan in general).

I was born in Taiwan; I immigrated to Canada at a young age, [and now] I live in the United States attending university. I always have trouble when people ask me the question, “What are you?” because I’m not even sure of the answer myself.

— Akira, age 20

The sentiments expressed in Akira’s statement above, characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty, encapsulate the tentative nature of Taiwanese identity. It is a familiar narrative, one that resonates with many Taiwanese immigrants like myself. For as long as I can remember, my identity has been a source of internal struggle and confusion. Originally born in Taiwan, my family and I immigrated when I was five-years-old to Richmond, British Columbia — a city with Canada’s highest concentration of immigrants. Growing up, I spent my childhood and early adolescence surrounded by Asian immigrants — a comforting privilege I never considered until I

---

<sup>1</sup> Detailed results to questions:

1. Asian (12 out of 16 respondents); Oriental (1 out of 16 respondents); Japanese (1 out of 16 respondents); Chinese (1 out of 16 respondents); East Asian (1 out of 16 respondents)
2. Top five responses in descending order: Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, and Vietnamese
3. Yes, located Taiwan precisely (1 out of 16 respondents); No, pointed to general region North [Japan, Korea, etc.] and South [Philippines, Malaysia, etc.] of Taiwan (5 out of 16 respondents); No, pointed to China knowing Taiwan was “somewhere near there” (6 out of 16 respondents); No, could not locate at all (4 out of 16 respondents)

moved to Greenville, North Carolina when I was fifteen-years-old. Relocating from Richmond (a metropolitan city with 69% of its residents identifying as Asian and 50% as Chinese and/or Taiwanese)<sup>2</sup> — to Greenville (a comparatively small town with a mere 2.4% Asian population; 0.5% of which identified as Chinese)<sup>3</sup> — was simultaneously jarring, anxiety-ridden, exhilarating, and traumatic. As soon as I arrived in Greenville, I could feel a discernible shift in the racial and ethnic composition between the two cities. The lack of Asian residents in Greenville was evident from the beginning and stood in stark contrast to what I was used to back in my Canadian home. This is not to say that racial prejudice and discrimination were never problems in Richmond (they most definitely were); nor am I claiming that my Taiwanese identity was ever secure by virtue of being around other Taiwanese and Asian individuals. There was, however, an undeniable transformation in my perceptions of identity once my family and I immigrated to Greenville — a town where Asian individuals were a rare sight.

My research is thus a product of my transnational upbringing and a mediation on the long-term anxieties born of these experiences. It is an attempt to make sense of questions like “Why are your eyes not squinty? Aren’t you supposed to be Asian or something?” (Yes, this *actually* happened) and the endless times I’ve been asked the question, “So...what exactly *are* you?” and “Wait, isn’t Taiwan the same thing as China?” This thesis, in essence, is the offspring of these assaults (some more subtle than others) on my identity. More importantly, it is an

---

<sup>2</sup> City of Richmond. 2011. “Immigrant Hot Facts.” [http://www.richmond.ca/\\_\\_shared/assets/Immigration6252.pdf](http://www.richmond.ca/__shared/assets/Immigration6252.pdf)  
Bhatty, Ayesha. “Canada prepares for an Asian future.” 2012. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-radio-and-tv-18149316>  
Statistics Canada. 2011. “NHS Profile, Richmond, CY, British Columbia, 2011.” <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=5915015&Data=Count&SearchText=richmond&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=59&A1=Ethnic%20origin&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>  
<sup>3</sup> United States Census Bureau. 2010. “QuickFacts: Greenville city, North Carolina.” <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/3728080.html>

endeavour to help others like me find meaning in their own diasporic realities. I hope my research, above all, can serve as a testament to the plurality of Taiwanese experience, which as I alluded to earlier in the opening vignette, is often relegated to the periphery.

I wish people would give us a chance to explain the difference [between Taiwan and China]. Some people just disregard us and I wish we got the chance to explain sometimes. I think it's good though that you're recognizing this and doing something about it. The more recognition, the better!

— Ezra, age 21

### **Research Questions and Methodologies**

The main objective of this thesis is to disentangle the complexities of Taiwanese identity with hopes of advancing broader treatises on identity, recognition, and the frictions between internal and external (re)labelling. Overall, it aspires to promote some much-needed dialogue about Taiwanese identity and convey the nuances of its experience through direct engagement with Taiwanese subjects. My research seeks neither to confirm nor deny the materiality of their experiences, but alternatively, it acknowledges the inherent truths embedded within each and every one of them. Thus, I hope to honour the fluidity, changeability, and variability<sup>4</sup> of Taiwanese identity. In summary, this thesis is devoted to celebrating the potential conflicts within and between individual biographies; it bears witness to the plural and contingent nature of Taiwanese identity and experience.

Over the past couple of decades, academic and public discourse on Taiwanese affairs has tended to prioritise geopolitical analysis over the lived realities of Taiwanese subjects, thereby producing an imbalance in the literature on Taiwanese identity. Though these issues are

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 2 (pages 23-26) for more clarification on these terms.

certainly relevant (e.g., cross-Strait tensions between Taiwan and China), intellectual endeavours striving to understand “identity” can easily transcend the boundaries of entire disciplines. By centering our discussions solely around these geopolitical issues, not only do we risk silencing the voices of Taiwanese subjects, but we simplify the multidimensionality of their experiences. Therefore, it is crucial that we make active efforts to fill this lacuna, especially if we want to address the troubling circumstances described in the preceding sections. We can begin to do so by transferring our collective focus elsewhere, specifically to the field of anthropology.

— — — — —

Informed by five months of IRB-approved<sup>5</sup> ethnographic research, additional in-person and online interviews, secondary documents, and a lifetime of personal experiences; this thesis represents a small, but critical effort to reimagine the academic and public landscape of Taiwanese identity. My sample population is composed of thirteen Taiwanese-identified individuals living in both the United States and Canada. Participants were each assigned a pseudonym as a means of protecting their respective identities. The individuals comprising my sample were selected based on their self-identification as Taiwanese. In order to do so, I reached out to personal contacts for interviews and also asked them to refer me to other self-identified Taiwanese. In addition, I posted on various social media pages asking for self-identified Taiwanese to participate in my research. Although my sample was not selected entirely at random and thus does not follow the conventions of scientific research; I trust that my decisions to engage several personal contacts actually created certain possibilities I otherwise would not have access to and allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. I also made

---

<sup>5</sup> Before submitting my application to the IRB, I underwent and passed the required CITI online ethics training program for research involving human subjects. My application to the IRB (Reference ID #15-2337) for non-biomedical research was approved and found to be exempt from further review.

a conscious decision to employ a relatively small sample size, which I believe was essential in order to accommodate the multiplicity and diversity of their subjective realities.

Though my thesis will draw heavily on theoretical works, its narrative is ultimately driven by and rooted in the voices of those I worked with. By utilising a distinctively anthropological lens to understand the politics of Taiwanese identity, this analytical reorientation hopes to clarify, rather than confuse, prior research on this topic.

[Living in so many places and experiencing racism as an immigrant] makes me think about how important it is to not lose your roots — to never forget where you came from, to better understand the culture you were born into. I think we owe it to our parents to study that. I think [my parents] catalyzed it; they implemented an idea [of my Taiwanese identity] and an introduction of our culture. But to truly identify yourself into it, well, it's a very personal experience. It's something only *you* can relate to; not something that can be taught.

— Ezra, age 21

### **Moving Forward: Overview of Chapters**

Serving as a point of departure, Chapter One contextualises the subject of Taiwanese identity by providing information about Taiwan's historical and political background. This preliminary chapter will briefly outline Taiwan's colonial encounters as well as explore its convoluted political relationship with China. Once this foundational support has been established, we move on to the following two chapters, which are united through their shared emphasis on hegemonic, overpowering identities. Chapter Two will initiate these conversations by exploring the dynamics of “Asian” identity in relation to Taiwanese identity. Elaborating upon the previous chapter, Chapter Three will then shift our attention towards “Chinese” identity

and proceeds with some reflections on Victor Turner's classic anthropological concept of *liminality*. Altogether, Chapters Two and Three seek to demonstrate the potency of both the Asian and Chinese labels. Moreover, both chapters elucidate the potential for these deeply entrenched designations, owing to their hegemonic positions in society, to disempower assertions of a distinctly "Taiwanese" identity — a common frustration amongst the people I spoke with.

We then arrive at the conclusion, which strives to inspire new possibilities for Taiwanese identity. Forging ahead, this final chapter will also ponder the diasporic spaces of *elsewhere* and the concept of *migratory subjectivities* as they appeared in the work of Carole Boyce-Davies, a distinguished scholar specialising in English and Africana Studies. The conclusion is dedicated to dismantling monolithic representations of Taiwanese identity and imagining instead a new platform on which to assert and affirm the experiences of all those that feel a connection to Taiwan, thereby liberating them from the suffocating forces of overpowering identities. The theoretical notions of elsewhere and migratory subjectivity enable these possibilities and function accordingly as powerful weapons of subversion.

Would you say that you know a lot, a little,  
or nothing at all about Taiwan's history?  
How do you personally understand this topic?  
How much, if any, influence does it have on your identity?

*Little to none. Sorry.  
I know there's a statue somewhere in the middle of a roundabout  
and he's a forefather of Taiwan or something?*  
— Frank, age 22

*Little to nothing. It's pretty sad.  
I don't think they taught it in Chinese class and my parents never educated me about it.*  
— Aaliyah, age 21

*I don't think it influences [my identity] but just more so  
serves as a reminder of where you came from.  
Yes, we might have all started as Chinese, but through  
the generations of cultural diversity;  
we are now Taiwanese.  
And that's something I think that people don't understand.*  
— Ezra, age 21

Do you keep up with cross-Strait politics,  
or have any knowledge about the relationship between Taiwan and China?  
How do you personally understand this topic?  
How much, if any, influence does it have on your identity?

*Little to none.  
I've heard that everything's a mess and it's chaotic though.*  
— Frank, age 22

*I think most people when they talk about politics they just think,  
"Oh yeah, Taiwan's democratic but China's communist...right?"  
I personally think less about that but I think that truly is  
how most people see it because of how it's portrayed in the media.  
Nobody knows anything about Taiwan and they think that Taiwan and China  
are the same culturally and politically — but that's just **not** true.*  
— Akira, age 20

---

CHAPTER ONE

**The Historical and Political Conditions of Taiwanese Identity**

*Nationality [...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time.*

— Benedict Anderson (2006:4)

---

It is crucial that we acknowledge Taiwan’s historical and political conditions in order to understand how Taiwanese identity is constructed, perceived, and expressed. Excerpts from the interviews I conducted with Taiwanese individuals show varying degrees of awareness of Taiwanese history and politics: For several that I spoke to, Taiwanese history and politics had a heavy impact on their deliberations of identity; for others, these issues were perceived as utterly irrelevant. The responses I received when I asked participants about their awareness of the relationship between Taiwan and China, or cross-Strait relations, varied from person-to-person. Most admitted they did not keep up with Taiwanese politics but agreed that differentiating Taiwan from China was crucial when talking about their own Taiwanese identity. When I asked Akira — a Taiwanese Canadian college student who immigrated to Canada from Taiwan as a young child — about cross-Strait politics, she replied:

I just know it’s very intense. It might have cooled down or intensified — I don’t know. Politics doesn’t really influence how I identify because I don’t know much about it. But at the same time, talking about identity, it always goes back to the whole “Taiwan and China aren’t the same” argument.

— Akira, age 20

Though she considers politics to be relatively inconsequential and downplays its significance within the context of her identity, Akira argues that her identity is at least partially, if not

entirely, dependent on the relationship between Taiwan and China — a central aspect of Taiwan’s past and present political circumstances. Karine — also a Taiwanese Canadian college student who immigrated to Canada from Taiwan as a young child — echoes Akira’s feelings in her response:

I don’t really keep up with it [...] I’m definitely not knowledgeable enough to explain the whole situation to someone else. I think it does [influence how I identify] because I disagree with a lot of the Chinese politics [...] Because I find myself disagreeing with the Chinese, it does strengthen my Taiwanese identity.

— Karine, age 21

The conversations I had with participants about Taiwan’s historical background also revealed a lot about their identities as each individual perceived Taiwanese history and the extent of its impact on issues of identity differently. One of my interviewees, Zainah — a Taiwanese American college student born to Taiwanese immigrants (a shared narrative amongst many individuals I spoke with) — discussed her knowledge of Taiwanese history and its minimal impact on her identity:

I know barely anything. I know [Taiwan] was an island and a bunch of countries tried to occupy it and have...and they just kept switching back and forth who was occupying it. [History] doesn’t really influence my identity to be honest.

— Zainah, age 21

Others, like Akira, described their understandings of Taiwanese history in ways that contrasted with the previous account:

[I know] a little. I know we were colonized by Japan at a certain point. I know Chiang Kai-shek was the leader who

fled to Taiwan and established it as a country. I know that we are having issues with China and have been since Chiang Kai-shek fled.

— Akira, age 20

The majority of those I interviewed believed Taiwan's historical background to have the least bearing on their identity simply because they did not know enough about the topic. However, most did express to me their eagerness to learn more about Taiwanese history and the lack of classes on this topic at their respective high schools and universities.

Though the role history plays in formations of identity may not be salient in our everyday experiences, “history provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and where we should be going” (Liu & Hilton 2005:537); therefore, accounts of both national and personal histories are important when determining how people experience their identity.

### **Taiwanese Encounters with Japan and China (1895–1949)**

Previous research has identified key elements of Taiwan's history as significant to its development of national identity.<sup>6</sup> The first involves Taiwan's historical experiences with Japanese imperialism. While under the control of Japan's colonial government from 1895–1945, Taiwanese identity was conceived primarily in racial or ethnic terms (Brown 2004:8). Early forms of colonial classification were based on perceived differences between regional varieties of the Han ethnicity and “barbaric” Aborigines; however, as Brown notes, by the early 20th century, “These distinctions were not particularly important [...] Much more important to the Japanese were the distinction between Japanese and everyone else” (2004:9).

Well, I know we were also colonised by the Japanese. When my grandmother was still in school — I think early on in her schooling, she was forced to speak Japanese [...] And then

---

<sup>6</sup> See Brown 2004; Gold 1993; Ho and Liu 2002; Schubert 2004 as examples.

later on when she was older, she was forced to speak Mandarin. So she's actually a little more comfortable speaking Taiwanese, which was what they learned at home and what most people speak.

— Vera, age 21

Secondly, ever since Taiwan was “returned” to Chinese Nationalists (KMT; 國民黨) in 1945, notions of Taiwanese identity began to reflect contemporary discourses that perceive a distinction between those who arrived post-1949 with the Nationalist government (Mainlanders) and those who did not. During this period, Taiwanese identity was conceptualised in terms of regional differences between “*bensheng ren* (lit., people from within the province)” and “*waisheng ren* (lit., people from outside the province)” (Brown 2004:9).

[I know that] Chiang Kai-shek had a dispute with Mao Zedong and they were fighting and they came over to Taiwan and then [Chiang] never went back. I know Taiwan was mad and didn't want to be seen or associated with China. I think they left the UN [United Nations] at one point and now they regret it because they want to be recognised as a country.

— Kendrick, age 19

Prior to the formation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP; 民主進步黨) in 1986, assertions of an independent Taiwanese identity were violently suppressed since the KMT regime understood its refuge in Taiwan as only temporary and continued to maintain its claims to China. One noteworthy example is the “February 28th Incident” (2:28 Incident; 二二八事件) of 1947 (Lee 2005:17), an early collective sociopolitical experience that confirmed the unmistakable presence of anti-KMT sentiments in Taiwan. High rates of political dissatisfaction, coupled with the deepening antagonism between Taiwanese citizens and Chinese Nationalists, eventually prompted a series of local uprisings throughout the island. In order to subdue these

acts of resistance, KMT officials commanded a series of government-sponsored massacres, which culminated in the death and imprisonment of tens of thousands of Taiwanese civilians. However, even though the KMT's intent was to censor developments of pro-Taiwanese attitudes, the 2:28 Incident actually exacerbated the tensions between Mainlander and non-Mainlander — a crucial division that continues to inform modern Taiwanese independence movements today. And though initial motivations did not explicitly address issues of identity, the enduring legacies of the 2:28 Incident (specifically in regards to its anti-KMT spirit) remain significant for contemporary assertions of Taiwanese identity.

### **Taiwanese Identity Enters the Political Arena: Crafting a “New Taiwanese” National Identity and Cross-Strait Tensions (1949–Present)**

Like, if we look at the fundamental history of Taiwan we can see that it's been culturally influenced by every conqueror to ever set foot there. The culture itself is enriched by not only the natives, but [the] Chinese, Japanese, and in some parts, even Dutch. To blatantly say that the Taiwanese people are Chinese would be ignorant regardless of how the UN [United Nations] doesn't hold a seat for Taiwan ever since, I think, 1971. Taiwan definitely fits the status quo required for an independent nation.

— Ezra, age 21

The late 20th century saw broader movements for the development of an “inclusive, proud, and nationalistic” (Brown 2004:12) narrative of Taiwanese identity. Facilitated by economic and sociopolitical transformations during this time, political leaders correspondingly reconfigured Taiwan's national identity to reflect these broader changes. As a result, people began to articulate the concept of a “new Taiwanese identity” (Brown 2004:12), which attempted to differentiate itself from previous historical and political ties to China.

Government-sponsored changes that occurred throughout the late 20th century highlight the political nature of Taiwanese identity. For example, in their analysis of how individuals living in Taiwan self-identified, Ho and Liu found that there was a discernible shift during the 1990s characterised by “a secular decline in Chinese identity and a steady rise in Taiwanese identity among people on Taiwan” (2002:29). According to their results, Ho and Liu (2002) concluded that though there are subtle variations, the shift towards a Taiwanese identity prevailed across multiple demographics (e.g., ethnicity, age, educational background, gender, and partisan identity). The authors attribute these trends to political and economic transformations that occurred throughout the 1990s in Taiwan (Ho and Liu 2002). Furthermore, they argue that these “events that impacted the identity of the Taiwan people [...] are political in nature” and that “historical evidence suggest that the Taiwanese identity had its origin in politics” (Ho & Liu 2002:68).

First thing that comes to mind [when I think about Taiwanese identity] is probably the political difference between Chinese and Taiwanese. It’s an important topic to discuss but I am afraid I lack the background knowledge to make informed opinions about it. My gut feeling is that Taiwan should be recognised as its own country, but obviously I’m biased.

— Banks, age 19

I’ve gotten low-key hostility from people who say like, “You’re not Taiwanese. You’re *Chinese*.” That happened a lot last year and they would laugh at me [when I said I was Taiwanese]. I was very surprised. I didn’t think people would actually openly want to make that kind of statement like, “You’re not Taiwanese. You’re Chinese. You’re basically us. Taiwan doesn’t exist.” I didn’t know what to say.

Through top-down political mobilisation and collective social action, Taiwanese national identity was redefined throughout the late 20th and early 21st century. The newly emerging Taiwanese identity was legitimised through strategic policies aimed to distinguish Taiwan from China; Lee argues that since 2000, political authorities have initiated various social and political reconstructions with the goal of establishing a distinct Taiwanese identity (2005:2). According to Lee (2005), these reconstructions attempted to legitimise de-Sinicization efforts through historical revisionism (e.g., a shift from a China-centered to a Taiwan-centered approach to history), language revitalisation (e.g., strong emphasis on local dialects, especially Taiwanese), and changes to political rhetoric (e.g., political leaders actively choosing to say Taiwan vs. Republic of China). Though my research interests do not explicitly address identity formation at the national level, these large-scale political definitions of Taiwanese identity are deeply implicated in personal constructions of identity.

The development of a collective Taiwanese consciousness accelerated in 2000 when Chen Shui-Bian (陳水扁) of the DPP Party was elected as president (Lee 2005). Chen's election symbolised a transfer of power from the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) since Chiang Kai-shek's initial arrival in Taiwan from China in 1949. There are several historically rooted differences between the KMT and DPP; however, disagreements over how cross-Strait relations should be managed and the related issue of Taiwanese independence remain the most significant sources of tension. Despite their differences, more recent research has shown that "although Taiwan's mainstream parties [KMT and DPP] clearly differ in the best strategy to de-escalate the tensions in the Taiwan Strait and to engage the mainland, they agree that the liberal constitutional state of the Republic of China

(ROC) must be protected and internationally strengthened” (Schubert 2004:535). These changing dynamics within Taiwan’s political arena support Taiwan’s position in the public imaginary as an autonomous entity that exists independent of China.

I’m just hoping that Taiwan won’t be forced to become part of China officially. For example, when people say, “Oh you’re Chinese!” — it’s like, oh cool, I can definitely understand some of their culture [like] Chinese food [and] I can also speak Mandarin. But again, to me, [Taiwan is] as much a different country as it is from Thailand or Japan.

— Vera, age 21

After months of anticipation and controversy, Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) was introduced as Taiwan’s new president on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Tsai defeated KMT candidate Eric Chu (30.9%) and third party candidate James Soong (12.8%), winning the election with 56% of the vote (Tiezzi 2016). Moreover, her victory as a candidate from the DPP Party signifies the end of eight years of KMT rule by Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) from 2008 to 2016 (Ramzy 2016). As the first female president in Taiwan and the second DPP President since the Chen administration (2000–2008), Tsai’s term in office is bound to stir up controversy and become a decisive factor for future cross-Strait relations. In fact, not long after results were announced, Chinese state-controlled media extended a warning for Taiwan to “abandon its “hallucinations” about pushing for independence, as any moves towards it would be a “poison,”” (Pomfret, Miller, and Blanchard 2016). Increasing pro-Taiwanese sentiment in Taiwan is undeniable; however, any moves towards independence by Tsai will certainly be confronted with aggressive action from the Chinese government.

I definitely feel like I relate to China and Taiwan as separate entities. China is a different country and it’s like, not related

to Taiwan *at all* in my mind.

— Vera, age 21

— — — — —

Results from two studies by Pei-te Lien further illustrate the importance of politics, specifically cross-Strait relations, for experiences of Taiwanese identity. Lien surveyed Chinese American immigrants (individuals from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) and found that “support for Taiwanese independence can be negatively associated with the ‘Chinese American’ identity while positively associated with the ‘Taiwanese American’ identity” (2008a:1397). Building off that last point, Lien’s analysis also suggests that “being socialized in Taiwan does not make a respondent more likely to self-identify as ‘Taiwanese American’ than those socialized in the US context” (2008a:1393). This second point is reinforced when Lien concludes that “homeland socialization context is significant when predicting ethnic identity choice *except for ‘Taiwanese American’ identifiers*” (2008a:1397, emphasis added). These results are consistent with findings from his other article which found that among those socialised as Taiwanese, the construction of a Taiwanese sub-ethnic identity is closely tied to transnational preoccupations about ongoing cross-Strait tensions between Taiwan and China (2008b).

The results from these two studies are particularly significant because they isolate, to a certain degree, political conditions from other factors (e.g., place of socialisation). When placed in conversation with one another, these findings reinforce the notion that not only are transnational political affairs (especially cross-Strait tensions) meaningful for individuals as general political concerns, but they are also deeply implicated in their experience and articulation of Taiwanese identity, regardless of the individual’s geographic position away from the homeland.

Do you consider yourself an immigrant?  
Could you tell me about your personal experiences,  
or any knowledge you have about your family's experience with immigration?

*I think I just remember being confused with what was happening mostly.  
I remember my mom sent me to preschool and I wouldn't  
understand what anyone was saying so I kind of was just mute.  
I had a friend who also didn't speak English  
so we would just point at things and we had a silent friendship.*  
— Shea, age 21

*I immigrated when I was very young.  
I had no sense of Taiwan and didn't miss Taiwan while I was in Canada.  
But then again, when I immigrated to the States, I was already grown up  
so there was a sense of longing for Canada, which I considered my home at the time.  
There wasn't the sense of nostalgia or longing about Taiwan  
but that's probably because I was still so young when I moved to Canada*  
— Akira, age 20

Do you identify as “Asian”?  
Why or why not?  
Are there situations in which you do,  
and situations in which you do not?

*I identify as Asian kind of like how we all identify as humans.  
I always identify as Asian, but then on a subcategory level,  
I identify as Taiwanese.*  
— Reynolds, age 22

*I think I always [identify as Asian],  
but I always specifically mention that I'm Taiwanese.  
This is when my “Taiwanese side” comes out:  
I'm proud to be Taiwanese and so I think that's why I always mention it.*  
— Karine, 21

*Yes, because Taiwan is part of Asia.  
I don't know why [I identify as Asian]...that's a hard “why” question to answer.  
I don't know; I'm just Asian.*  
— Zainah, age 20

---

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Concept of Identity and Overpowering Pan-Identities Part I: Asian Identity**

*Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return.*

— Stuart Hall (2005:446)

---

Identity, diaspora, and subjectivity are significant themes within the social sciences, with countless scholars having written on these interrelated topics. Anthropology, in particular, has dedicated extensive volumes of literature on the subject of identity. Social scientists, including anthropologists, have previously contributed to imperfect representations of “identity” as an unconditional, timeless entity that somehow operates independently of its cultural, political, and social context. However, now known for their analytical diligence and reflexivity, anthropologists have increasingly placed the concept of identity under scrutiny and in doing so, are able to alert us to some of its potential dangers; their work serves as a purposeful reminder that we must be actively critical of identity, always wary of its far-reaching implications. For example, as mentioned earlier, identities are often presented as coherent narratives; however, as prior anthropological research has consistently demonstrated, this totalizing representation of identity ignores its inherent multidimensionality and conceals its ability to transform across contexts.

In recent decades, the anthropological discipline itself has been committed to dismantling previous representations of identity, which were oftentimes ethnocentric and oversimplified. Contrary to these rigid conceptualisations, identities should instead be understood as dynamic and susceptible to external influences (Hall 2005). They are situated within specific contexts and are therefore subject to change as the individuals themselves migrate across various geographic,

political, cultural, or situational boundaries. Taiwanese identity is no exception to this phenomenon: Every single person I spoke to who identifies as Taiwanese (albeit to varying degrees, depending on the individual) currently lives, or was born in a country other than Taiwan, like Canada or the United States. As a result, the majority of those I corresponded with expressed to me that they see themselves as much more than simply *just Taiwanese*:

[I'm] a cluster of cultures. It means that I cannot be condensed down to one particular ethnicity, identity, race, or culture. I'm hesitant to pick only one term because it wouldn't be fair or accurate to say that I'm *only one thing*. I can't even say with complete confidence that I am 100% Taiwanese; and if I did say that, then I would be lying. I'd be lying because I spent most of my childhood in Canada, my adolescence in America, and basically I'm more culturally Western than Eastern. But then again, what does it even mean to be any of those things anyway? I'm personally still trying to figure that question out for myself.

— Akira, age 20

In order to sincerely engage these mechanisms of identity (as multidimensional and contingent in nature), it is worth outlining sociocultural anthropologist Melissa J. Brown's distinction between two similar concepts that are often used interchangeably when speaking of identities: "fluidity" and "changeability" (2004:16-8). The former is reimagined as the "involuntary relabeling by external sources" and the latter as "voluntary self-relabeling" (Brown 2004:17). By presenting fluidity and changeability with such dichotomous language (internal/external; voluntary/involuntary), we are introduced to notions of *recognition* and *power*. The first distinction between internal and external directs our attention to the politics of *recognition* (a vital issue that will be explored in greater detail in upcoming sections): Fluidity,

specifically its subordination to external forces, underscores the authority of outsider recognition in determinations of identity.

The second distinction between voluntary and involuntary, on the other hand, reveals certain *power dynamics* implicit in the formation of identities: Changeability, by offering the freedom of mobility, is able to emphasise the role of individual agency. Prominent sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall elaborates on this notion and suggests that “every regime of representation is a regime of power formed [...] by the fatal couplet, “power/knowledge”<sup>7</sup>” (2005:446). In particular, the degree to which identities are fluid or changeable depends on both the power position of the identity and of the individual; and often the struggle between internal and external recognition.

If I say [I’m] Taiwanese, some people are like, “What?”  
[They would] start asking me questions [and] I don’t want to  
start a heated debate, especially with Mainland China people.  
So I usually avoid [making that distinction] so I don’t start  
shit [...] As long as I know myself [that] Taiwan is Taiwan,  
that’s all that matters.

— Aaliyah, age 21

Not only are these concepts productive in terms of challenging the perceived boundaries of identity, but they also demonstrate the significance of recognition and power — both of which are intimately associated with each other and with processes of identity formation. Moreover, this differentiation between fluidity and changeability is crucial because they are often employed as rhetorical strategies to counteract dominant portrayals of identity as inflexible or internally consistent.

---

<sup>7</sup> Though I do not expand upon these notions in much detail in my work, the original quote references Foucault and his classic works on the relationship between power and knowledge.

Lastly, Brown extends her reinterpretation of identity as fluid and changeable by defining another useful term — “variability” — as “the *content* of an individual’s or group’s identity” (2004:17). To synthesise these three terms, Brown states: “When the content of an identity varies [*variability*], individuals may have the opportunity to change their identity labels [*changeability*] and at the same time, the classification border dividing that identity from others may shift [*fluidity*]” (2004:18). This summary reinforces the fact that though they may be presented separately to promote deeper analysis, these concepts are actually deeply entangled with one another and must be understood in terms of their interdependent relationship.

I think being an immigrant and living in so many distinct situations just allowed me to realise that you don’t have to have just one identity. As a mix of Canadian and Taiwanese, it allowed me to see things from both sides.

When I’m in Taiwan, I don’t feel like I’m the same as the locals there because I grew up in a North American kind of culture. When I’m in Canada, I still have my Taiwanese values so I’m not exactly like the people here too [...] I think immigrating, moving around, and living in so many places confuses my Taiwanese identity. The values that I have are a mixture of Taiwanese and Canadian, so it’s hard to identify with only one. I have no idea...I guess [I’m] a bit of both!

— Karine, age 21

For example, Karine’s experiences presented above showcase the *fluid, changeable, and variable* nature of her identity; she describes her experiences with immigration, namely living in multiple locations, as enabling her to realise her Taiwanese identity was flexible and adaptable. It is not fixed in a specific geographic location, nor does it function independently of Karine’s Canadian identity. Despite aforementioned representations of identity as homogenous or

resistant to change, Karine's identity proved to be fluid, changeable, and variable. Karine, in response to *involuntary relabeling by external sources*, was able to engage in various forms of *voluntary self-relabeling* to refashion the content of her identity to match her transnational background.

According to Carole Boyce-Davies, "the re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration [...] It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (1994:3). Although Boyce-Davies is speaking specifically about Black women's migratory identities, her connections between place, experience, negotiations and re-negotiations of identity pertain to *all* diasporic communities, including the Taiwanese. In the context of Boyce-Davies research, she uses cross-cultural literary analysis to discover the convergences in geographies, migratory experiences, and identity — arguing that these connections are not bound in seamless narratives, but rather involve continual negotiation and re-negotiation. Similarly, the majority of those I interviewed believed their transnational experiences to be vital when thinking about their identity. As seen in the example of Karine, those I spoke with expressed to me that the terms of their Taiwanese identity often shift as they travel across geographic boundaries. During these migrations, Taiwanese identity is subjected to various historical, political, and cultural contexts; and in turn, these external forces compel the individual to negotiate and re-negotiate their subjective meanings of Taiwanese identity means to them.

### **Asian Identity**

*The terms that we use to name ourselves [...] carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation.*

— Carole Boyce-Davies (1994:5)

— — — — —

Boyce-Davies' narrative of dispossession and representation are revealed in the individual struggles both *with* and *against* powerful labels. Pan-ethnic identities, such as "Asian" or "Asian American," imply "the presence of a unitary, undifferentiated identity" (Lien 2008b:157) and are often externally imposed by forces beyond individual control. For example, Boyce-Davies notes that in the context of "African-American" identity, "African," is a term based on another misnaming and an attempt to create a monolithic construction out of a diverse continent of peoples, cultures, nations, and experiences" (1994:9). According to those I interviewed, the term "Asian" (or Asian followed by a modifier, like "Asian American" or "Asian Canadian"), were labels commonly placed onto them by outsiders — and like "African" identity, can be considered by many to be another externally imposed misnaming that subordinates their Taiwanese identity to a less prominent position.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, a key thinker in the field of identity politics, expresses some philosophical concerns with "identity," arguing that it has the potential "to suggest that everyone of a certain identity is in some strong sense *idem*, i.e., the same, when, in fact, most groups are internally quite heterogenous" (2006:15). Appiah's hesitance is able to expose a major limitation implicated in ascriptions of identity, both to oneself and to others, and that is the tendency for specific identities to homogenise their subjects. As the following sections will attempt to delineate, Asian identity is undoubtedly subject to this criticism.

I feel like, me included, that a lot of people say Asia as just the East Asian countries. Then with India, Pakistan, or other South Asian countries, people will just say the country [rather than refer to them as Asia]. I definitely think like that too, even though I know it's wrong [...] I guess "Asian," to me, is an all-encompassing thing and there's many different cultures within it [...] It doesn't necessarily refer to a certain culture;

it's just very broad and encompassing.

— Zainah, age 21

Imposing a monolithic racial Asian identity not only obscures myriad differences (e.g., historical, political, linguistic, etc.) between ethnicities (e.g., Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Indian, etc.), but it also has the potential to distort both public and personal understandings of what it means to belong to those sub-identities. This struggle between internal and external identification can have a profound influence on how we understand our identities. Charles Taylor, an academic philosopher, expands upon this notion with what he described in a renowned essay as “the politics of recognition” (1994). His thesis is rooted in the idea that our identities, as products of ongoing negotiation and dialogue with the outside world, “[are] partly shaped by recognition or its absence [“nonrecognition”], [and] often by the *mis*recognition of others” (1994:25). Following Taylor’s arguments, Asian identity can be considered a form of misrecognition — or even *non*recognition for those who self-identify as Taiwanese: By “[condensing] ethnic and national groups into an amorphous lump, flattening their differences into a geographical continent” (Ho 2015:12), the Asian label eclipses internal diversities and thus becomes an inadequate representation for self-identified Taiwanese.

I think Asian is a category [but] Taiwanese is just a more specific way of describing my own identity. Well, I don't think [Asian] is necessarily an insufficient label but it's just a very general term because there are so many types of Asians. It's more like a category as defined by outsiders, whereas Taiwanese is more like my own definition of myself.

— Karine, age 21

According to Taylor, this type of “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”

(1994:25). Overarching narratives of Asian identity fail to recognise internal diversity and consequently, as Taylor would argue, have the power to invalidate the lived experiences of those who may prefer a more specific ethnic identity. Moreover, these homogenising categories “not only, in Said’s “Orientalist” sense, [construct us] as different and other [but] they [have] the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as “Other”” (Hall 2005:445-6). And because they have the capacity to force us to filter our realities through the lens of the unfamiliar “Other,” Hall contends that these externally imposed identities and the forms of knowledge they create are, in fact, “*internal*, not external” (2005:446, emphasis added). Therefore, these processes of internalisation are able to work alongside misrecognition and nonrecognition to engender anxieties about the authenticity, legitimacy, and value of various sub-ethnicities — especially those that do not adhere to easily accessible definitions of what it means to be “Asian”.

I think I prefer identifying myself as Taiwanese just because there are so many different types of Asian cultures. So I guess [I would identify myself as Taiwanese] just to be more specific.

— Shea, age 21

For example, Aaliyah — a Taiwanese Canadian student who, along with the rest of her family, immigrated to Canada from Taiwan as a young child — alludes to the expectations that come along with the Asian label as she speaks to me about her experiences with immigration:

I feel like there’s a bigger pressure here not to act *too* Asian because a lot of Caucasians here make fun of Asians [...] I don’t care as much not but I still try not to act “too Asian” in front of white people, ‘cause I feel like they won’t take me seriously otherwise. I guess over time, by rejecting [my Asian identity], I didn’t think about relating to my Asian side anymore.

— Aaliyah, age 21

In the quote above, Aaliyah describes the pressure she feels not to act “too Asian” around her White counterparts, fearing she won’t be taken seriously otherwise. Aaliyah, like those around her, understands the stereotypes associated with acting “too Asian” and hopes not to validate them through her behaviour. This pressure not to act “too Asian” is familiar to many and is fundamentally predicated upon destructive stereotypes that continue to pervade the society we live in today. In Aaliyah’s case, the Asian label (and the strings attached to it) caused her to reject that side of herself entirely. Kendrick — a Taiwanese American sophomore at UNC — reiterates Aaliyah’s concerns as he vents to me about his experiences with having the “Asian” label imposed onto him:

I hate when people use the word “Asian” because in our society, people think of us as obedient and fit us into this stereotype and box. I feel like sometimes, it’s a neutral statement; but other times, it has a negative connotation [...] Me being born Asian doesn’t necessarily mean that I will follow all these stereotypes. It’s so annoying. [People will say to me] like, “Oh! I’m surprised you’re not doing STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math]!” That word [Asian] just makes me feel like, “Okay yeah, but I’m also a human being.”

— Kendrick, age 19

Kendrick spoke to me with raw emotion — his frustration with these pervasive stereotypes was almost tangible but I could do nothing to help except to affirm his experiences with stories of my own. Kendrick’s experience, along with those of countless others, serves as a useful reminder of some of the problematic features of identity.

— — — — —

For others, however, the Asian label — along with the stereotypes that it is associated with — is not met with such resistance:

Yes [I identify as Asian] because my family is from Asia and I was raised with Asian values and tradition to some extent.

— Deandra, age 24

Yes, I am Asian because I am half-Chinese by blood [and] half-Taiwanese by nationality. I look Asian. I was raised “Asian” in the sense that I studied a lot, played piano, violin, had Asian discipline and stuff.

— Leilani, age 30

Others, like Akira, echoed Deandra’s response above and told me that they consider Asian identity to constitute an integral part of their lives:

Yes [I identify as Asian] because I *am* Asian. I’m from Asia; I look Asian; I’ve been told all my life that I’m Asian. I never fought against it because it’s just something that’s been prescribed upon me since forever.

— Akira, age 20

The role of external recognition remains significant though, even in cases where the individual has accepted the label and uses it to refer to him or herself. For Akira, this was the result of having been told all her life that she was, without question, Asian.

Later in our conversations, as she reflected on her childhood and adolescence, Akira spoke in more detail about her memories of being continually reminded of her Asian identity:

I never had a moment where I realized suddenly I was “Asian,” just because I grew up around a bunch of Asian people so I never had any reason to feel that different. But moving to North Carolina, other people prescribe that upon

me and I ended up sticking out as “The Asian girl” at my high school because there were so few people like me; because I looked “different” from the rest of the population, like white or black people, which were the predominant groups in the town I moved to. And like, yeah, it’s accurate — but it’s also dehumanising to be characterised solely based on [my] race or ethnicity, you know?

— Akira, age 20

Under these conditions, Taiwanese identity is relegated to the sidelines and remains unrecognised by society. Vera, in the excerpt below, elaborated on Akira’s experiences with misrecognition and underscores the need for specificity when referencing her identity:

Often, people were like, “Oh — you’re that Asian girl!” I think I get that more in communities where there are fewer Asians, so I guess it’s more understandable. But yeah, I think I would be a lot happier if people were like, “Oh — you’re that *Taiwanese* girl!” It doesn’t bother me a significant amount [...] unless they use it in a negative way.

— Vera, age 21

Akira concludes our conversation by bringing up an interesting point about the ways she was forced to reckon with her identity during her childhood and adolescence, specifically in relation to the importance of representation:

When I was young, I never had to fill out any form that asked me what my race or ethnicity was. But being in high school — being more independent from my parents and being able to fill out college applications, SAT forms, and general population data and all that — they always ask you these things, so I would actively have to put myself down as Asian. That’s something I don’t think most people think about but it

plays such a large role on your identity. You have these forms and you have to choose one that best fits yourself based on the choices they give you.

— Akira, age 20

When her preferred identity (Taiwanese) was not represented in the options available to her, Akira had no choice but to opt for the next-best option (Asian) — even if it meant she had to sacrifice a part of herself in doing so.

— — — — —

Despite its ambiguity and inconsistencies, Asian identity is nevertheless able to present radical possibilities for political organisation and community formation; it succeeds in establishing feelings of solidarity and enables new understandings of shared experiences with immigration, discrimination, and other challenges associated with being a minority in the United States (Ho 2015:13-5). With this in mind, both the possibilities and limitations of “Asian” identity should be acknowledged; and moreover, they should be understood in conjunction with one another and not on separate terms.

Do you identify as “Chinese”?  
Why or why not?  
Are there situations in which you do,  
and situations in which you do not?

*I prefer identifying myself as Taiwanese because  
even though a lot of people think China, or people from China  
are similar [to Taiwan], I find they actually aren't.*  
— Shea, age 21

*I won't actively identify myself as Chinese but if someone mentions it with no malintent,  
then I won't correct them if the situation doesn't call for it.*  
— Ezra, age 21

*No, never — I always say that I'm Taiwanese.  
With Taiwan's whole conflict with China,  
I disagree with people when they say that Taiwan is a part of China.  
I believe that Taiwanese and Chinese people have very different values  
...and that makes us different!*  
— Karine, age 21

Do you identify as “Taiwanese”?  
Why or why not?  
Are there situations in which you do,  
and situations in which you do not?

*Yeah and they usually think I'm saying “Thai,” [not Taiwanese].  
Well, it depends on how I feel. For the most part though, I say Taiwanese.  
But then people are like, “You mean Chinese?”  
And I just say, “Yeah like, I give up. Just call it whatever you want.”*  
— Aaliyah, age 21

*I identify as Taiwanese but I'm not like all in your face about it.  
Unless I'm getting a gun pointed to my head, then no,  
[there aren't any situations where I wouldn't identify as Taiwanese].*  
— Reynolds, age 22

*I think I'd always say that I identify as Taiwanese.  
Taiwan in my mind is just...it's home to me.  
I think that if I were to go to China, it's like a foreign place, you know?  
When I fly to Taiwan, I go outside, feel the humidity, and it's like,  
“I'm here. I'm back home.”*  
— Vera, age 21

---

CHAPTER THREE

**Overpowering Pan-Identities Part II: Chinese Identity**

*Objectively and subjectively, Taiwan's relationship with the Chinese mainland has never been consistent. Neither have the two ever been well integrated.*

—Thomas Gold (1993:169)

---

The problematic features of pan-ethnic labels are not limited to pan-Asian identity and can manifest in other identities. For example, Lien observes: “Although, in the context of Asian American studies, the term ‘Chinese American’ is an ethnic-specific rather than a pan-ethnic expression, it may be considered a pan-ethnic label when compared to other more specific labels such as ‘Taiwanese American’” (Lien 2008a:1385-6). The potential for the ‘Chinese American’ label to lose its ethnic-specificity is evident in public treatment of Taiwanese and Chinese identity as essentially synonymous; however, it is important to note that many self-identified Taiwanese individuals do not understand their identity in these terms. Rather, they acknowledge the ways these two terms diverge and instead opt for an identity that engages Taiwan on its own terms, independent from China. Therefore, it is important to understand the conflation of Taiwanese and Chinese identities as a potentially dangerous process that can actually disempower claims to a distinct Taiwanese identity.

I feel like the thought most people have at first [when I tell them I'm Taiwanese] is that Taiwan is the same as China; so whenever I meet someone Taiwanese, there's an immediate connection. Honestly, I've gotten used to [getting misrecognised] because people pretty much assume every Asian person is Chinese.

— Zainah, age 21

---

There currently exists a vast array of literature on transnationalism, diaspora, migration, and immigration, with assorted groups of scholars having published innumerable works interpreting and reinterpreting these themes. Although international migration is often expected to erase established borders between nations and diminish the relative importance of nation-based identities, this is not necessarily the case for Taiwanese pursuits of identity. As mentioned earlier, refusing to submit to the political or cultural boundaries established under Chinese hegemony is often seen as a critical strategy that fuels transnational formations of an independent Taiwanese identity (Lien 2008ab).

### **Liminality**

Originally coined by Arnold van Gennep in the context of *rites de passage*, the concept of “liminality” was later extended by Victor Turner, an eminent symbolic anthropologist, in relation to his own ethnographic research on Ndembu rituals in Zambia. According to Turner, “the attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since the condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in a cultural space” (1969:95). In the context of my own research, I plan to utilise the concept of liminality first as a theoretical foundation to better understand the disputed nature of Taiwanese identity and second, as a way to describe the subjective experiences of being Taiwanese.

Due to Taiwan’s uncertain status as a sovereign nation-state in relation to China, Taiwanese identity inhabits a conceptual space resembling the one described above: “One of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion to all the customary categories” (Turner 1967:97). Like liminal *personae*, transnational Taiwanese subjects “are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1967:96) — no longer Taiwanese under Chinese or Asian hegemony; not yet

American under White hegemony, but somewhere in-between. Therefore, Taiwanese subjects and Taiwanese identity itself can both be regarded as in transition, “neither here nor there; they are *betwixt and between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969:95, emphasis added).

For example, Shea — a Taiwanese Canadian college student — spoke to extensively about some of the ambiguous, “in-transition” qualities that define the experiences of liminal personae:

Moving from Taiwan to Canada at a young age, I kind of lost touch with my culture in a way since it’s so different living in Canada due to different traditions and culture here. But I can’t 100% classify myself as a Canadian either because my roots are still Taiwanese.

— Shea, age 21

As outlined in chapter two, identities should be conceptualised as both fluid and changeable — susceptible to internal and external influences, specifically to forces of recognition and power. In the case of Shea’s own personal experiences, her awareness of her liminal identity was almost always due to prompts from an external source:

I never really thought about it much before. I think it’s something that only comes up when someone asks me where I’m from because I don’t know if I should say I’m Canadian, or Canadian but also Taiwanese. It’s kind of confusing for me so I guess I’ll just settle with the fact that I’m a little bit of both.

— Shea, age 21

As a result of outsiders, Shea reconciles this dissonance between her various nationalities by accepting them all as valid facets of personal identity, rather than drawing stark definitional boundaries between them.

When I asked Deandra — an American-born Taiwanese I met during one of my visits back home to Taiwan — about whether she identifies as “Chinese” or not, she told me:

No, [I don’t identify as Chinese]. I visited China for the first time when I was 18-years-old and I was really surprised by how different the culture is there. It was kind of an alienating experience and now I know there are actually a lot of really jarring dissimilarities between the PRC [People’s Republic of China] and ROC [Republic of China].

— Deandra, age 24

Later in our conversations, she elaborated on her experiences with misrecognition, specifically when others wrongly identify her as Chinese:

I get annoyed when people think I’m from China just because there’s such a difference between the cultures of Taiwan and China. Mislabelling doesn’t really bother me that much, I guess. I usually correct them and that’s the end of it.

— Deandra, age 24

Though it causes her a certain degree of frustration, the treatment of Taiwanese and Chinese identity as a unified entity is not something that Deandra takes to heart; however, for many others I spoke with, this type of misrecognition (and at times even total nonrecognition) of their Taiwanese identity, can inflict serious harm to their self-perception as distinctly *Taiwanese* subjects — and not Chinese.

Take, for instance, what Akira described to me as her personal journey towards discovering her Taiwanese identity as something separate from China:

Honestly, it took me a while to really start distinguishing between [Taiwanese and Chinese identity]. But now, I only say that I'm Taiwanese and I identify with that strongly. When people ask me about my ethnicity, I say I'm Taiwanese. If they say something like, "Oh, is that Chinese?" then I will actively fight them on that. If someone equates China with Taiwan, then yeah, I will fight them on that.

— Akira, age 20

I was surprised upon learning that Akira had not always differentiated between Taiwan and China when referring to her identity. With my curiosity piqued, I was eager to find out more about why this was the case. She hesitated for a moment, pausing to reflect on the question I had just asked before recounting some of her childhood memories:

Well, when I was younger, I didn't have a very strong sense of what Taiwan was; I spent little time there, no formative memories there, and would only visit during summers — so it was never a huge part of my identity. I would always just simplify myself and say that I was Chinese because it was a lot of work to explain the differences between them for people that don't know about Taiwan.

— Akira, age 20

Akira then proceeded to tell me about a summer she spent volunteering in Taiwan — or what she perceives to be the turning point in her life when the distinction between Taiwan and China was finally solidified:

When I went back to Taiwan for a service trip [during] my junior year of high school, I really started to bond with my motherland, see what Taiwan really is, and come to appreciate that. [That's when] I started to see Taiwan as

really separate from China, especially since at that point in my life I had been to China and I just knew that they were not the same thing.

— Akira, age 20

She contrasted her extended stay in Taiwan with the time she spent in China, arguing that the many divergences between the two were what pushed her to reclaim her Taiwanese identity:

When I went to China, I just didn't feel at home and couldn't identify with the people around me. To me, Taiwan and China are just not synonymous with one another [...] The difference is stark, like, they're two completely different countries. In terms of culture, economy, politics, and even demographics — Taiwan and China are just distinct. I mean, we have a whole different culture that is not the same as Chinese culture and people don't seem to realise that. I will never refer to Taiwan as ROC [Republic of China].

— Akira, age 20

— — — — —

The potential for Taiwanese identity to become subsumed under Asian, or even Chinese identity, implicate several dimensions of power that determine which identities are recognised as legitimate and valuable. According to Gold, “Taiwan’s economy, polity, and culture all evolved under [...] a triple Chinese shadow” (Gold 1993:169). Specifically, he identifies “three shadows” as reinforcing Taiwan’s peripheral position and Chinese dominance over Taiwanese identity: First, the geographic shadow of Mainland China; second, the shadow of the Nationalist (KMT) Party and their prospects of unification; and finally, the shadow of the Communist Party and their prolonged influence in Taiwan (1993:169-72). Though Taiwan may not necessarily be positioned under these specific “shadows,” it is clear that its ambiguous geographic political,

economic, and cultural relationship to China constitutes an inevitable challenge for those attempting to form an independent Taiwanese identity.

I don't want to make that distinction [between Taiwan and China] in front of people from Mainland China. Usually with others, I am totally fine with saying [I'm] Taiwanese. I won't call myself Taiwanese in front of Mainlanders; I will just say, "Yeah I was born in Taiwan." I won't say, "Yeah, I'm Taiwanese."

— Aaliyah, age 21

Every time someone asks me what nationality I am, I have to say Taiwanese. Or if they're like, "Oh, are you Chinese?" I'd be like, "No, I'm *Taiwanese*!" I would always correct people because that's what I've always done growing up, like, my parents would always correct people too.

— Zainah, age 21

Thus, the development of "pan-Chineseness" has the potential to work in conjunction with "pan-Asianness" to further invalidate claims to a distinct Taiwanese identity (Lien 2008a:1386). In this case, the hegemonic position China holds within the geopolitical sphere contributes to the displacement, or in Taylor's terms, the nonrecognition of Taiwanese identity under Chinese identity. Although this process seems inconsistent with the disempowered positions both identities (Taiwanese and Chinese) occupy under the larger Asian designation, it is representative of how the power and meanings of identities undergo perpetual shifts as they navigate different political, cultural, or historical landscapes.

I've been in situations where I've tried to explain [the difference between Taiwan and China] but people still assume that it's part of China. They'll be like, "Where are

you from?” And I’ll be like, “I’m from Taiwan; I speak Mandarin,” and I think they might get confused that maybe Taiwan’s a part of China or something? Or they get it confused with Thailand, which is a completely different country! Yeah I would say that most people I encounter don’t [know the difference between Taiwan and China].

— Vera, age 21

— — — — —

Interestingly enough, however, the PRC’s persistent denial of Taiwan’s existence as a sovereign nation-state, along with their imposition of pan-Chinese identity can actually bolster claims of Taiwanese nationalism; some argue that it is precisely these threats of cross-Strait violence that consolidate assertions of an independent Taiwanese identity.<sup>8</sup> This seemingly contradictory process was evident in Lien’s studies of political identities, where he found a strengthened transnational Taiwanese identity among those who supported Taiwanese independence (2008ab). By rejecting Chinese hegemony and enacting a strategy of resistance based on ‘difference’, individuals are able to juxtapose Taiwan with China and facilitate the construction of disparate identities.

Some Chinese people will be like, “Taiwan’s part of China.” I might not try to argue with them but I would still say that I was Taiwanese and try to make [them understand] the difference between Taiwanese and Chinese [...] The difference is important to me.

— Vera, age 21

You know, I’m not like, a Taiwanese nationalist or anything — I don’t identify as Taiwanese because of nationalist

---

<sup>8</sup> See Kang and Yang 2011 as an example.

concerns. At the same time though, my identity is definitely marked, or I guess I should say it's defined by this difference [between Taiwan and China].

— Akira, age 20

Another interesting phenomenon worthy of mention is the selective treatment of Taiwan as distinct from China. Though most scholars refer to Taiwan and China separately and acknowledge their geographic boundaries, they continue to define Taiwanese identity as a subcategory of Chinese identity.<sup>9</sup> By assuming a unified Chinese identity that does not differentiate Taiwan from China, authors are further accentuating the indeterminacy of Taiwan's position in relation to China and contributing to the misrecognition of Taiwanese subjects

I honestly think that truthfully, from the bottom of my heart, if you put me beside a Chinese-born individual, I can list to you all the differences [between us] 'till the sun goes down. There's no animosity though — like, I think a lot of people get that part misunderstood.

We don't hate Chinese people; that's not the reason why we want to disassociate ourselves from them. We disassociate ourselves because if we don't, we get brushed with the same prejudice, like the one the rest of the world perceives of us. *We strongly object because we want to be recognised as an individual who possesses thoughts and values and ideas — not just an appendage to a larger being.*

— Ezra, age 21

---

<sup>9</sup> See Lien 2008ab as examples.

If you had to pick one term that  
best fits your personal identification  
— what would it be?

*Taiwanese American. I am **me**.*  
— Kendrick, age 19

*I would say Asian and Taiwanese are equal [in terms of my identity].  
Then Chinese...yeah, I would never consider myself that.  
If I had to pick the best term to fit my personal identification,  
I would say Taiwanese American.*  
— Zainah, age 21

*A human being.  
[I just want] to be more relatable to the rest of the world;  
to be held on the same spectrum as anyone else.*  
— Ezra, age 21

Do you have any ideas on how things should change?  
What is your vision for the future of “Taiwanese identity”?  
Or are there certain things you wish more people knew  
about Taiwanese identity or Taiwan in general?

*Just having more people recognise where Taiwan is  
and how it's distinctively different from China and Chinese culture.  
Hopefully Taiwan won't become a part of China [in the future].  
Hopefully it can get a spot in the United Nations.  
I would like it if more people knew about Taiwan and how awesome it is.*  
— Vera, age 21

*A world where people actually know the difference between  
Taiwan and China — that would save me a lot of trouble explaining.  
And a world in which they **are** different!  
A world in which Taiwan is independent and thriving! That'd be pretty sweet.  
Honestly, I just want to put Taiwan on the map because right now,  
nobody knows where it is; nobody knows anything about it.  
It'd be super cool if Taiwan established itself and became a major player in the world.*  
— Akira, age 20

— — — — —  
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS  
**Locating Taiwanese Identity “Elsewhere”**  
— — — — —

Occupying the liminal space between internal recognition and external misrecognition, or at times nonrecognition, Taiwan’s unusual geopolitical reality is positioned *elsewhere*. Carole Boyce-Davies postulates a realm of possibility for transnational migrants akin to the one offered by liminality “whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner 1967:97). Drawing from the works of various authors, she refers to this diasporic space as “elsewhere”: According to Boyce-Davies, “it is the “elsewhere” embedded in the diaspora formulation which has palpable meaning as a working formulation. For elsewhere means “consciousness...as a combination of knowing the condition of one’s existence, imagining alternatives and striving to actualize them”” (1994:14). These spaces of *elsewhere* are not firmly situated in a geographic location, but rather in an “unbounded context” (Boyce-Davies 1994:17), reflective of the contingent nature of identities in general.

When I was younger, I wanted to distance myself from my Asian side. I was like, “I just want to be American,” you know? [I wanted to] fit in with everyone else. But learning more about Asian culture just made me more appreciative of it and from that, I guess I realised that I could be just as much American as I can Taiwanese. Like, just because I’m one doesn’t mean I can’t also be the other.

— Vera, age 21

Identities that do not fit neatly within the confines of hegemonic discourse, like Taiwanese identity, are thus brought out from the periphery (to which they were previously relegated) and made visible through these dynamic conceptual spaces. Not only are they recognised in these spaces, but in the process of becoming visible, these peripheral identities are

imbued with feelings of legitimacy and value, which were once prohibited by hegemonic modes of representation. This perception of legitimacy — that your identity is something that can survive against dominant identities (like Asian or Chinese), or is simply something that *matters* — is crucial if we want to subvert established power structures and validate the experiences of Taiwanese subjects. These conceptual spaces transcend the confines of overpowering identities, and in turn, are able to yield new possibilities that allow its subjects to continually reimagine their own identities.

I guess growing up, it kind of was like “finding myself.” There were definitely times where I was like, “Oh I wish I was just completely white or American.” There were other times where I was like, “Oh I wish I was just Taiwanese” and that I grew up in Taiwan. But I think that everyone goes through that at some point in their lives, you know? Luckily, I can be happy where I am now.

— Vera, age 21

Related to Turner’s conception of liminal subjects as existing betwixt and between, in spaces devoid of structure, we should regard Taiwanese subjectivity as a “*migratory subjectivity* existing in multiple locations” (Boyce-Davies 1994:4, emphasis added). In doing so, we are able to better see how “their presences traverse all of the geographical/national boundaries instituted to keep [their] dislocations in place” (Boyce-Davies 1994:4). Moreover, Boyce-Davies’ idea of migratory subjectivity “promotes a way of assuming a subject’s agency [...] the subject is not just constituted, but in being constituted has multiple identities that do not always make for harmony” (1994:36). Similarly, in order to discern the nuances and potentialities of Taiwanese identity, its subjectivity cannot be defined or located in a fixed position; but instead, must be framed in terms of its multiple sites and contingencies. By imagining Taiwanese identity in this

way, we are also able to transcend the limits and boundaries of various overpowering identities discussed in earlier chapters.

Through the interviews I conducted with thirteen self-identified Taiwanese individuals, it is evident that the subjective experiences of Taiwanese identity are neither static nor consistent. Rather, their experiences proved to be dynamic and varied immensely between individuals; they change depending upon multiple variables, like the geographic context or the individual's personal upbringing. When we position Turner's theories in conversation with those of Boyce-Davies, we can consider Taiwanese subjects as liminal personae with migratory subjectivities, existing in betwixt and between various elsewheres. As a result, we are able to give a marginalised identity, like Taiwanese identity, a platform on which to assert and affirm its existence. Most importantly, we introduce a newfound sense of freedom to our discussions of identity, one that would have been otherwise denied under ordinary circumstances.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983 (2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. 2006). "Introduction." In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Appiah, Kwame A. 2006. "The politics of identity." *Daedalus* 135(4): 15-22.
- Boyce-Davies, Carole. 1994. "Introduction: Migratory Subjectivities: Black women's writing and the re-negotiation of identities." In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Melissa J. 2004. "What's in a Name? Culture, Identity, and the "Taiwan Problem"" and "Theory and the Politics of Reunification: Understanding Past Choices and Future Options." In *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Gold, Thomas B. 1993. "Taiwan's Quest for Identity in the Shadow of China." In *In the Shadow of China: Political Developments in Taiwan since 1949*, edited by Steve Tsang, 169-192. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 2005. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Contemporary Sociological Thought: Themes and Theories*, edited by Sean P. Hier, 443-453. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Hanchard, Michael. 1991. "Racial Consciousness and Afro-Diasporic Experiences: Antonio Gramsci Reconsidered." *Socialism and Democracy* 7(3): 83-106.
- Ho, Jennifer A. 2015. "Introduction: Ambiguous Americans" and "Ambiguous Movements and Mobile Subjectivity: Passing in between Autobiography and Fiction with Paisley Rekdal and Ruth Ozeki." In *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

- Ho, Szu-yin, and Liu, I-chou. 2002. "The Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of the Taiwan People in the 1990s." *American Asian Review* 20(2): 29-74.
- Lee, Wei-Chin. 2005. "Taiwan's Cultural Reconstruction Movement: Identity Politics and Collective Action since 2000." *Issues & Studies* 41(1): 1-51.
- Lien, Pei-te. 2008a. "Homeland origins and political identities among Chinese in Southern California." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(8): 1381-1403.
- . 2008b. "Places of socialization and (sub)ethnic identities among Asian immigrants in the US: evidence from the 2007 Chinese American Homeland Politics Survey." *Asian Ethnicity* 9(3): 151-170.
- Liu, James H., and Hilton, Denis J. 2005. "How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44: 537-556.
- Pomfret, James, Miller, Matthew, and Blanchard, Ben. 2016. "After vote, China tells Taiwan to abandon independence "hallucination"." *Reuters*, January 17.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/taiwan-election-idUSKCN0UV021>
- Ramzy, Austin. 2016. "Tsai Ing-wen Elected President of Taiwan, First Woman to Hold Office." *The New York Times*, January 16.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/world/asia/taiwan-elections.html>
- Schubert, Gunter. 2004. "Taiwan's Political Parties and National Identity: The Rise of an Overarching Consensus." *Asian Survey* 44(4): 534-554.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Tiezzi, Shannon. 2016. "It's Official: DPP's Tsai Ing-wen Is Taiwan's Next President." *The Diplomat*, January 16. <http://www.thediplomat.com/2016/01/its-official-dpps-tsai-ing-wen-is-taiwans-next-president/>

Turner, Victor. 1967. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press.

—. 1969. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Cornell University Press.