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ARTICLE



'I became a Taiwanese after I left *Taiwan*': identity shift among young immigrants in the *United States*

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ABSTRACT

Migration and transnationalism studies use variables such as migration trajectory, length of stay, and ties with origin country to examine migrant identities. Research has also found that contrary to the prediction of assimilation theory, some well-adapted migrants activate their origin country identities. Using young Taiwanese immigrants who stayed in Taiwan for most of their lives and went to the United States as a case, this article examines the mechanisms of context- and event-driven identity shift. We argue that these young adult Taiwanese immigrants – most of whom are first-generation – find that they are situated in a context where they have to 'choose' and 'perform' an identity for everyday interaction. Negative experiences with Chinese immigrants and the realization of Taiwan's marginality encouraged them to activate their homeland (Taiwan) identity. This article contributes to migration and identity literature by analysing the consequences (identity triggers and shifts) of everyday encounters and events in an immigration setting.

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KEYWORDS Assimilation; context-driven identity; event-driven identity; Taiwanese immigrants; China; transnationalism

Introduction

The concepts of assimilation and identity have been widely discussed in the fields of migration and transnationalism (Glick-Schiller 2012; Näre 2017). Assimilation implies immigrants adopting the values, cultures, and norms of the mainstream society and becoming part of it (Alba and Nee 1997; Waters and Jiménez 2005). Studies indicate that migrant identity and extent of assimilation is determined by timing of migration, immigration trajectory, length of stay, and transnational ties, among other variables. Research on transnationalism and return migration has found that migrants are likely to embrace origin country identities when they are overseas (Sutton 1992; Wessendorf 2007). Migrants do not necessarily assimilate; they may maintain

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transnational ties and identity to their origin instead. Scholars (Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1994; Zhou 1997) provide a 'segmented assimilation' perspective, showing that second-generation immigrants may cultivate strong ethnic identities in relation to their origin societies, instead of following linear patterns of assimilation.

This article acknowledges the symbiosis of assimilation and transnationalism but takes things a step further by examining the mechanisms of identity trigger and shift. We present a distinctive diaspora experience of young adult Taiwanese immigrants who have spent most of their lives in Taiwan and went to the US to study and work. While appreciating American culture and values and even choosing to become its citizens, they simultaneously activate and strengthen their Taiwanese identity based on specific contexts and events. We highlight the dynamic relations between political inclination and migrants' identity generation/shift, as well as 'performing identity' (Reynolds and Zontini 2016) in the immigration setting – where they have to address commonalities and differences with immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the marginalized international status of their home country – Taiwan (Huang et al. 2004; Tseng and Wu 2011). Emphasizing one's Taiwanese identity becomes a demarcation strategy to avoid the ethnic label of Chinese. Meanwhile, we found 1.5- and second-generation Taiwanese immigrants embrace Taiwan's cultural heritage as they experience ethnicization in America.

While there has been a noticeable trend of identity indigenization among young people in Taiwan, we argue that their identity performing strategies are fluid and situational when they are overseas. Echoing Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism', which focuses on everyday representations of nationhood, our findings draw on immigrants' everyday experience to understand how aspirations for the American dream coexist, if not mutually reinforce, the seemingly parochial insistence of performing their origin identity. It also highlights that a blurring partisan divide among Taiwanese immigrants makes context and event-driven identity shift in the receiving society possible. The aims of this article are to examine under what circumstances and through which mechanisms Taiwanese youth presented and performed their nationhood/Taiwanese identity vis-a-vis an ethnic Chinese one.

Literature review

Beyond assimilation theory and transnationalism

Researchers on migration and identity are interested in how and why immigrants culturally assimilate into their host societies (Grajzl, Eastwood, and Dimitrova-Grajzl 2018; Waldinger 2017; Waters and Jiménez 2005). Other scholars (Drouhot and Nee 2019; Rumbaut 1994) have also identified factors

that directly or indirectly determine assimilation outcomes, including migration timing, length of migration, transnational ties, socio-economic and legal status, cultural difference, and so on. On the other hand, transnationalism studies stress the persistence of trans-border social relations, economic transaction, kinship ties, and mobility among migrants (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2002; Levitt 2001; Vertovec 2009). For example, research has discussed the continuing involvement of immigrants with politics in their home countries, and how such identities have led to intra-ethnic conflict or symbolic violence between overseas Taiwanese and PRC-Chinese (Tseng 2002).

This article focuses on the activation and situational performance of national identity, which implies a political allegiance that is more exclusive than ethnic or linguistic commonality. National identity is a shared sense of belonging to a political community, which trumps belonging to a specific political party; precisely because of its exclusiveness and connections with values and emotions, national identity tends to be more political than other identities.

Identity is a dialectical process involving internal self-identification and external outsider ascriptions (Espiritu 1992), which influences ethnic boundary making and unmaking strategies (Wimmer 2013). In an immigration setting, Taiwanese may be categorized as a subset of 'the Chinese' (PRC-Chinese, Hongkongers, Singaporeans, etc.) (Ang 2001, 2014; Ong 1999). People may identify themselves as Chinese culturally, but choose Taiwanese as their national identity. In some circumstances, they may prioritize one label over the other.

Scholars now agree that assimilation and identification with origin country are not mutually exclusive and that identities are situational (Waters 1990). Identities and ethnic boundaries are under constant negotiation and revision by in-group members (Reyes 2017). People may expand their identity boundaries (from Taiwanese to ethnic Chinese or Taiwanese American) out of strategic concerns in specific contexts, while contracting the boundaries (from ethnic Chinese to Taiwanese) to highlight different values and benefits associated with a nationality, or to avoid being seen as belonging to the same category as another group (e.g. PRC-Chinese) (Li 2020). To understand why immigrants perform an identity in specific ways, we examine identity shift based on daily experiences, practices, and interaction with other groups. We highlight the reasons and contexts in which young Taiwanese immigrants perform their homeland identity vis-à-vis a 'mistaken' Chinese one. Within the literature of transnationalism, the case of Taiwanese youth is theoretically interesting in that they are undergoing an 'identity-triggering' process, revealing an intra-ethnic tension among the broader 'Chinese' category. Taiwan's young migrants do not simply give up or carry over the original country's identity when migrating to another country, but they undergo

a negotiating process with another label/identity (an ethnic Chinese or PRC-Chinese). The case helps us rethink the meaning of transnationalism which is not merely about the extent to which one holds the transnational ties to his/her country of origin. It can also involve one's learning and navigating process pertaining to the meanings/consequences of certain identity after encountering another group and specific events.

A context- and event-driven focus

Identities, as Stuart Hall (1996, 6) wrote, 'are ... point[s] of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us'. It is less a matter of 'being', but more about 'becoming'. Instead of seeing identity as comprising different categories, we should focus on the 'category of practice' (Brubaker 2015, 129) which varies in different contexts and stages of the life course. In addition to timing of migration, migrant's socio-economic status, visa types, etc., which all contribute to the formation and decline of national or ethnic identities, this article takes a further step by examining the reasons and mechanisms of identity trigger and shift, particularly in terms of group relations.

Portes and Zhou (1993) and Rumbaut (1994) have found that contextual factors such as the presence or absence of racial discrimination experience, the location in or away from inner-city areas, and the presence or absence of a co-ethnic community, all affect the way second-generation immigrants define their identities. In a receiving country where immigrants are seen as 'other' or 'foreigner', national identities, such as Taiwanese, may become a secondary identifier similar to that of an 'ethnic Chinese', 'Asian', or 'outsider' identity. Yet, political ambiguity back home and intra-ethnic conflict can cause fluctuations in origin country identities, which can be activated once they encounter certain events or have specific experiences where the importance of the Taiwanese label emerges.

The focus on immigrants' everyday experiences, contexts, and events contributes to the research on identity shift and assimilation outcome. Immigration setting plays a critical role. With more chances of interacting with different groups, the attachment to origin country may be invoked, transformed, and contested. Identity is not merely a question of positional difference; it is also closely linked to the meanings and practices of diasporic experiences.

Taiwanese immigrants find it necessary to 'choose' or 'perform' their identity in everyday life, yet identity is flexible and strategic. We attribute such fluidity to generational factors because elder immigrants are more politically divided. Identity is not 'fixed' but is always changing based on context (Laoire 2016). We highlight that identity activation and shift happen when Taiwanese immigrants face practical considerations and power

disparities regarding identity labels. Specific contexts and events may determine which of a person's identities are appropriate and whether they should be strategically highlighted or hidden for situational reasons.

Data and methods

The US is the largest destination of Taiwan's post-war emigrants, making up fifty-five percent of overseas Taiwanese as of 2000. As of 2018–2019, Taiwan represented the seventh largest source of international students. In the 2010 US Census, around 230,000 people identified themselves as 'Taiwanese American', representing one percent of the Asian population. Since student status has been the primary channel through which Taiwanese arrived, it profoundly shaped their economic and political profile. On average, Taiwanese Americans had higher per capita income than Asian and non-Asian Americans (Lien and Harvie 2018). Typical first-generation Taiwanese Americans worked in the middle-class professions of engineering, academics, or entrepreneurship after finishing their studies. They tended to be 'more educated, affluent, and suburban than other Chinese', neatly fitting into the myth of 'model minority' (Chen 2008, 23).

The first author spent one year (2018–2019) as a visiting scholar at a university on the East Coast. The city (referred to as 'Atlantis' hereafter) was a magnet for international students and professionals because of its leading position in higher education and the biomedical industry. He conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-nine respondents. The interview guideline asked about family background, migratory history, everyday experiences with different groups, and identity change.

Without a complete list of Atlantis-based Taiwanese which would allow for random sampling, interviewees could only be recruited via personal connection. Most of the interviewees were selected by purposive and snowball sampling, starting with active members of student associations with whom he had prior connection. The sample is biased in that it does not include immigrants who had deliberately assimilated into the American mainstream society by avoiding 'ethnic' events and those who exclusively joined the associations organized by PRC-Chinese out of career and ideological considerations.

In addition to interviews, the first author also held a focus group session at Café Philo@Atlantis, a periodic gathering among Taiwanese with featured speakers and opinion exchanges, which attracted forty-plus participants. The event began with a short lecture on youth movements and identity politics in Taiwan and then proceeded to open discussion, with questions regarding diasporic experiences in the US and their interactions with different groups. A focus group was adopted to provide a more communicative setting where participants could express their thoughts freely. Some interviewees were also recruited on that occasion.

The primary target of this study was young adult immigrants (under 40 years old). To draw a reference point, we also included three senior immigrants, whose life stories provided a contrast to their younger counterparts. Sixteen interviewees were recent immigrants who came to the US for graduate study or work, or as accompanying spouses. Four were the so-called '1.5-generation', meaning that they were born in Taiwan but immigrated to the US at an early age, while another six were born in the US (second-generation). Some US-born interviewees received college education in Taiwan before migrating to the US, while others' experience with Taiwan was limited to occasional family visits. All the young migrants were born between 1980 and 1997 and were aged 22 to 39 at the time of the interviews and they were equally divided in terms of gender. The 1.5-generation and second-generation interviewees had obtained American citizenship and their average duration of stay in the US was 17.2 years. By contrast, more recent immigrants (the average years were 4.4) held either student or work visas and many were applying for permanent residency. In short, our sample is comprised of two groups: recent migrants ($n = 16$) and established ones (1.5-generation and second-generation migrants, $n = 10$). The overseas Taiwanese group is not homogenous, and it is why we would like to include migrants of different generational backgrounds as a comparison, to examine the importance of contexts, mechanisms, and events.

We used both inductive and thematic coding to create codes based on a theoretical framework that focuses on participants' perceptions of themselves as overseas Taiwanese and their interaction experience with another out-group (PRC-Chinese) and Americans. We coded keywords such as identity or identification, boundary, ideology, meaning, China, Mainlander, Taiwanese, among others.

Youth and Taiwanese identity: at home and abroad

Survey studies on Taiwan-based respondents have indicated growing indigenous identification and less emotional attachment to China among the younger generation, especially for those born after 1980 (Rigger 2016; Wu and Li 2019). Le Pesant (2011) found that Taiwanese who were born in the 1980s typically rejected the pre-existing Islander (*benshengren*)/Mainlander (*waishengren*) classification and chose a more inclusive civil identity of being a Taiwanese. The 2014 Sunflower Movement, in particular, amounted to a dramatic explosion of youthful nationalistic attachment in the face of China's threat (Chen and Yen 2017). Huang (2019) maintains that the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) subsequent electoral victories were due to generational replacement by young voters. As 'Taiwanese' became a mainstream identity label, the term no longer refers to an ethnic category (Islanders) but becomes an all-embracing national identity.

The following table (See Table 1) presents longitudinal data from the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS):

Table 1. :Changing national identity (1995–2020) in percentage.

Year	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014	2015	2020
Taiwanese Identity (all)	32.2	55.0	58.4	69.3	73.3	75.3	77.4
Taiwanese Identity (young)	25.1	49.5	54.0	70.8	81.0	84.6	87.4
Dual Identity (all)	47.8	36.3	36.0	27.8	25.0	23.1	20.6
Dual Identity (young)	52.3	42.8	41.3	27.3	18.7	14.7	11.2
Chinese Identity (all)	20.0	8.7	5.5	2.9	1.7	1.7	2.0
Chinese Identity (young)	22.7	7.7	4.7	1.9	0.3	0.7	1.5

Note: (1) TSCS is currently administrated by Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica. The 2020 survey is the latest one and still not publicly released, while other historical data is available online (<https://cutt.ly/sm042h7>, accessed on 21 July 2021). The data was arranged by Thung-Hong Lin. (2) Young respondents were defined as people under 40. (3) The category 'dual identity' combines the choices 'I am both Taiwanese and Chinese' and 'I am both Chinese and Taiwanese'.

The above table documents the continuing ascendancy of Taiwanese identity, surpassing dual identity as the most popular choice in 2000 and reaching the three-quarter majority in 2015. Concomitantly, there was a swift decrease among China identifiers, making up less than 3% after 2010. A comparison of young cohort (under 40) and the national sample reveals an interesting thread: prior to 2010, young respondents were laggards as they trailed behind the all-age average in indigenization; afterwards, they became the trend-setters – clearly a consequence of youth mobilization both before and after the Sunflower Movement.

While TSCS data confirm the existing findings on Taiwan-based youth, what about the same age cohort who chose to become expatriates, sojourners, or settlers in the US? First, as the transnationalism literature suggests, what happened in Taiwan continues to affect immigrants abroad. The Sunflower Movement, for instance, triggered a solidarity rally in Atlantis that attracted many of our young interviewees. Secondly, the sixteen recent immigrants who left from 2007 to 2019, were not immune to the same forces that generated the spectacular growth of Taiwanese identity. In the interview, they mentioned their experiences with student protests, participation in annual LGBT pride parades, and visits to the National Human Rights Museum, all of which strengthened their Taiwanese identity prior to their departure.

If our interviewees were a representative sample, we would have projected to find 22.7 Taiwan identifiers, 2.9 dual identifiers, and 0.4 China identifier by using the 2020 TSCS distribution ratio. However, all of our respondents identified as Taiwanese at the time of interview. For several reasons, we refrain from drawing the conclusion that overseas young Taiwanese embraced Taiwanese identity more closely than their homeland-based cohort. First, TSCS uses a standardized question ('there are several ways to describe yourself, which of the following is most suitable to you?') and restricts the respondents to four prepared choices ('I am Taiwanese', 'I am Chinese', 'I am both Taiwanese and Chinese', and 'I am both Chinese and

Taiwanese'). In contrast, our in-depth interview asks respondents if they think themselves as Taiwanese and asks them to provide details about their identity choices and shifts. While Taiwan identifiers are emphatically not China identifiers, our interview procedure did not provide the dual identity choice for them. Secondly, there is no way to measure their pre-migration identity precisely; what we have collected instead is their own storytelling. As self-identity is constantly evolving, there is an inherent risk of distortion because of retrospective rationalization. While our interview did ask the respondents about their pre-migration identities, their responses are better taken with a grain of salt. The following analysis will show identity labels of 'Taiwanese' and 'Chinese' took on different meanings personally before and after their migration. Lastly, we used the snowball sampling method which may contain self-selection bias because of the difficulty in recruiting people who are not active in the immigrants' circle. Yet, we did not claim our sample to be statistically representative of overseas Taiwanese youth. Our goal is to locate those mechanisms of identity shift that are specific to the migration milieu.

With these caveats in mind, we found six interviewees who were ambivalent, if not apathetic, to the identity label of 'Taiwanese' for different reasons: Two hailed from pro-Kuomintang Mainlander families who were opposed to the political narrative of Taiwanese identity. One descendent of a Hakka family held a dim view of the Taiwanese discourse because of the association with Hoklo chauvinism. Established migrants who left Taiwan earlier also inherited the then dominant political culture. A 1.5-generation migrant who came to the US in 1989 at age 14 continued to identify as Chinese because that was what she learnt in Taiwan's junior high school. There were American-born and American-raised immigrants whose parents revealed little about their land of origin and they simply grew up as 'Chinese Americans' because it represented a conventional category.

Despite the unanimous acceptance of Taiwan identity in 2019, there still existed partisan differences. Our field work happened to coincide with the lead-up to the presidential election of January 2020, and the conversation inevitably raised the topic of preferred candidate. While the majority was inclined to the DPP Tsai Ing-wen, we did not encounter any Kuomintang Han Kuo-yu supporters. Yet, there were two admirers of Ko Wen-je (the then non-partisan Taipei City Mayor who briefly evinced his presidential intention) and one supporter of Terry Gou (the electronic tycoon and then a participant in the Kuomintang primary).

From established immigrants to recent ones: the blurring divide

In the American context, Taiwanese identity first emerged as resistance movement against the Kuomintang dictatorship and rejected the regime-imposed Chinese identity (Cheng 2017). Among the senior migrants, a political divide persisted as pro-Kuomintang immigrants tended to identify

themselves as 'Chinese' and were more likely of Mainlander origin (Lien 2008). Earlier immigrants experienced a polarized landscape divided by ethnic background and political attitude. The Taiwanese Association of America (TAA) has maintained close-knit communities throughout the country since 1970, and their solidarity was fortified by the shared experience of Kuomintang prosecution. But for latecomers who arrived in the new century, the world of Taiwanese immigrants was no longer so polarized. There was a clear trend towards less tightly knit forms of association, as newer associations were more likely to be organized around their pre-immigration traits (being alumni of a particular school, for instance) or their career interests in the host society. The membership of the older organizations stagnated as more recent immigrants increasingly met their needs via the Internet.

Many freshly arriving Taiwanese did not follow the conflict-ridden legacy. They took part in socializing activities mainly to get to know more compatriots, only to discover a world of partisan conflict among senior immigrants overseas. Mei-hui, who arrived at Atlantis in 2012, was immediately invited to join the activities of the pro-Kuomintang Association of Chinese Professionals because of her need for inexpensive dental care. Being a descendent of a Mainlander family, she originally found the organization a congenial place until she discovered that its senior members disapproved of her participation in a campaign to gain international status for Taiwan and her support for a solidarity rally for the Sunflower Movement.

Similarly, pro-DPP immigrant associations found their younger members more ready to accept Republic of China symbolism (the flag and national anthem). Chung-ming, who became the head of Atlantis-based TAA in 2018, revealed his experience:

Senior TAA members have made a great effort to support Taiwan in the past, but they are also more radical and partisan. We are not like them, and we do not feel it necessary to criticize the Kuomintang all the time during the meeting. Younger Taiwanese here are neutral and more selective.

Meng-hao came to Atlantis to study public health in 2017 after working as a medical doctor for five years. He identified as Taiwanese and was an outspoken supporter of Taiwan independence. Yet, when he first arrived at Atlantis, he came to know senior leaders of the Kuomintang Atlantis branch who were mostly descendants of overseas Chinese immigrants from Guangdong Province. Later, he participated in the Kuomintang Atlantis branch activities. Did his participation conflict with his political belief? Meng-hao emphatically denied that this was the case. He maintained that overseas Kuomintang members supported the Republic of China and therefore must be anti-communist.

Another related tendency is that many Taiwanese immigrants were eager to flock to receptions for visiting politicians, regardless of their party affiliations. In 2019, Ko Wen-je, Han Kuo-yu, the Kuomintang Kaohsiung City mayor, and Chen Chu, the DPP secretary-general to the president visited Atlantis. Many overseas Taiwanese attended these events simply because they provided networking opportunities and they were willing to put aside their partisan preferences in order to join the activities of rival camps. Anna, who used to lead the local Youth Chamber of Commerce and Monte Jade Science and Technology Association, emphasized that she was not a fan of Han Kuo-yu, who emerged as the Kuomintang presidential candidate after his American trip. She nevertheless followed Han's American itinerary closely because of her duty as a local leader.

An episode suffices here: In May 2019, TAA, a regional Taiwanese chamber of commerce and other immigrant associations co-hosted a Taiwan Film Festival. The event received funding from Taiwan's consulate and the planners obtained financial support from Chinatown leaders. How could the planners cobble together such a team of sponsors with such diverse ideologies? On the first day, the festival screened *Lost Black Cats*, a documentary about U-2 reconnaissance aircraft pilots who took risks to photograph mainland China during the Cold War. This film highlighted the loyalty of airmen – a favoured topic for Association of Chinese Professionals members. On the closing day, the festival featured *Our Youth in Taiwan*, an award-winning documentary about Sunflower Movement activists. The latter film was obviously a favourite choice among young people and those who supported Taiwan independence. The organizers intentionally segregated the audience into two days and presented an inclusive programme to attract a wide range of immigrants.

Encounters matter: context- and event-driven identity shift

Many interviewees revealed there was little need to think about their relation to Taiwan prior to departure. Once landing in the US, however, they found themselves immediately confronted with the question of their origin. Meng-hao explained:

Back in Taiwan, you do not ask yourself the question of who you are. When asked, the answer is likely I was born in Ilan, studied in Taipei, and then worked in Tainan. But being in foreign countries, people will stick the question to you bluntly. When I took the Uber trip from the Atlantis airport, the driver asked where I was from, and upon hearing my reply he said: 'I like Thai food!' I had the instant realization that I came from an obscure place.

Meng-hao's experience was common as many immigrants faced the persistent difficulties of explaining their origins. They resented being mistaken for people from other countries (such as China or Thailand) and eagerly hoped

that their American friends would be more knowledgeable about Taiwan. These daily encounters resulted in an apparent paradox in that respondents identified themselves and performed more as Taiwanese when they were on foreign soil. Below we identify three major pathways of the identity trigger and shift:

Taiwanese identity as a strategy of social demarcation

Some Taiwanese initially thought that the best way of self-introduction was 'I am a Chinese from Taiwan'. However, such characterization immediately caused them troubles because their audience would mistakenly identify them as people coming from China. Their audience may not have a clear idea about Taiwan, but they are likely to have a preconceived view of China. Thus, young Taiwanese immigrants' intention of detaching from the Chinese label reflects both the everyday world they experienced (e.g. hostility towards China) and on an institutional level, the US government's friendlier policies towards Taiwan.

As negative sentiments on the increasingly authoritarian and expansionist policies of China surfaced, many Taiwanese immigrants reported being asked by their colleagues or friends about Hong Kong's political crisis and concentration camps in Xinjiang, which they saw on the TV news. Disapproval of the PRC government was largely growing as a result of the trade war that has been going on since 2018 and was further exacerbated by the coronavirus epidemic since 2020. Hence, asserting one's Taiwanese identity became a convenient strategy to avoid the stigmatized implications associated with China.

Being mistaken for PRC-Chinese could bring about personal troubles. Many graduate students were used to the complaints from their American professors that some PRC-Chinese students failed to meet expected standards. There appeared to be massive irregularities regarding testing results in China. PRC-Chinese tourists were another source of nuisance. Since Atlantis was famous for its higher education, its world-class university campuses were a major tourist attraction. As Mei-hui mentioned:

My husband used to work at a famous research lab. The building previously did not have entry control, and anyone was allowed to go inside. Later, PRC-Chinese tourist buses stopped at the front gate, and passengers were encouraged by tour guides to explore the building freely. The lab staff and students were so annoyed that they decided to lock the door. After that, whenever my husband brought some Asian friends, lab security would approach him and requested his ID.

Institutionally, the US government treated Taiwan passport holders differently. PRC citizens need to apply for a tourism/business visa for a short-term stay, whereas Taiwanese passport holders are eligible for the visa waiver

program via online application. Taiwanese graduate students could not fail to notice that many of their PRC-Chinese classmates were refused permission for work- and study-based exchange visitor programmes (the J-1 visa) after graduation. PRC-Chinese students faced a more unwelcoming environment as the narrative of espionage threat became widespread. Taiwan passport holders were allowed to visit Canada and European Union countries without visa application, but such convenience was not shared by PRC-Chinese citizens.

Asserting a Taiwanese identity appears a rational and strategic response by allowing these immigrants to enjoy better treatment in the host society; it is also a safer strategy to avoid a stigmatized identity that may be associated with PRC-Chinese.

Negative experiences of encountering Chinese immigrants

Before leaving, quite a number of Taiwanese students thought they would be closer to PRC-Chinese students because of the shared language: Mandarin. Many Taiwanese subscribed to the idea that Taiwanese and PRC-Chinese were 'of the same culture and racial stock [*tongwen tongzhong*]'. However, such expectations did not match their experience in Atlantis.

PRC-Chinese students were never a homogeneous group in terms of political attitudes, as some interviewees were pleasantly surprised to find PRC-Chinese students who genuinely admired Taiwan's democracy and freedom. More frequently, however, many Taiwanese students met assertive PRC-Chinese students who were deeply imbued with patriotic education. Unpleasant 'microaggressions' emerged when they first met during orientation. One Taiwanese student remembered:

There were 13 national flags in the room, and our teacher gladly announced that this year we accepted students from 13 countries. But there was one PRC-Chinese student who rose immediately in protest and claimed there are only 11 because Taiwan and Hong Kong are not countries. There were six Taiwanese students in that reception, and we immediately knew she was hostile to us.

Taiwanese students later found that they might easily antagonize PRC-Chinese students and became a target of abuse. One interviewee used the term 'Chinese' rather than 'Mainlanders' in a casual Facebook post, which incidentally gave rise to ostracism among PRC-Chinese students. He found that his PRC-Chinese classmates had begun to shun him, without indicating why. He later found a group on WeChat (a popular social media among PRC-Chinese) where his 'erroneous' remarks were criticized. Upon this unpleasant discovery, he decided to keep his relationship with PRC-Chinese students at arm's length.

Taiwanese students adopted different coping strategies when encountering these hostilities. One student interviewee insisted on saying 'our country Taiwan' in the seminar discussion about public health to ensure that everyone knew Taiwan operated its own healthcare system independently. Not every Taiwanese student chose such a confrontational approach though. Another interviewee shared an unpleasant car ride experience. He felt annoyed when hearing an off-the-cuff remark that Taiwan would eventually be reunited with China. Yet, he decided not to reveal his unpleasant feelings, mainly out of politeness. He thought that these PRC-Chinese students might simply assume that 'we were in the same family' and that it was their way to express friendship. PRC-Chinese students might be well-intentioned, but they failed to consider how Taiwanese might feel about these casual remarks.

Young Taiwanese immigrants quickly shattered their rosy expectations that others of similar ethnicity in an immigration setting would necessarily contribute to solidarity. The assertive nationalism of PRC-Chinese counterparts soon became an anathema that young Taiwanese immigrants had to face in their everyday encounters. That people of 'the same culture and racial stock' could behave so differently – and the difficulty getting along with them – became their first lesson when setting foot on American soil.

The urge to make Taiwan more visible

A typical experience consisted of the disheartening discovery that Taiwan was so little known abroad. The feeling of being invisible might be tolerable when new arrivals are busy adjusting to their new life. However, after getting to know more about the dilapidated public transportation, the costly and inconvenient healthcare system, and underdeveloped waste sorting and recycling, young immigrants began to appreciate the way of life they had in Taiwan. After all, their home country was not falling behind the US, but rather performed better in some respects. During the coronavirus pandemic, Taiwan has shown its effective measures to bring COVID-19 under control; yet international politics has unfortunately led to Taiwan's exclusion from international agencies, including the United Nations and the World Health Organization. There arose an urge to make Taiwan better known as they did not want their place of origin to be mistakenly perceived as a third-world backwater.

Shu-fan, who came to the US for graduate study in 2018 after working in China, said: 'We do not have to compete with China, but there are some areas in which Taiwan is doing great, and these are the things that need to be more broadly known'. Kuo-ming, a pharmaceutical firm employee with a Ph.D. in immunology, claimed that Taiwanese should be prouder of their achievements:

Just three decades ago, we were a country under martial-law rule, but now we are approaching the level of a developed country. Our technological development, talents, public morality, and artistic levels are something to be proud of . . . There are some medicinal pills that were actually invented by Taiwanese, and these are laudable things and compatible with American values here. I hope more people in the US can know that.

Atlantis is located in a solidly liberal state, and younger Taiwanese, at home or abroad, are willing to accept sexual diversity. The annual Atlantis Pride Parade in June became the perfect occasion to showcase Taiwan as a positive exemplar. In 2018, a Facebook fan page of Atlantis Taiwanese for Equality was created to participate in the gay pride parade. In that year, around 50 Taiwanese participants marched for the first time. In 2019, the number nearly doubled, because Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage that May and became the first nation in Asia to achieve marriage equality (Ho 2019). One Atlantis Taiwanese for Equality campaigner reflected:

Regardless their political tendencies, overseas Taiwanese hope that Taiwan would be better noticed. As long as we do not mention Taiwan independence, pro-Kuomintang Taiwanese who long for international attention will join us. [It is only because] they are so thirsty for global attention that they care so much about whether Taiwan has become the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage.

Yet, enthusiastic support for lesbian and gay rights in Taiwan does not translate into an equal concern for LGBT issues in American politics. In 2018, the state where Atlantis is located held a referendum on a law prohibiting gender discrimination in bathrooms and locker rooms, and an activist was dismayed to find that most Taiwanese immigrants were rather unconcerned. Her frustration indicated that Taiwanese communities were concerned about LGBT politics only when it related to Taiwan, and their political participation was more about enhancing Taiwan's international visibility than a principled concern about enfranchising sexual minorities.

Established immigrants: ethnicization and the search for cultural roots

While the above three pathways represented how recent immigrants rediscovered their homeland identity, we also discovered a particular mechanism specific to 1.5- and second-generation immigrants only. Admittedly, some did not care much about their Taiwanese roots and were comfortable being referred to as Chinese Americans. Even among those who were willing to identify themselves as Taiwanese Americans, their understanding of Taiwan might be limited to food, night markets, and Taipei 101 (the tallest building in Taipei). Linda, an American-born Taiwanese, recalled her disappointment when first joining the Taiwanese Student Association in her college:

During self-introduction, I said, 'I am pro-Taiwan.' The club leader interrupted by saying, 'we are not pro anything', and then there was a moment of embarrassing silence . . . The club was mostly made up of second-generation immigrants who had minimal understanding of Taiwan, and they wanted to avoid political disputes. Many white students joined the club simply because they were bubble tea fans.

There were cases in which the second-generation immigrants chose to de-emphasize their Taiwanese connection. Those who set eyes on future careers in China focused more on Mandarin proficiency and 'passing' as Chinese. They generally had a WeChat account, joined the associations of Chinese immigrants, and acquired a mainland Mandarin accent.

Not all second-generation Taiwanese immigrants were effortlessly assimilated or chose to 're-sinicize' themselves for their career prospects. Accommodation to the minority status in the American context involved constant self-reflection and appreciation of one's own cultural roots.

Serena was born into a family of Taiwanese immigrants in California. She resented being asked 'where are you from?' twice because her interlocutor was dissatisfied with her reply, 'I am from California'. Serena had to further explain, 'I was born in California, but my parents are from Taiwan'.

My little sister and I had the experience of being denigrated at school. People said we had strange food. My sister even thought if we wanted to become real Americans, we should not speak Mandarin or eat rice . . . So there was a time when I did not want to identify myself as Taiwanese or Taiwanese American. I just wanted to be a regular Californian.

In college, she became more willing to explore the land where her parents came from. In a summer internship program, she went to Taiwan to teach English to mountain tribe schoolchildren, and that was the first time she met indigenous peoples. She became intellectually interested in Taiwan's culture and history; in Atlantis, she became a frequent participant of Café Philo, where she enjoyed learning more about contemporary issues of Taiwan. Serena claimed Taiwan was her second home and she hoped her American friends would learn more about it. On her Facebook page, she often shared the news of cultural events like the Taiwan Film Festival, in order to introduce Taiwan to more people.

Morris was a second-generation immigrant working as an IT engineer, active in the circle of Taiwanese Americans. Morris hoped that second-generation Taiwanese like him would become more concerned about Taiwan. His experience revealed that political issues were not good topics for starting conversation because family members might be divided in partisanship. Morris thought that referring to contemporary 'social issues' in the US was the best way to arouse their interest in Taiwan. For instance, most young Taiwanese Americans knew about the removal of Robert E. Lee

Monument in Charlottesville and its political fallout. This analogy could help them to understand the effort involved in removing Chiang Kai-shek statues and the contentious politics of transition justice. According to Morris, 'many Taiwanese American students in the college now found urban white culture bland and boring. They became more curious about Taiwan's culture and history'.

Established immigrants exhibited diverse means of coping with their minority status. Apparently, not all of them had taken their roots seriously, but as the stories of Serena and Morris show, they found a strong need to understand, assert, and embrace their Taiwanese identity. Compared with first-generation immigrants whose goal is assimilation, 1.5- and second-generation immigrants attempted to reclaim their cultural heritage.

Discussion and conclusion

This article discusses contexts, everyday encounters, and events that young adult Taiwanese immigrants experience and how their origin country identities are triggered and performed. We found that their experiences are different from those who arrived before the 1980s. The older generation faced a politically divided world of immigrants in which Taiwan identifiers and China identifiers rarely interacted with each other. For younger generations, the choice of a Taiwanese identity label became mainstream, consensual, and non-political. The label is oriented towards Taiwan as their homeland and as a country that has been marginalized in the world.

Scholars have been debating whether there is an ethnic foundation for national identity or an 'ethnic nationalism' that focuses on blood, common language, shared religion, or history (Smith 1986). Our findings suggest that before arriving in a new country, there was no need or incentive to identify oneself as a Taiwanese living in Taiwan. An 'imagined' community based on shared language (Mandarin) with other ethnic Chinese groups exists among young Taiwanese immigrants to some degree.

How 'differences' are felt in an immigration context and trigger the unanticipated reaffirmation of Taiwanese identity is key. The identity shift, we argue, takes place through two mechanisms in everyday life after migrating to the US. First, there is a context-driven shift from a homogenous environment where identity (Taiwanese) is taken-for-granted to an immigrant context where Taiwanese immigrants are forced to 'perform' their identity. In that instance, Taiwanese becomes a more desirable label compared to Chinese. It is a label that encourages interaction with others and allows for the preferred treatment associated with citizenship. Second is the event-driven shift in which negative experiences with PRC-Chinese immigrants and participation lead young Taiwanese to realize the marginal status of Taiwan. Intra-ethnic conflicts and symbolic violence between overseas Taiwanese and PRC-

Chinese manifest as banal nationalism and lead young immigrants to embrace their Taiwanese identity. For established immigrants who have acquired American citizenship, embracing their Taiwanese heritage was integral to their ethnicization experiences of being a minority in the US.

Research claims that identity has a strong situational component (Ang 2001; Hall 1990). Other scholars (Brobaker 2015; Glick-Schiller 2012) also argue that we need to go beyond 'groupist' ways of thinking and focus instead on processual, contextual, and relational terms. The activation and performance of Taiwanese identity for young immigrants not only shows that identity is fluid and context-driven, but it also provides a relational perspective to explain why a symbiosis of assimilation in the host society and transnationalism is possible. Furthermore, different from explanations in the migration and transnationalism literature that immigrants cultivate their ethnic identities in the host society out of racial discrimination experiences (Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1994), or due to accent or origin difference (Glick-Schiller 2012; Waters 1990), in this article we show that intra-ethnic encounters (between Taiwanese and PRC-Chinese) also reactivate origin identity while at the same time creating a distance from their ethnic (Chinese) label. Linking group relations and intra-ethnic conflicts to theory of banal nationalism and transnationalism, identity labels are everyday representations/performances and are value-laden and emotionally charged. The point here is how immigrants navigate understandings and different meanings of identity based on specific contexts, encounters, and events, which embody existing power disparities and political meanings associated with identity labels.

For studies of diasporic identity, there is a need to include a comparative perspective of migration experiences in different countries. The experience of young Taiwanese immigrants in the US may be different from immigration experiences in other countries – for instance, Taiwanese in Japan or Latinos in the US. Second, how origin country identity connects to attitudes towards politics in host societies, such as growing support for the republican party among Taiwanese immigrants, is another timely issue, given that US-China tensions resonate with pro-Taiwan sentiments. Lastly, there are more diverse situations than the ones described in this article, experiences of different immigrant groups (e.g. accompanying spouses who are unemployed) should also be considered to explore different subjects, contexts and events in generating or shifting different kinds and levels of social assimilation, group interaction, and identity to country of origin.

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