Taiwanese Skin, Chinese Masks: A Rhizomatic Study of the Identity Crisis in Taiwan  
Che-ming Yang

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, College of Liberal Arts, National Cheng Kung University
yang5692@mail.ncku.edu.tw

Asian Culture and History, Vol.1.2, (July 2009)

1. Introduction: The Identity Crisis in Taiwan

Since the 17th century, Taiwanese people had been colonized for about four hundred years, by several foreign regimes. As a result, Taiwanese people have much difficulty in the formation of a unified identity. Over the past fifty years, Taiwanese had been brainwashed by the KMT's essentialist view of history and identity that they have a shared history and ancestry with the mainlanders and thus should identify ourselves as Chinese. Actually, China's population also consists of a variety of ethnic groups and its modern population is the outcome of the continuous hybridity of the mixed marriage of those ethnic groups. More importantly, there is not a single nation that has long been divided and ruled by different regimes (e.g. Korea and the former Germany before reunification) facing the dilemma of Taiwan—whether choose to desperately declare independence of or seek reunification with mainland China despite China's warning and threatening that such act would lead to war. In Deleuzian terms, the revolt is Taiwanese people’s lines of flight or deterritorialization of China’s hegemonic rule and culture. And this happens to be the paradoxical aspect of Taiwan's quest for identity—to search for a shared past while denying some elements within it. Therefore, to solve the identity crises of Taiwan and re-position our relationship to China, I propose some tactics respectively from the socio-political and cultural perspectives: (1) a proper definition of nation and, (2) a repositioning of cultural identity of Taiwan through the reform of cultural representation that transforms “historical identities” (Woodward, 1997, p.21); (3) to recognize, based on Deleuzian/Bhabha's postcolonial conception of liminality (in-betweenness), the cultural/ethnic hybridity in the local people so that Taiwanese can escape the schizoid cultural/national identity or paranoia of ethnic purity and cultural orthodoxy while searching for Taiwanese cultural/national identity.

Viewed from some postcolonial/postmodern perspectives by employing mostly the micropolitics of Homi Bhabha's and Gilles Deleuze (and other theorists who hold similar conceptions), whose major common interest lies in dismantling the myth of establishing an imagined community by retrieving a shared national history/culture and assuming ethnic purity, this paper seeks to explore the paradoxical aspects of Taiwan's quest in her decolonizing progress for a “collective” national/cultural identity. Besides, this paper compares mostly Taiwan's decolonization process with South Korea's because of their similarity in territorial division due to some civil wars and the intervention of external powers (e.g., the former Soviet Union and U.S.A.). By so doing, this paper aims to propose some solution to
Taiwanese's dilemma in constructing a “collective” national/cultural identity.

2. Counter-Narratives of Taiwan's Anti-Representation

*Reaction against cultural marginalization: Taiwan's quest for identity*

In this section, I intend to apply Bhabha's conception of “counter-narrative” and Deleuze's “minor literature,” both of which aim to deconstruct the hegemony of a dominant culture. And this micropolitics may offer some alternative for those Taiwanese who are seeking lines of flight from the Oedipalization of China/Chreinese culture and furthermore, to establish an cultural autonomy through a counter discourse (or minor writing) based on “creating a people who are missing,” in Deleuzian terms.

To solidify “Chineseness” and to weaken “Taiwaneseness” in the inhabitants in Taiwan, the KMT proclaimed Mandarin the official language and at the same time, discouraged or suppressed the prevalence of Taiwanese dialects (Minnan, Hakka, and the aboriginal languages) in either education or mass media, along with the banning on the Japanese films/programs on TV. These cultural policies really weakened Taiwanese people's identification with the land and their past, and thus can hardly develop a sense of “Taiwaneseness,” for their cultural identities can only be easily produced by those representational or signifying systems (e.g. mass media) in modern societies.

Since representation is so influential on the formation of identity, under the KMT's misrepresentation of Taiwanese, many Taiwanese developed a kind of “inferiority complex” that Chineseness was superior to Taiwaneseness. To cope with this situation, Taiwanese have to continue the nativist movement of our predecessors who began to write in the mid-1970s some “sympathetic stories abut the hitherto untouched subject of daily life of farmers, workers, prostitutes, small businessmen and soon. Much of the dialogue was written in Taiwanese dialect, replete with earthy profanities” (Gold, 1994, p.61). That is to say, in order to construct Taiwan's cultural identity we have to develop our own literature and other cultural products (e.g. films, pop songs) whose main concerns are the land, its people and its history (preferred but not limited to the use of Taiwanese dialects or employing a *detransnationalized version of Chinese that is mixed up with Taiwanese dialects*), not trying hard to reclaim our excluded past but to reposition our relations to Taiwan by open-heartedly valuing and exploring her as our “being” in the transformation process of cultural “becoming.” For as Hall (1990) indicates, we can never recover the *origin* of our identities, which have been transformed by a long period of diasporas:

Cultural identity, in another sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Hall's conception of diasporas happens to correspond to Bhabha and Deleuze's anti-foundationalism and minor/counter writing.

Nowadays, many Taiwanese intellectuals have already tried to develop the sense of “Taiwaneseness” politically and culturally. In terms of Stuart Hall's perspective on cultural identity, this is a strategy to bring about a “production” of identity: “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity,' lays claim” (1990, p.392).
In Bhaba's and Deleuze's idea of counter/minor discursive strategies, they advocate the creation of a resistance literature, which is characteristic of postmodernism, for they “acknowledge late capitalism's play of simulacra, yet they find ample possibilities for creative transformations of social relations through political action in varying spheres of engagement. They reject all forms of foundationalism” (Bogue, 2002, p.103). Through minor writing, which is written in a minor language that is a deterritorialized form of a dominant language; namely, in Taiwan's case, to develop a **Taiwanese Chinese** that varies from the “**Standardized**” Chinese by adding some local Taiwanese colors in either diction or syntax without worrying about the minor language's linguistically being “impure” or “unorthodox”—“a minorization of this major language,” just like what Kafka has done to German (1997, p.5). Deleuze and Guattari (1986) strongly advocate this form of “multiple deterritorialization with language” for immigrants like Taiwanese to embark on a nomad’s quest for cultural identity:

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the bay from its crib, walk the tight rope.

**3. Conclusion**

Given the above-mentioned, Taiwanese have to set up a minor practice of the major language Chinese so that they can define their “national literature” or marginal literature and thus establish a cultural sovereignty that is also essential to founding their national sovereignty. Hence, if we are to construct Taiwan's cultural identity we should just ignore the Chinese influence, not to discard the tradition, but to utilize it in artistic creation, if necessary, so that we can constitute our national identity/subjectivity in the cultural production.

**References**

- Shih, M. (1993). *Taiwan is not part of the territory of China: the history of the four-hundred-
year development of Taiwanese society.” Taipei: Chian-wei.


Copyright 2009 National Cheng Kung University