Identity Politics in Contemporary Women's Novels in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Here the discussion of contemporary women writers' works in Taiwan is situated with regard to the "geopolitics of center": Taiwanese women's literature is marginalized within the wider *topos* or discourse of Chinese women's literature, just as China may be marginalized in relation to the West, and women's writing in relation to men's. But all readings of cultural products need to be contextualized, and Taiwan's own productions are indeed best seen as "made in Taiwan." Taiwan's unique history and culture—on the "margins" of Chinese history and culture—is a powerful and necessary force within recent women's fiction on the island. Based on a reading of several recent Taiwanese women's novels, the argument here is that, as also in other Third World countries, in Taiwan the construction of women's gender identity is often tied up with questions about the (re)construction of national narrative. Thus an exclusive preoccupation with gender cannot help us to understand the complexity of gender politics in contemporary women writers' texts.

KEY WORDS

fixed identity
remembering otherwise
postcolonial reconstruction
contextualization
disidentification
marginalization
historicity

Questions of Marginality

The ambiguous status of Taiwanese literature in relation to the pedagogy of Chinese Studies is an interesting one. David Wang 王德威, who has written extensively on fictional works in Chinese, once remarked that "the poetics of marginality" that spurred the current feminist enthusiasm in the West over Chinese women writers' works has, paradoxically, "the geopolitics of center" as its underside (Wang 161). His observation is based on a telling incident. A student came to him with complaints about the marginalization of Chinese women's works by critics and publishers of Chinese literature. She then asked him for help with her research in Chinese women's literature. When David Wang suggested that she might as well look into the rich corpus of works produced by women writers in Taiwan, the student hesitated for a moment and replied that women writers from Taiwan could not represent "Chinese" women writers. David Wang certainly is right in discerning what he calls "the geopolitics of center" in the "poetics of marginality" that the feminist student claimed to be her working principle. The fact that feminist readers of Chinese literature are concerned with the marginalization of Chinese women's literature but show no interest at all in women's literature in Taiwan or the question of its marginalization in Chinese Studies demonstrates how deeply we are implicated in the structure that regulates power relationships. Obviously much still needs to be done before we articulate a truly sophisticated "poetics of marginality."

But the student may not be totally wrong in regarding Taiwan women writers' works as *not representative* of *Chinese* women's lit-

erature. The relationship of Taiwan to China not only has been heatedly debated on the island but is also often regarded as a thorny issue in international politics. To a certain extent, the ambiguous status of Taiwanese literature reflects the ambiguous political status of Taiwan. For readers interested in identity politics and its relation to cultural production, this problematic status of Taiwanese literature, with all the on-going debates on Taiwan over the problems of identity and the interrogation of the concept of "Chinese," offers a rich field for inquiry into questions of postcolonial identity politics. If we agree that all readings of cultural products need to be contextualized in order to ward off the danger of gross trans-historical interpretation, the feminist student's rejection of seeing women's works in Taiwan as representative of Chinese women's literature is well justified. Instead of treating Taiwanese literature as part of "Chinese" literature (and thus eliding questions of historicity), it might be more fruitful to read literary works *made in Taiwan* as cultural products of a context in which the whole notion of "Chinese" has been continuously subject to critical interrogation.

It is in this context that I would like to situate my discussion of contemporary women writers' works in Taiwan. David Wang points out in his essay that women writers in Taiwan have produced a large corpus of works over the past fifty years. What he does not mention is that it is only recently that women writers have begun to attract serious critical attention. What women writers in Taiwan had, indeed, was "a literature of their own." With the conspicuous exception of Professor Pang-yuan Chi's 齊邦媛 (1990) introductory essay on women's writing from 1949 to the early 1980s, discussion of women writers' contribution to the shaping of the tradition of literature in Taiwan is scarce. Works seeking to map out important topics in the critical study of Taiwanese literature or those devoted to the construction of a history of Taiwanese literature (Peng 1995; Kao 1994) also fail to include women writers in their discussion. In the early 1980s, when Taiwan was witnessing a blossoming of women's creative writing, and almost all the literary awards were claimed by young women writers who shot up from nowhere, the traditional

deprecatory attitude toward women's literature even led a male critic to protest indignantly against what he called the "take-over" of the literary world by "light, trivial" women's literature. It was necessary, the male critic argued, that the feminine, "lightweight" writing by women writers be put back in its former, marginal quarters.

Political Intervention in Contemporary Women Writers' Works

Certainly the feminist critique of canon-formation and the reflection on gender-inflected literary as well as cultural values over the past decade has taught us how to rebut this critic's evaluation of women's literature effectively (Kolodny 451-67). But the question of the politics of literary criteria, though important, is not the one I want to address in this essay. What I am concerned with here is the remarkable difference between women's fictional works in the 1990s and those in the early 1980s. Women writers associated with the 1980s renaissance of women's literature in Taiwan, such as Chiang Hsiao-yun 蔣曉雲, Hsiao Li-hung 蕭麗紅, Yuan Ch'iung-ch'iung 袁瓊瓊, Su Wei-Chen 蘇偉貞, Liao Hui-ying 廖輝英 etc., focused mostly on heterosexual relationships. Though a critique of traditional sex roles and family structure often surfaced in their writing, the scope of women's fictional works was generally constrained within what Rosalind Coward calls "the sexual histories of women." If traditionally women's writing is concerned exclusively with heterosexual relationships, women's fiction in the 1990s shows a sharp veering away from this interest in the relationship between men and women to a more active participation in the cultural sphere.

This is not to say, however, that women writers and readers all become political maniacs all of a sudden and are rid of their romantic sickness. With the flowing of Harlequin romances into the book market in Taiwan through the channel of transnational enterprises, the marketability of love stories is more successful than ever. And certainly quite a number of women writers continue to work on that familiar terrain. Nevertheless, in the 1990s we are seeing a more active

response on the part of women writers to what is happening in the public sphere in Taiwan. A wide range of topics have been addressed by women writers since the late 1980s. For example, critique of the stock market fever in Taiwan, the question of national narrative, and the problems of ethnicity in the recent remapping of political power structure are recurrent themes in recent fictional works by Li Ang 李昂 and Chu T'ien-hsin 朱天心. Feminist issues such as body politics and lesbianism are also addressed by quite a number of women writers. As the critic Peng Hsiao-yen 彭小妍 points out, fiction that addresses political questions used to be exclusively male writers' terrain (72). The year 1987, when martial law was officially lifted, marks a turning point in the development of literature in Taiwan. There can be detected in contemporary women writers' works published after 1987 an increasing involvement with political issues. Unlike male writers whose thrust of political interrogation is usually directed toward questions of national narrative, women writers' works are concerned with the question of gender identity *as well as* the question of national identity.

It is the purpose of this essay to investigate how questions of national identity and gender identity are addressed in contemporary women's writing. The recent writings of three major contemporary women writers in Taiwan are chosen for discussion: Li Ang's *The Maze Garden* 迷園, Chu T'ien-hsin's "Remembering My Brothers in Those Old Military Village Days 想我眷村的兄弟們" and "New Party for Nineteen Days 新黨十九日," and Su Wei-Chen's *Island of Silence* 沈默之島. My choice is based on the criteria of the persistence of the writers' long-term engagement in literary production and the relevance of their works to the current debate on identity politics in Taiwan. The breakthrough we find in each writer's recent works can be taken to be representative of the transformation that is taking place in women's literature in Taiwan. The works that constitute the list above have attracted critical attention from scholars of literature as well as critics of cultural politics. My discussion will focus particularly on the writers' rigorous engagement with identity politics.

At this historical moment when the issue of national identity is

becoming more urgent than ever under the threat of China's increasingly provocative military maneuvers, the centrality of the questions of identity politics in recent women writers' works demonstrates to what extent cultural production is deeply implicated in socio-political structure. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the break-away of women's literature from its traditional ghettoized sphere of romance takes place at a time when the feminist movement and other social movements are developing with a surprising speed. In other words, the change that is taking place in women's literary production has much to do with developing material conditions and shifting ideologies. It is important to note that without the lifting of martial law that deemed all demonstrations illegal, the flowering of oppositional discourses, feminism included, would certainly have encountered many more difficulties. Unfortunately, this close connection between the feminist struggle and the political struggle for democratization in the broader social context has often been neglected in much feminist discourse. In the eagerness to undermine the traditional values that relegate women's issues to a marginal place, feminist analyses in Taiwan tend to suppress the importance of politics in the traditional sense to promote an exclusively gender-based way of reading. In contrast, many feminists in third-world countries with histories of colonization often reject the focus on gender as the sole basis of struggle and instead stress the need to examine the intersection of various networks of gender, race, nation, and class (Mohanty, Gilliam, Johnson-Odim). Likewise, I want to argue that an exclusive preoccupation with gender will not help us to understand the complexity of identity politics in contemporary women writers' texts. It is the contention of this essay that, for women in Taiwan, the construction of gender identity is often tied up with questions about the (re)construction of national narrative. As in other third-world countries, the question of gender identity is interlocked with questions about national identity and other social factors in Taiwan.

The Maze Garden and the Postcolonial Reconstruction of History in Taiwan

Li Ang is a writer known for her interest in controversial topics. In her celebrated novelette, *The Butcher's Wife* 殺夫, she probes into the suffering of women in a patriarchal society with a stark portrayal of a much abused wife who murders her husband in an outburst against the long-endured oppression that he has imposed upon her. Though Li Ang refuses to be labeled as a feminist writer, the harsh critique of the patriarchal structure in the novelette demonstrates her sensitivity to issues of gender politics. In another novel, *Dark Night* 暗夜, Li Ang focuses her attention on the critical examination of a sick Taiwanese society plagued by money games. Recently, however, she seems to be particularly concerned with the problems of historical memory in Taiwan. In the preface to *A Biography of Shi Ming-te: Part One* 施明德前傳, Li Ang points out that, in writing about Shi (the chairman of the leading oppositional political party in Taiwan and a former political prisoner who passed twenty five years in jail for his dissident political activities), she is trying to preserve historical memory that is fast sinking into oblivion. In a word, the book is a struggle against historical amnesia and an attempt to re-collect the memories of "tears and blood" that mark the history of Taiwan over the past forty years (Li 1). In *The Maze Garden* (1991), we see Li Ang engaged in an even more ambitious archaeological enterprise: to re(-)vision the history of Taiwan from the perspective of the people on Taiwan who have gone through the oppressive years of the Japanese colonial rule and the authoritarian control of the Chiang Dynasty.

Although the major story line of the novel traces the development of the relationship between the heroine, a descendent of a formerly prominent family in a provincial town, and the hero, a self-made tycoon representing the adventurous and hard-working middle-class that constitutes the majority of the native Taiwanese. It is quite obvious that Li Ang's major interest is not simply to tell a love story. The narrative is constantly interrupted by the heroine's childhood memories of her father, a victim of the traumatic February 28 massa-

cre in 1947 that brought to the surface the conflict between the native "Taiwanese" and the "mainlanders" and marked the beginning of a forty-year authoritarian rule in Taiwan. At the same time, the narrative also makes repeated references to the heroine's ancestor, a wealthy pirate-merchant who migrated to Taiwan from China. The plot thus operates on many levels: it is a love story, a reconstruction of the heroine's family genealogy, and an archaeological reconstruction of the history of Taiwan from the perspective of a Taiwanese woman. The fragmented form of the narrative suggests the rupture of historical time on a colonized Taiwan. This sense of rupture regulates the social as well as the private life of people in Taiwan.

It is my contention that the failure to pay attention to the role of historical memories in the shaping of the heroine's love relationship to the hero easily leads to an oversimplified treatment of the politics of gender identity in the text. Arguing against the reading of Liu Yu-hsiu 劉毓秀 and David Wang, who see the interpenetrating of national narrative and the narrative of gender relationship as an unfortunate flaw in the text, I want to demonstrate that Li Ang's examination of gender relationships in terms of the specific historical context of Taiwan not only makes the text a fruitful field for our investigation into the intricate interlocking of gender, nation, and other social elements in women's identities, but also helps to demonstrate how questions of national narrative can be addressed from a female, colonized subject position.

The social status of the heroine is significant: she is a descendent of a prominent family in a provincial town in Taiwan that has suffered under the Japanese occupation and the authoritarian control of the Chiang Kai-shek administration. It is from this female Taiwanese perspective that Li Ang conducts her archaeological reconstruction of history and examines the question of the extent to which gender relationship has been affected by historical memories of painful colonization imprinted on the individual's consciousness. The obvious link between Li Ang's archaeological re-collection and the on-going nation-building project on Taiwan cannot be missed. In identifying Li Ang's writing as an archaeological enterprise, I am

thinking of the link between archaeologists and nationalists as postulated by Anthony Smith. In an essay that discusses the role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations, Smith argues that the task performed by nationalists in regard to the ethnic past is very much like the one performed by archaeologists. For archaeologist-nationalists, the engagement with the past concerns not so much the resurrection and recording of historical memory as the re-interpretation of the past in a specifically national light for the mobilization of the present (Smith 15-17). In *The Maze Garden*, the archaeological historical investigation is seen in the heroine's re-construction of the genealogy of her family and in her recollection of her father's critical interrogation of the construction of the national narrative. As an epitome of the history of Taiwan in the past one hundred years and the history of the indigenous confusion about the issue of national identity, the history of the father culminates finally in the claim for a Taiwanese identity always suppressed and subsumed under other identities: "Taiwan is not the replica or the epitomized image of any other place. It is Taiwan, Formosa" (121).

The heroine's reconstruction of the genealogy of her family by tracing the family tree back to the pirate-merchant Chu Feng 朱鳳 also has significant implications when situated in this grand project of re-visioning the national narrative. As Liu Yu-hsiu points out in her reading of this novel, the careful elaboration on the historical past of Taiwan is obviously intended to stress the differences between Taiwan and China. Li Ang highlights the similarities between the hero Lin Hsi-keng 林西庚 and Chu Feng to reinforce the idea that the adventurous spirit of self-made businessmen is representative of the "Taiwan spirit" and constitutes the vitality of the people here (Liu 92-93). In other words, Li Ang defines the Taiwanese people as the descendents of adventurous, self-made migrants good at the trading business. This theory of Taiwan as a nation with people of migrant spirit—quick at assimilating different cultures, ingenious in exploiting what they have learned from the exposure to the outside world, and strongly commercially oriented—is postulated by Hsu hsin-liang 許信良 (the former chairman of the leading oppositional party DPP

in Taiwan) in his book *The Rising People* 新興民族 (1995) as an attempt to interrupt the Chinese national narrative and to interpellate the Taiwanese people as subjects of an independent nation.

To the extent that Li Ang is formulating a counter-narrative to the Chinese national narrative through a reconstruction of the historical memories of Taiwan, she is not simply treating the history of Taiwan as a cultural text but also trying to promote a specific reading that runs counter to the traditional reading of it. Rather than a simple resurrection of the time past, the re-collection of historical memories in *The Maze Garden* is obviously oriented toward the present and bears the important function of intervening in the current debate on national identity in Taiwan. What Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan (1993) say on the reading of history is quite relevant here:

> Any understanding of history entails a theory of reading . . . reading is a material practice, contributing to the construction of the social real; any reading of any text of culture is first of all an ideological intervention in the available ways of making sense of "history" in the subject's historical present. A global reading of history, then, does not seek to recover a past that has been silenced, but to investigate the cultural currency of the past in the present and critique the interests served by historical narratives as material practices shaping contemporary social arrangements." (465)

If in traditional reading, the history of Taiwan is often regarded as adjunctive to the history of China, Li Ang's postcolonial reading problematizes this unquestioned Chinese identity and tries to open up the possibility of an alternative national narrative.

It is this insistence on the significant relationship of the historical past to the present that sheds light on the gender relationship in the novel. If what constitutes the theme of the novel is, as David Wang says, a woman's painful search for selfhood (Wang 179), then the story Li Ang is telling here certainly is very different from the

standard story of women's liberation that, as a rule, posits patriarchal oppression as the foe. For the central woman character Chu Ying-hung 朱影紅, what is at issue is the liberation from the sufferings that Taiwanese women experienced under the colonial rule. It is noteworthy that time and again Chu Ying-hung is haunted by the memory of the traumatic moment when her father was being taken away by soldiers sent by the government controlled by the Chinese Nationalist Party. Part of the pain inflicted on Taiwanese women under the colonial rule of the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalist Party in the days before the lifting of martial law was to see their fathers/husbands/sons taken away as suspects of dissidents and to witness helplessly a symbolic castration of their men folk that affected imperceptibly every aspect of life in the colonial society. Although Chu Ying-hung's father was finally released from the prison, he was put in custody and closely watched by the government. As all possibilities of a career were ruled out in this situation, a sense of futility and uselessness began to gnaw away at the life of Chu Ying-hung's father. This explains why he squandered all his money and traded inherited family property for luxurious commodities. For Taiwanese women like Chu Ying-hung who witnessed their men folk deprived of masculine power and spiritually unmanned, the re-claiming of the male Taiwanese's masculine power becomes all the more important if a liberation from nightmarish colonial memories is to be effected.

It is this aspect of women's liberation that Li Ang wants to address in *The Maze Garden*. This serves to remind us that there need not (and should not) be a standardized version of women's liberation. Third world feminists have long criticized the "mainstream" feminism of the West for confining the project of feminism to a struggle against gender discrimination (Gilliam 217; Johnson-Odim 315). For women in the third world, "a gender-based analysis alone, without the factoring in of issues of race and class, can never describe the oppression of Third World women" (Johnson-Odim 318). For women in Taiwan who share with women of other third-world countries the experience of colonization and authoritarian rule, women's liberation cannot be simply conceived of as an anti-sexist struggle. There are

different levels of oppression that need to be addressed. The oppression of women by patriarchal forces is simply one of the stories to be told by feminists.

It is this desire to get over the trauma of losing a powerful father that defines Chu Ying-hung's relationship to Lin Hsi-keng. In a farewell scene in which Lin Hsi-keng decides to put an end to their love affair, the description of the painful impact of Lin's leave-taking on Chu is interrupted as fragmented memories of the traumatic moment when her father was disappearing out of her sight and the shock at seeing a male school teacher of hers being led away by soldiers are involuntarily recalled. The stream-of-consciousness mode of presentation effects an inter-penetration of the past and the present, in which the disappearance of three major male figures in her life—the father, the school teacher, and the man she would like to have as her husband—is conflated. Though she could not control the disappearance of her father and the school teacher, she can at least vanquish the repetition of history by using all means to keep Lin Hsi-keng.

The historical memories of men's emasculation under foreign occupation and authoritarian rule looms heavily in the background as Chu seeks to construct her relationship with Lin. It is by no accident that she falls in love with a man with blatant masculine prowess. With the miraculous story of his career-building that reflects the so-called "Taiwan miracle," Lin not only represents the male Taiwanese in general but manages to reclaim the masculine power that the male Taiwanese were often forced to relinquish in the time past. To the extent that Lin Hsi-keng is defined in the novel as a representative of the male Taiwanese whose masculinity is at issue, he cannot occupy the position of the colonizer. Hence the trope used by the critic Hsiao-yen Peng in her discussion of the relationship between Chu and Lin, I believe, is quite misleading. (Peng 85). To equate Lin with the colonizer and Chu with the colonized is a reductive, transhistorical treatment of the gender relationship in the novel.

With the help of Lin, Chu finally recovers her family's hereditary mansion, which obviously is a symbol of Taiwan. At the end of the narrative, she donates the mansion to a public foundation so that

the mansion can belong to the twenty million people in Taiwan instead of becoming a property of the government. The allegorical meaning of the ending is quite clear: people on Taiwan thus reclaim the land that has been invaded and exploited by different political authorities. This seemingly happy ending, however, is undercut by a gloomy prospect as Chu discovers Lin's impotence and the hope of their ever having any descendent is extinguished. In the novel, Lin's impotence is connected with his extravagantly frequent sexual activities as an active businessman, though a family curse of Chu's associated with the reconstruction of her family genealogy is also evoked as part of the reason. Ending her novel in this way, Li Ang seems to imply that, if not properly guarded, the capitalist enterprises that have helped to forge Taiwan into a nation of prosperity can also be the cause of its ruin. Thus the victorious recovery of the masculine power of the male Taiwanese is problematized. Though hopefully women in Taiwan can finally get rid of the historical nightmare of seeing their men emasculated and their families falling apart, the capitalist system that has accumulated enough material capital for Taiwan to re-build its confidence might also lead to a future that gets nowhere. The archaeological project and the prophetic vision Li Ang offers in *The Maze Garden* render the novel a densely textualized work. Into this book is condensed the history of Taiwan—its past, present, and the possible direction of its future.

Intervention in Identity Politics from the Position of a "Second-generation Mainlander": Chu T'ien-hsin, and the Anxiety over the Rupture of National Narrative

If Li Ang examines the problems of identity from a female Taiwanese subject's position, Chu T'ien-Hsin tries to intervene in identity politics from the position of a "second-generation mainlander." It is, however, important to bear in mind that the term "second-generation mainlander" is a misleading one, for it is a label too clear-cut to convey the sense of ambiguity with which "second-generation mainlanders" try to negotiate their identity. At a time when the myth

of "recovering the Chinese mainland" propagated by the Nationalist Party for forty years is obviously bankrupt, the term "mainlanders" becomes an ironical label attached to a social group who, all of a sudden, find themselves doubly exiled. Unable to identify themselves with the Chinese on the mainland and suspicious of the Taiwanese Nationalist movement, "second-generation mainlanders" are caught in a sort of "in-between-ness." The agonizing experience of this "in-between-ness" of "second-generation mainlanders" finds expression in some of the best works produced by Chu T'ien-hsin after 1987.

Although Chu T'ien-hsin began her writing career quite early (her first collection of short stories was published in 1977 when she was only nineteen), she had never been truly considered a major fiction writer until she astounded the literary critics on the island in the early 1990s with two collections of short stories that show a sharp critical mind at work. With a noticeable change in choice of topics and writing style, Chu works pungent political critiques into her fictional works. In the following, I will focus on two of her recently published short stories, namely, "New Party for Nineteen Days" and "Remembering My Brothers in Those Old Military Village Days," to investigate how identity politics can be interrogated from the position of "second-generation mainlanders" who are affected deeply by the impact of the rupture of the Chinese national narrative and the shock at the discovery of a competing, alternative reading of the history of Taiwan.

The agony of the inescapable rupture of time is explored in depth in the story "New Party for Nineteen Days." In its simplest sense, the story is one about an oppressed housewife's gradual realization of her involuntary imprisonment in ignorance and housework routines. Through stock investment, the housewife timidly breaks out of her cocoon, and, for the first time in her life, discovers a sense of freedom and self-confidence as she moves around in this new world of information. Because of her stock market activities, she learns about everything from GATT to intriguing domestic political conspiracies. As her eyes are opened to a world larger than what her professor husband or college student/son can imagine, she is rid of the

shame of ignorance and also finds a community of common interests. When the government announces a new tax policy unfavorable to stock market exchange, this sense of community even propels her to join a protest led by members of the oppositional party. If her stock investment suggests her secret, timid transgression of a boundary that used to circumscribe her life as a housewife, now she finds herself making an even bolder move as her participation in the protest undermines her past loyalty to a government held by the Nationalist Party. The story culminates in a scene where her secret activity on the stock market and in the protest are found out by her family. As they stare at her in disbelief, she breaks down in front of the three persons who constitute what the world calls her "family."

What is really at issue here is an identity crisis being painfully experienced by the housewife as she realizes that she can never go back to the dark corner in the kitchen and continue her life as it used to be. In other words, if questions of identity are, as Stuart Hall remarks, always questions about representation, and the concept of identity, in the simplest terms, can be defined as a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves (Hall 8), then the housewife in "New Party for Nineteen Days" undergoes a sudden explosion of her sense of identity. She finds it no longer possible to represent herself in the way she used to do in the past or continue to tell the same story about herself. Her timid adventurous contact with a world outside the traditional women's domestic sphere not only changes her in a fundamental way but unexpectedly leads to a drastic undermining of all her former beliefs in family values and party loyalty. Gender identity and political identity are destablized.

But what is so intriguing about this story is not so much its critique of the housewife ideology—a theme that, after all, has been much exploited in feminist writing—as its indirect intervention in the construction of a national narrative. The portrayal of the protest of stock market investors led by members of the leading oppositional party DPP implies a strong negative view of the oppositional party as essentially opportunist and untrustworthy. If the construction of the ideological world in the story seems to suggest an implicit complicity

between the Nationalist Party and patriarchal institution (both operate on keeping women in a state of ignorance so as to exert an absolute control over them), the negative representation of DPP reveals a distrust of the oppositional political movement and of the alternative national narrative that this movement seeks to construct. In a sense, this story reflects the anxiety of "second-generation mainlanders" (the housewife and her husband are identified in the story as belonging to this social group) in their ambiguous experiencing of the breakdown of traditional values symbolized by their unquestioned loyalty to the Nationalist Party. If the past, together with its acceptance of the Chinese national narrative propagated by the Nationalist Party, is associated with ignorance and imprisonment, while the freedom DPP promises is suspiciously shallow and shaky, then how should one continue the story and formulate a plan for the future? It might not be too far-fetched to regard the ruptured story of the housewife as an epitome of the ruptured identity-narrative of "second-generation mainlanders" struggling in the face of the conflictual competition of the Chinese and the Taiwanese national narratives. It is this disturbing question of self-definition for a female "second-generation mainlander" that Chu is examining in the story.

It is noteworthy that the housewife's sense of identity is shattered exactly when she discovers the multiplicity of time—or, to put it in another way, histories. Beside the narrative that has shaped her consciousness of time and regulates her life, there exist at the same time other ways of structuring time never imagined by her. This certainly is a familiar theme in fictional writings that deal with women's journeys of self-liberation. However, this is not simply a story about the problematization of one's gender identity, but it is also a story about the relationship between ethnic identity and the construction of a national narrative. In the critic-writer Yang Chao's 楊照 view, the change that readers find in Chu's recent works has much to do with her participation in the production of a TV program which opened her eyes to the world existing outside her "military village experience 眷村經驗" (Yang 156-58). In the past, military villages were the geo-political places inhabited exclusively by the mainlanders who moved

to Taiwan with Nationalist forces after their defeat by the Communists. These mainlanders formed a world of their own. Since it was generally believed that the Nationalist forces would soon force their way back to the Chinese mainland and recover their lost territory, inhabitants of military villages tended to regard themselves as temporary diaspora. The mentality of "temporary diaspora" excluded them from an interested participation in the Taiwanese world outside military villages.

If the ideology of military villages is deeply imbedded in the ideology of the Chinese national narrative, then Chu's inescapable involvement with the outside world exposed her not only to other ways of experiencing history but also to an alternative narrative that boldly challenges the authority of the Chinese national narrative. The contradictions that the housewife in "New Party for Nineteen Days" experiences reflect to a certain degree the writer's own complicated feelings about the vital reconstruction of identity on Taiwan. On the one hand, the past is now revealed to be far too imprisoning and limiting; on the other hand, the present is experienced as too confusing and criss-crossed with contradictory ideological forces. Distrusting the integrity of the nationalist movement led by DPP and feeling somehow alienated from the new nationalist sentiment, Chu T'ien-hsin responds to the current reconstruction of national narrative from the position of a "second-generation mainlander."

Compared with "New Party for Nineteen Days," "Remembering My Brothers in Old Military Village Days" addresses the questions of national identity more directly. Writing in an autobiographical mode, Chu merges herself with the character/narrator in the story to evoke her memory of a girl-hood in a military village. It is useful to note with Sidonie Smith here that autobiographical telling is not a self-expressive act. Rather, autobiography should be defined as essentially a performance (Smith 18). Chu T'ien-hsin's autobiographical account of "what life used to be" in military villages, as a historiographic performance on memory, is deeply imbedded in memory politics. The use of memory, as the large corpus of discussion of the struggle over memories in Post-war East-central Europe demonstrates, should al-

ways be subject to examination. Whenever memory is evoked, the question formulated by Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn in their introduction to a special issue on historical memories needs to be posed: "by whom, where, in which context, against what?" (David and Starn 2). For our concern here, what performativity is being staged in Chu T'ien-hsin's evocation of her childhood memory of military villages at a time when questions about historical memories are inevitably intertwined with questions about the construction of a national narrative?

A way to deal with memory-identity politics in this particular story of Chu's is to return to the question of Chu's anxiety. This literary autobiographical work can be read as a strategic defense that seeks to refute the stereotyping of "mainlanders" as a privileged social group in Taiwan and to emphasize their victimization in the ideological operation in the past. In the story, life in military villages is portrayed as suffocating and imprisoning. The older generation mainlanders who moved to Taiwan with the Nationalist Party continued to maintain the hope of returning to their homes in China. Consequently, they tended to regard any in-depth knowledge about the world outside their villages as superfluous. Even long after they realized the impossibility of their homecoming dream, the thought of adopting a Taiwanese identity remained repulsive. For, as the autobiographer-writer Chu comments bitterly, the distance from home only helped to romanticize the dream of China. The idea of perceiving themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese seemed self-debasing because the smallness of Taiwan signified nothing but narrowness and restriction in vision. Paradoxically, this claustrophobia led to an isolation of the military village world as it deliberately cut itself off from any engaged communication with the society outside of it (Chiu 104-105). Children growing up in military villages lived, therefore, in an imprisoned state. Chu implies in this autobiographical portrayal of the old days in military villages that, rather than being a privileged class, the social group labeled as "mainlanders" are victims of an ideological construction of "China" as the real home and the unquestioned (as well as unquestionable) belief in the Chinese nation-

al narrative.

In a sense, this autobiographical writing is an anxious, performative act of "counter-memory." It tries to intervene in the writing of history at a moment when the past is being carefully reconstructed and evaluated. Chu seems to foresee that, once a Taiwanese national narrative successfully replaces the Chinese national narrative in Taiwan, the official version of history written from the perspective of a Taiwanese subject position and based mostly on the collective memory of the native Taiwanese might conveniently use "mainlanders" as scapegoats in the struggle for political power. This autobiographical writing thus has the pose of a counter-memory to the as-yet-to-be-written official history of Taiwan as an independent nation-state. As Richard S. Esbenshade points out in a discussion of the relationship between memory, history, and national identity, "a proper investigation of the past becomes *destabilizing* rather than stabilizing; the national narrative as a means of control can be subverted and splintered into multiple and ever-changing narratives" (Esbenshade 87). What Chu is attempting here is to look forward into the future and rescue memory from State enforced forgetting before it is too late.

Like Li Ang's *The Maze Garden*, Chu's autobiographical writing in "Remembering my Brothers in the Old Military Village Days" is a performative act of "remembering otherwise." The way memory is historicized and reconstructed depends greatly on the position of the person who is doing the remembering. While *The Maze Garden* evokes historical memory to unveil the unspeakable and unspoken sufferings of the native Taiwanese in the past, Chu's strategic presentation and highlighting of certain aspects of military village life stresses the victimization of mainlanders under the Nationalist-controlled state policy. The goal is to absolve this social group from the accusation of playing a complicit role in the Nationalist authoritarian oppression of the native people of Taiwan. What is involved here is an implicit competition for the claim for victimhood. To the extent that Li Ang and Chu T'ien-hsin represent different social groups and that they historicize memory to examine the complication of identity problems in a specific socio-historical context, both writers

are participating in the current struggle over memory in Taiwan. Like other parts of the world, late twentieth-century Taiwan is preoccupied with what Pierre Nora calls "the psychologization of contemporary memory." If there used to be an opposition between official history and the counter-memory preserved in the popular imagination, in the late twentieth century we are witnessing an unpreceded phenomenon of private history writing. The fashion of searching for one's own origins and identity reminds one of the importance of remembering as a means of protecting the trappings of identity (Nora 15).

But as memory becomes a means of intervening in contemporary politics and we have more often than not conflictual accounts of the past, memory becomes a site of contestation. Instead of the opposition between a falsified, manipulated collective memory by the state and an untainted, "primal" collective memory by the people, we have now a proliferation of conflictual memory accounts. Traditionally, collective memory is often regarded as a site of resistance against forced forgetting and state-manipulated history. However, a close examination of the current struggles over memory in areas that have undergone drastic political transformation (e.g., the re-unified Germany, Poland, South Africa, etc.) demonstrates the unreliability of memory. The reconstruction of memory inevitably involves its historicization; in postcolonial countries or East Europe, memory is not only reconstructed from different perspectives but is also effectively exploited to intervene in the construction of national narrative. For example, the feminist recovery of memory accounts of the rape of German women by occupation soldiers during and after World War II is, as Atina Grossmann's sophisticated analysis (1995) demonstrates, participating subtlely in the revival of German nationalism. The emphasis of German women as victims helps Germans to whitewash the past and elide the question of their victimization of the Jews. In Grossmann's view, "women's stories were combined with men's to construct a new national community of suffering that served not only to avoid confrontation with Nazi crimes but also, of course, as a strategy of reauthorizing and reestablishing the unity of the *Volk*, providing the basis for a 'sick' Germany to 'recover' once again"

(Grossmann 62) The recovery of memory is never an innocent act; it partakes of the forging of the present by pretending to speak about the past. The operation of memory in Li Ang's *The Maze Garden* and Chu T'ien-hsin's "Remembering My Brothers in Those Old Military Village Days" testifies to what extent the engagement with memory is connected with the engagement with questions about identity and national narrative.

Island of Silence and the Question of Disidentification

While Li Ang's *The Maze Garden* and Chu T'ien-hsin's "Remembering My Brothers in Those Old Military Village Days" highlight the importance of memory in the construction of one's own identity, Su Wei-chen chooses to use another strategy to deal with memory-identity politics in her *Island of Silence*. Readers are apt to be puzzled by the peculiar structure of the novel. The protagonist Ch'en-mien 晨勉 is split in two at the very beginning of the narrative. The two characters with the same identical names then develop their own stories respectively. Their sexual encounters constitute the development of the narrative while other social factors that usually structure human relationships are pushed to the background. But the novel not only has a protagonist split in two; characters with identical names but different nationalities, gender identities, or sexual preferences also appear in both fictional worlds. For example, the protagonist's sister who marries an English man in the first fictional world becomes the protagonist's brother who falls in love with her lover. In the first fictional world, Ch'en-mien remains single and develops an intimate relationship with a German young man named Daniel; the married Ch'en-mien in the second fiction world has a lover from the United States and whose name is also Daniel. This proliferative doubling of characters radically problematizes the sense of identity as social categories (family background, social status, nationality, sex, etc.) commonly used to define a person, are thrown into a flux.

Without the splitting of the protagonist Ch'en-mien in the first place, there would be no further multiplication of plots or other char-

acters. It is noteworthy that the splitting of Ch'en-mien happens at the moment when she experiences an urgent desire to liberate herself from the burden of a painful family history. When the novel begins, we learn that Ch'en-mien's mother has been in jail for murdering Ch'en-mien's father when she found it no longer possible to tolerate his extra-marital affairs. Visiting her mother in jail, Ch'en-mien suddenly has a double: another Ch'en-mien with a "normal" middle-class family background. But as the narrative moves on, we find that the stories of these two Ch'en-mien are hardly related to each other, except for the fact that characters with identical names appear in both worlds. It is as if the narrative tries to work against the registration of memory. Once the fictional world is split in two, the event is soon put behind and scarcely any effort is made to suggest the memorable significance of this unusual operation of narrative beginning.

The downplaying of the importance of memory is also seen in other aspects of the narrative. In appearance, the two Ch'en-mien are quite different. They live in rather different social contexts and share nothing in common in terms of their family background, marital status, and working environment. However, the two Ch'en-miens appear identical to the reader not simply because they have the same name but because of the way they are characterized: both live chiefly for sex. There is scarcely any character development and the two Ch'en-mien show little interest in any in-depth development of their human relationships. It seems that the meaning of each of their lives depends on a total immersion in love-making which, as one Ch'en-mien says, makes her have the pleasure of losing the sense of time (169). Instead of constructing her novel on a constant interplay between the past and the present like Li Ang and Chu T'ien-hsin do in their fictional writings, Su Wei-chen seems to be struggling hard to create a novelistic form that would be rid of the burdens of the past and memory.

Indeed, the novel does everything it can to undermine a sense of the passage of time. The narrative is built on repeated sexual encounters while the element of plot is cut down to the minimum. As there is little development of the plot and the characters keep drifting around

in the fictional world(s) with sexual activity as the main event of their lives, time is hardly experienced as a movement. Since what counts is what one's body experiences in the moment and the meaning of one's life is constituted in the moment of the intimate encounter of bodies, consciousness is rid of the burden of history. As the play of memory crucial to the constitution of identity is reduced to the minimum in the fictional world(s), identity becomes difficult to fix.

The resistance to a fixed identity is also reflected in the metaphor of "island." Images of "island" are scattered throughout the text. Isolated and lonely amidst the ocean, island is the locus of ambiguous identity. The Ch'en-mien with the burden of a painful family history is constantly on the move; this mode of living makes her connection to any place reduced to the minimum. Without a long-term relationship to any place or any person, she is short of memory and easily rid of the burden of history. As she contemplates after the death of her grand-mother,

> When the people around her and her sister are dead, it signifies the disappearance of the indicators of their identities. Who are they? Undeveloped lonely islands. (21)

But the metaphor of island not only signifies the problematic identity of the protagonist; it is also associated with a particular Taiwanese attitude toward the issue of identity. The same Ch'en-mien feels suffocated when she visits the mainland China on a business trip:

> She has even been to the mainland China. She lived on that land and under its climate; she felt like trapped in a marsh . . . .
>
> While she was there, she got to know the continental ecology because of her work. History tended to settle down on land like that. It stayed. These were people who, for generations after generations, never left their birth places. As a person without such identification with the land, she

was scared of this kind of changeless rooting. (103)

Thus, Ch'en-mien finds herself alienated from the Chinese for whom identity is constituted mainly in a firm connection to land. This absence of an identification with a particular piece of land characterizes the protagonist in Su's story, but it is also representative of a certain aspect of the Taiwanese character. In the book *The Rising People* that tries to interpellate the Taiwanese people as subjects of an independent nation, Hsu Hsin-liang defines Taiwan as essentially a society of migrants. The Taiwanese people are constantly on the move. Migrations on a large scale repeatedly occurred in the history of Taiwan during periods of political turbulence. But political reasons aside, the economic structure of Taiwan also requires a very large proportion of its population to de-emphasize the connection with land and downplay the importance of a fixed identity. The middle-class merchants who, in Hsu's view, embody the "Taiwan spirit" are people living on dynamic movement. Their business transactions take them to almost every corner of the world. Seen in this light, Ch'en-mien is in fact representative of the Taiwanese people who have been taught by their historical experiences to adopt "dis-identification" as the basic survival skill. In Ch'en-mien we see an embodiment of the typical Taiwanese "dis-identification."

Paradoxically, this resistance to a fixed identity is accompanied by a longing for a sense of belonging. The first Ch'en-mien realizes this repressed longing through her relationship with the German young man Daniel (127). The hedonistic Ch'en-mien born out of the imagination of the first Ch'en-mien has a similar longing. What characterizes this Ch'en-mien is her lack of memory (73). Unlike the first Ch'en-mien, the second Ch'en-mien stays on the island Taiwan. But the shallowness of her relationships to people around her makes her as lonely and isolated as the first Ch'en-mien. She is also an "island." The Chinese-American named Daniel renders a kind of depth to her life because he is a man with a complete memory (93). As he adds memory to her life, she begins to shake off the sense of loneliness that permeates her life without memory:

> Ch'en-mien no longer felt sad; she developed a land of memory. From then on, she became a person with memory. No matter where Daniel went, she would not feel lonely any more. It was memory, not love, that helped her escape loneliness. (92)

Like Li Ang and Chu T'ien-hsin, Su Wei-chen acknowledges the importance of memory in the constitution of one's identity. But while Li and Chu use historical memory to redefine the identities of the social groups they represent and rigorously engage with questions of national narrative in their recent fictional writing, Su opts for a more ambivalent attitude toward the issue of identity. In its treatment of identity, *Island of Silence* appears to be a site of ambiguity traversed by contradictory impulses. Both the desire to resist a fixed identity and the desire for one are in the novel. Being as difficult as it is to determine the stance that the novel adopts in regard to the issue of identity, it is not easy to assess the novel's achievement. On the one hand, *Island of Silence* may be regarded as a rather conventional women's novel, less innovative than the works of Li Ang and Chu T'ien-hsin we discussed above. After all, the focus on the female protagonist's exploration of the meaning of her life within the realm of heterosexual contract is a common theme in the tradition of women's literature. But the foregrounding of the politics of "body matters" and the refusal to have other political issues occupy the central stage can also be interpreted as a radical gesture that intervenes in identity politics from an oblique angle. It may thus reflect a certain strand of thinking in Taiwan that emphasizes the importance of body politics and carefully wards off the danger of having gender issue elided under the shadow of other political topics. At the same time, it is also possible to read the novel allegorically and explore the subtle dialogue that the work conducts with questions of Taiwanese nationalism. The choice for dis-identification, in fact, is a strategy adopted by quite a large number of people in Taiwan to evade the burden of history and the difficulty of working out the confusing question of national identity. The ambiguity we find in *Island of Silence* is thus representative of a

certain attitude maintained by some people toward the issue of identity politics.

In an essay that discusses the close relationship between cultural production and the formation of national and ethnic identity, Gregory Jusdanis argues that culture, rather than being a result of social change, plays a very active role in the construction of nation-states (Jusdanis 27). At the time of drastic political transformation, cultural production is often a site of contestation where various social groups negotiate their identities. The dynamic change that is taking place in women's literature in Taiwan shows women writers breaking out of their traditional ghetto to participate rigorously in the field of cultural production. They address the questions of national identity and gender identity from different positions. As they turn their writing into a site of contestation, they are developing a new direction in women's writing that deserves more critical attention. It is time that we recuperate women's literature in Taiwan from its former state of exile.

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