Narrating Overseas "Taiwanese Identities": Migration and Identity Politics in Belinda Chang's *Confessions of the Woman in the Locker Room*

Phyllis Yu-ting Huang

Abstract

Belinda Chang (Chang Yuan 章緣) is among the very few Taiwanese writers whose works focus on lives of overseas Taiwanese migrants. Since the 1990s, she has published ten collections of short stories and two novels in Chinese. Despite not residing in Taiwan, she has won several prestigious literary awards on the island. Chang, a transnational migrant born in Taiwan in 1963, moved to the US in 1990 and relocated to China in 2004. While Chang's works primarily revolve around personal issues of marriage and love from the perspectives of female characters, they also present the identity struggles and transformations of Taiwanese migrants in the two countries of settlement, showing the author's views of the complicated cultural-historical relationships among the US, China, and Taiwan. By examining how overseas Taiwanese characters negotiate their Taiwanese identities in different host countries in Belinda Chang's *Confessions of the Woman in the Locker Room* 更衣室女人的告解 (2018), this article argues that Chang presents overseas Taiwanese characters' "Taiwanese identity" as flexible and strategic in different social contexts, which is especially demonstrated in her narratives of Taiwanese characters' relationship to Chinese people.

Keywords: Taiwanese identity; migrants; cross-Strait relationships; Belinda Chang

PHYLLIS YU-TING HUANG received her PhD in Chinese Studies from Monash University. She is Vice President of the Australasian Taiwan Studies Association and Research Affiliate at Monash University. She is the author of *Literary Representation of "Mainlanders" in Taiwan* (Routledge, 2021). She has published widely in both English and Chinese. Her works can be found in *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, and *Journal of Taiwan Literary Studies*.

Taiwan Lit and the Global Sinosphere
Spring 2025 | Volume 6, Issue 1

DOI: 10.61774/RLQH9673

Belinda Chang (Chang Yuan in Chinese) is one of the very few Taiwanese writers whose writing focuses on the lives of Taiwanese migrants overseas. Born in Taiwan in 1963, Chang moved to the United States in 1990 and relocated to China in 2004. Since the 1990s, she has published ten collections of short stories, two novels, and one essay collection, all in Chinese, all of which are highly related to her own migration experience. While her earlier writings primarily delve into the lives of Taiwanese postgraduate students and their spouses in the US, once she moved to China, she shifted her attention to Taiwanese entrepreneurs and Taiwanese Americans there. Most of Chang's works adopt an explicitly feminist perspective to address Taiwanese women's love, desire, and marriage. While her writings seem to revolve around personal issues, they also reflect how the Taiwanese characters negotiate multiple identities in different social contexts and reveal her views about the cultural, historical, and economic relationships among the US, China, and Taiwan.

Chang has won a number of important literary awards in Taiwan, including the prestigious *United Daily News* Literary Award (*lianhebao wenxue jiang*) in 1995. She is known primarily for her short stories, and some of her works have become important pieces in Taiwanese literature. As literary critic Yang Chia-hsien puts it, "Belinda Chang's 'The Woman in the Locker Room' is definitely a required text in university courses on Taiwanese feminist fiction" (2020, 3). Despite her literary achievement, academic research on Belinda Chang's work is comparatively sparse due to her marginal position as an overseas Taiwanese author writing in Chinese about Taiwanese and *huaren* (ethnic Chinese) migrants, which is not in line with either Taiwanese literature's major focus on post-colonialism or Taiwanese nationalism in the post-martial law period.[1] Taiwanese literary critic Fan Ming-ju thus notes that Belinda Chang is a "marginal" writer by virtue of her geographical position as an outsider and identity as a migrant (2018, 7–8). Yet, Belinda Chang's unique narrative position enables her to vividly represent the complicated relationships between Taiwanese migrants and their countries of settlement, showing how these migrants' Taiwanese identification is continuously under negotiation after moving to a new country.

This article analyzes the identity politics of Taiwanese migrants in two countries, the US and China, as seen in Belinda Chang's *Confessions of the Woman in the Locker Room* 更衣室女人的告解, published in 2018 (*Confessions* hereafter).[2] The text was chosen because it is a selection of Chang's twenty most representative short stories written from 1995 to 2014, which presents Chang's observations and reflections on Taiwanese migrants' shifting identities across two decades. Her Taiwanese characters are depicted as showing strong admiration for the US, and yet they remain alienated from American society. Their Taiwanese identity is often subsumed under the more generalized category of *huaren*. Whereas China seems to share the same language and culture with Taiwan, her Taiwanese characters do not see China as a home, but instead consciously keep some distance from the local Chinese community by emphasizing their

[1] Taiwan was under martial law imposed by the Kuomintang government from 1949 to 1987.
[2] The title of this book is based on her most famous short story, from 1995, entitled "The Woman in the Locker Room," which is also included in the book.

Taiwanese identity. This article argues that overseas Taiwanese's identity is flexible, negotiable, and strategic in Chang's literary narratives, as she presents identity as politics—something people can adopt to benefit their difficult lives in different social contexts.

I. Belinda Chang's Overseas "Taiwanese Identities"

Most of Belinda Chang's short stories in *Confessions* are narrated from the perspective of a Taiwanese character or narrator, and yet the "Taiwanese identity" in these works is malleable and slippery, which to a great extent mirrors the author's transnational lived experience. Chang's move to the US from Taiwan in 1990 was in line with the trend towards globalization in post-martial law Taiwan. In 2004, she moved again, this time with her family to China, due to her husband's job relocation. Her transnational migration exemplifies that of many Taiwanese—for better education and career opportunities in the 1990s to the US, and then on to China with the emergence of its economic potential in the 2000s. Her works thus reflect the transformations of Taiwanese migrants' identity in the waves of global movement during the past several decades.

Chang did not start to write literary works until she moved to the US in the 1990s, and she has often been categorized as an overseas Chinese writer (*haiwai huaren zuojia* or *luwai zuojia*).[3] Nonetheless, in her earlier works, she explicitly expresses her identity as a Taiwanese. In her 2008 essay collection *Being a Neighbor of Eileen Chang*, she called herself "a Taiwanese guest in the US" (*Taiwan liumei ke*) to signify her Taiwanese identity.[4] In an essay in 2018, she also explained why she had adopted a Taiwanese narrative perspective in her earlier works, stating, "[I] needed to tell stories about [myself]. […] Most of the time, migrant writers' motif of writing comes from their yearning to get closer to the wonderful place at a distance, which is their original land, their mother culture" ("Literary Taiwan," 2018). Chang's statement above clearly demonstrates her emotional attachment to Taiwan as well as her identification with Taiwan. This is an important feature of her literary works, since before Chang, most literary works by overseas writers from Taiwan[5] narrated Taiwanese migrants as Chinese. Yet, while expressing her identification with Taiwan, Chang constantly contests a homogeneous or essentialist meaning of being a Taiwanese in the global context.

In fact, "Taiwanese identity" is a recently developed consciousness that contains a wide range of meanings. Chang has lived overseas for many years and, as a consequence, her idea of "Taiwanese identity" is highly related to the social contexts in which she has been located and thus

[3] Chang is also a member of the Overseas Chinese Women Writers Association, a US-based organization founded by some Taiwanese writers. She was invited to give talks at the Association's annual meetings in 2010 and 2018.

[4] In recent years, Chang has started to write from a mainland Chinese perspective. For example, in her *Another Kind of Life* (2018), more than half of the short stories are narrated from the perspective of Chinese characters. However, in the preface, Chang explained that the Chinese perspective in her work is in fact informed by her own lived experience in Taiwan and the US, so it is also different from the ordinary Chinese people's perspective.

[5] Here I consciously use "writers from Taiwan" instead of Taiwanese writers, because the idea of "Taiwanese" as a cultural identity had not been formed during the martial law period.

is notably different from that of Taiwanese writers residing in Taiwan. It is therefore important to discuss Belinda Chang's interpretations of "Taiwanese identity" against the background of the identity of earlier migrants from Taiwan to the US, as well as the nationalist Taiwanese identity emphasized by many other Taiwanese writers nowadays, before we analyze Chang's narratives of Taiwanese migrants.

The concept of "Taiwanese identity" was not widely accepted in Taiwan prior to the lifting of martial law in 1987.[6] Beginning in 1945, when Japan relinquished its former island colony, Taiwan was under the rule of the KMT (Kuomintang or Chinese Nationalist Party) regime. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party defeated the KMT and established the People's Republic of China. The defeated KMT Nationalist government, along with around one million Chinese civilians, retreated to Taiwan. To strengthen its political power, the KMT forcefully promoted Chinese nationalism by making Mandarin the official language, banning other dialects and languages, and teaching Taiwan residents to identify themselves as Chinese and see Taiwan as part of China.

The KMT's indoctrination was largely a success. As sociologist A-chin Hsiau observed, in the 1970s most people who had grown up in post-war Taiwan saw themselves as Chinese (2018, 101). This sense of Chinese identification was reflected in many literary works during the martial law period, including those written by migrants from Taiwan to the United States. In the 1960s, a great number of people moved to the US, driven by a desire to escape the KMT's dictatorship and lured by the US's continuous financial support for Taiwan (1951–1965), which made it a dream land for many Taiwanese. There was a popular saying among the elite—"Come! Come! Come! Come to National Taiwan University. Go! Go! Go! Go to the United States!" (*Lai lai lai, lai Taida! Qu qu qu, qu Meiguo!*). This saying reflected a social phenomenon, in which many outstanding students from Taiwan's top university desired to pursue further education in the United States and eventually immigrate there. A large proportion of them were Chinese civil war migrants ("mainlanders"), including well-known Sinophone writers such as Pai Hsien-yung, Yu Li-hua, and Li Yu. Since many of them had spent their childhood in China and received the KMT's Sinocentric education, their work often reveals different levels of diasporic nostalgia for China mixed with memories of their lives in Taiwan, which can be exemplified by Pai Hsien-yung's *Taipei People* (*Taipei ren*) in 1971 and *New Yorkers* (*Niuyue ke*) in 2007.[7] Whereas *New Yorkers* delves into the migrants' isolation and frustration in the US, *Taipei People* addresses mainlander characters' nostalgia for China and sense of displacement in Taiwan. In both works, China is presented as the eternal homeland for the characters, all of whom identify themselves as Chinese (*Zhonguo ren*). In the preface to *New Yorkers*, Liu Jun commented that Pai Hsien-yung's works from the 1960s conveyed "a strong [Chinese] Nationalist perspective" and portrayed Chinese people in the

[6] Some scholars have also argued that the idea of Taiwanese identity might have first emerged in the late 1970s during the debates over nativist literature (*xiangtu wenxue lünzhan*), in which writers argued over whether literature produced in Taiwan should address more local Taiwanese issues rather than those in China. As Taiwan was dominated by the Kuomintang's Chinese nationalism at that time, such a debate demonstrates that those writers had already started to recognize the distinctiveness of the lived experience and culture in Taiwan versus that in China.

[7] *New Yorkers* is a collection of Pai's six works published between 1965 and 2003. It centres on Chinese immigrants' lives in the US.

metropolitan US as experiencing "exile and degradation" (2007, 5). While Pai's later works in *New Yorkers* address how these migrants gradually settled down and became New Yorkers, Taiwan is never shown as a place with which his characters feel a sense of identity. It is seen more as a transitional point in these migrants' movement from China to the US.

Unlike the 1960s immigrant writers who often saw themselves as Chinese and whose struggles primarily resulted from conflicting Chinese and American cultural identities, Belinda Chang's writings went beyond the framework of Chinese nationalism, taking on a more Sinophone perspective, narrating her Taiwanese characters as identifying with Taiwan rather than China, and thus showing them not only wrestling between American identity and Taiwanese identity but also struggling to distinguish their Taiwanese identity from Chinese identity. For example, "Danny and Doris" recounts a romantic relationship between a second-generation Taiwanese American and a second-generation Chinese American, which ends with the lovers' accidental death. While the story seems to highlight the shared cultural values between the two families, such as the first-generation migrants' conservative attitude toward sex, it also displays the cultural differences between Taiwan and China. Chang especially mentions Chinese language schools in the US, stating, "In earlier years, Chinese language schools were run and taught by Taiwanese, so they taught Taiwanese alphabetic symbols and traditional Chinese. With the arrival of more PRC immigrants, these schools started to teach the pinyin system and simplified Chinese" (*Confessions*, 306). In the story, Chang presents China and Taiwan as two autonomous cultural entities even if they share quite a few cultural similarities. It is notable that while current Sinophone theories often focus on the complex relationships between overseas Sinophone communities and China, as well as a hierarchical sense of "Chineseness," China, in Chang's works, simply represents another cultural entity or a new place of settlement (as seen in her later works) for Taiwanese characters. No nostalgic or patriotic feelings are involved. Her Taiwanese characters' identification with Taiwan is not constrained by the framework of Chinese nationalism nor is Taiwanese identity subject to Chinese identity. In her later works set in China, Chang even turns the hierarchical concept of Chineseness on its head, suggesting that Taiwanese migrants perceive themselves as culturally superior to Chinese. This narrative perspective reflects the author's confidence in Taiwanese culture and identity, emphasizing their distinctiveness from those of the PRC.

Even though most of her characters are Taiwanese, Chang does not appear keen to define the content of Taiwanese identity. Instead, she often presents the features of this identity by portraying Taiwanese characters' interactions with Americans and Chinese, through which their unique cultural values and social norms are brought into focus. Fan Ming-ju thus remarks that Chang's seemingly personal stories, in fact, implicitly speak to the complicated issue of Taiwanese people's "conflicts and predicament in terms of identity politics" (2018, 4). It is notable that Chang's characters are not afraid to embrace multiple identities, nor do they work hard to defend their Taiwanese identity. Instead, her Taiwanese migrant characters often make use of their multiple cultural and national identities for their own benefit. In other words, Taiwanese identity is only part of the characters' repertoire of identification. At times, even if readers are shown that the characters identify with Taiwan, they intentionally disguise their Taiwanese identification and

make use of other identities for their own benefit or protection. Such a feature is especially conspicuous in her later works set in China. For instance, in "Wars between Cats and Dogs," when the protagonist Mrs. Lin is told by the real estate agent that the landlord prefers not to rent to Taiwanese, she insists, "We are Americans" and argues that she entered China using a US passport (*Confessions*, 244). This example reveals how the character navigates her multiple identities and nationalities, momentarily negating aspects of her identity while emphasizing her American citizenship. Such a narrative of "Taiwanese identity" is controversial from the perspective of Taiwanese literature, a sphere in which a nationalist Taiwanese discourse and local (or *bentu*) cultural values are underscored. In this regard, the "Taiwanese identity" presented in Chang's works may not seem "Taiwanese" enough. And yet, Chang's works demonstrate the necessity for overseas Taiwanese to modify their established Taiwanese identity in order to fit into new environments. Chang's literary representations of overseas Taiwanese, to a great extent, echo cultural critic Fran Martin's interpretation of transnationalism, which, she argues, presents a sense of "mistrust of monolithic and essentialist understandings of Chineseness," and focuses on "transnational mobility's capacities to (re)make social identities through everyday practices" (2024, 780). Chang's work, using Fran Martin's idea, challenges the discourse of Chinese nationalism by presenting transnational migrants' identity dynamics.

Ien Ang's idea of diasporic Chinese identity further sheds light on Chang's articulation of overseas Taiwanese identity. In *On not Speaking Chinese* in 2001, Ang argues that whether ethnic Chinese in different countries call themselves Chinese is a political decision and highly contextual: "Why still identify ourselves as 'Chinese' at all? The answer depends on context: sometimes it is and sometimes it is not useful to stress our Chineseness, however defined. In other words, the answer is political" (2001, 36). Whereas Ang's argument is developed based upon her disagreement with imposing a hierarchical concept of Chineseness on all overseas Chinese, her argument regarding why overseas Chinese choose to identify or not with China and Chineseness is highly relevant to Chang's representation of overseas Taiwanese's identity, as both she and Chang demonstrate that for migrants, identity is not something people are born with but a subjective and strategic decision, and this decision is context-oriented. For Chang's characters, no matter how much and to what extent they identify with Taiwan, their Taiwanese identity can be emphasized, underplayed, or even hidden depending on the situation they face.

Whereas Chang's work appears to defy hierarchical Chineseness or nationalist Taiwaneseness, it reveals the author's personal preference in terms of identity, presenting how she recognizes Taiwan, the US, and the PRC, the three places she has lived. Her Taiwanese characters are more apt to be identified as Taiwanese or Taiwanese American rather than Chinese. Literary critic Hsieh Hsin-chin argues that in Chang's essay collection in 2008, she often adopted a Western (American) perspective to judge her new life in China. Such a perspective reveals Chang's "superior feeling with regard to her Western experience" (2016, 162). Yet, while her work shows her bias for Western modernity and values, she also casts some judgement on those who take advantage of China's admiration for Western countries to obtain or maintain their superior social status. The following two sections will provide detailed analysis regarding Chang's narratives of overseas Taiwanese

characters' identity transformation in the US and China, respectively, explaining how they modify various identities (or how their identities are modified) to fit into different social contexts.

II. Alienated *huaren* in the US

Of the twenty short stories in *Confessions*, six address the theme of *huaren* migrants in the United States, including five on Taiwanese characters and one on PRC Chinese characters. Chang presents a rather bleak picture of their lives, as her narratives are focused not so much on the characters' self-fulfilment as on their displacement and depression owing to their inferior social status, cultural barriers, and difficulties in integrating into American society. Although she demonstrates these characters' eagerness to fit in, most of the stories show that their efforts are seldom repaid. Interestingly, they never give up their American Dream. No matter how difficult their lives are, none of them are presented as wishing to return to or feeling nostalgic for their country/place of origin. David Der-wei Wang thus comments that the characters in Chang's stories already "regard the alien land as their homeland" (2003, 125) and that what the author addresses is how overseas *huaren* seek a way to settle themselves in a new land. However, the characters' determination to live in the US usually comes in tandem with an overwhelming feeling of frustration. As mentioned above, Chang especially focuses on Taiwanese female characters' predicaments. For example, in "The Woman in the Locker Room," the protagonist is a nameless "she" who accompanied her husband to the US in order to pursue a postgraduate degree. The story is set three years after she had arrived in the US, but "her English is still not good enough, and she still cannot drive a car" (*Confessions*, 37); she tries several jobs but none of them suits her. Losing her autonomy and self-confidence, she feels rejected and isolated. Similarly, in "Born with a Green Thumb," the Taiwanese character Jane marries a second-generation Asian American who is a successful financial adviser. While it appears that Jane climbs the ladder to the upper-middle class by marriage, she endures her husband's infidelity and suffers from depression. In the two stories, due to the female characters' subordination in marriage, cultural/language barriers, and professional frustrations in building careers in a new land, they become depressed and feel disconnected. Even those who have a job, such as the protagonist in "The Dancer Sasha" and the real estate agent Judy in "Born with a Green Thumb," are discontent with their lives, and instead still struggling to settle in their new homeland.

Ethnic Chinese migrants' feelings of being excluded from American society are repeatedly highlighted in Chang's stories, and she takes gender and ethnic/racial biases as the main reasons. The narrator of "Born with a Green Thumb," Judy, describes her friendship with Phil, the head of a gardening club, noting, "Because I am quiet, I cannot fit in their group. Phil is my only friend. He is the most relaxed person I have ever met, which makes me forget my *gender* and *ethnicity*" (emphasis added, *Confessions*, 62). Here Chang shows the quietness of immigrants in the US and especially mentions gender and ethnicity so as to reflect Judy's uneasiness when dealing with local people. Another example is "Northern Snakehead Fish," a story about a Chinese family in a small

town where an invasive species of fish from China threatens the local environment. Chang addresses the issue of racial discrimination by comparing the Northern Snakehead to *huaren* in the US, showing how they, like the fish, are seen as "external invaders" (*yiguo qinluezhe*) (*Confessions*, 142). In this story, Michael, the son of protagonist Charlie, has been bullied continuously since he was young and is eventually stabbed by white teenagers. But due to the horrible experience of racial discrimination, Michael's Chinese background becomes a source of personal distress, and he longs to become "a real American" (*Confessions*, 146).

Although in Chang's works most of the major characters are Taiwanese, and they primarily maintain identification with Taiwan, their Taiwanese characteristics are portrayed rather ambiguously and implicitly. Without careful reading and/or readers' personal lived experience in Taiwan, it is difficult to identify the characters' original homeland. For example, in "The Woman in the Locker Room," the very few clues to the male protagonist's place of origin are that he completed his compulsory military service before going to the US and that he studied in a "provincial" high school (*shengli gaozhong*) and a "national" university (*guoli daxue*)—terminology unique to Taiwan (*Confessions*, 39).

That the author continuously undermines these characters' Taiwanese identities is possibly a matter of timing, owing to the fact that during the 1990s most of Belinda Chang's works were published in Taiwan and targeted towards Taiwanese readers. She might therefore have taken the fact of the characters' Taiwanese identity for granted. More importantly, Chang's generalizations about Taiwanese characters in the US reflect her understanding of Taiwanese people's (and other ethnic Chinese people's) situation in the course of assimilation. A large part of Chang's work delves into the stereotyping of *huaren* in American society. She recounts how Taiwanese migrants' Taiwanese identity is often generalized into the more ambiguous, pan-ethnic category of *huaren*, as if it might be supposed that ethnic Chinese from different countries could all share the same culture. This can be exemplified by the names of the *huaren* characters: Most of them use English names instead of their original names. Readers can hardly identify the characters' places of origin via their names. Thus, important traces of their background are obscured. While Chang indeed makes efforts to distinguish Taiwanese from Chinese in stories such as "Danny and Doris," the subtle cultural differences are shown as only comprehended by the Taiwanese and Chinese characters themselves, but not by other Americans.

The categorization of *huaren* does not necessarily contain a negative connotation, however, it is still an oversimplified grouping. And yet, Belinda Chang's characters seem to have accepted such a label. The author herself also does not see it from a critical perspective. In "Northern Snakehead Fish," the term *huaren* is repeatedly used to suggest both individuals as well as the collective. When it turns out that the environmental catastrophe in the town was caused by a *huaren* (versus an individual person from a certain country) who bought a pair of Northern Snakehead and released them into a pond, *huaren* as a collective whole become the target of public blame in the media. And as the narrator says from the perspective of the Chinese protagonist, "living in an alien land, an individual represents the whole. If one *huaren* succeeds, all *huaren* stand proud; if one *huaren* makes mistakes, all *huaren* shudder" (*Confessions*, 144). As Richard Alba and Victor Nee

remark, in the process of immigrants' assimilation, "individuals' ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group […], and individuals on both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class" (2003, 11). Resonating with Alba and Nee's idea, Chang's work suggests that due to PRC migrants' and Taiwanese migrants' similar lived experience of alienation in the US, they come to develop a sense of collective identity and empathy with each other under the category of *huaren*.

Chang's narratives of Taiwanese migrants in the US present a typical center-periphery relationship with the migrants being the marginalized who try hard to assimilate into mainstream American society but continuously feel rejected and frustrated. The "Taiwanese identity" in Chang's narratives merges into an American identity and is gradually transformed into a unique Sinophone identity, *huaren*, in the context of the US. While the term *huaren* in many contexts is used to refer to overseas Chinese in general (Wang 2013, 133–134), in Chang's *Confessions*, it specifically alludes to ethnic Chinese Americans and their unique lived experience *in* the United States. This interpretation aligns with Shu-mei Shih's assertion that "the Sinophone is a place-based, everyday practice and experience" (2013, 33) and Gungwu Wang's argument that varying localities and environments result in distinct practice of being Chinese overseas (2013, 131). Chang portrays her PRC characters and Taiwanese characters in the US as distinctive; however, they reach a sense of solidarity and collectiveness due to their similar lived experience. Chang's "American stories" do not present Taiwanese migrants' experience as fulfilling the American Dream but bring to the fore their difficulties in this new country of their settlement. In Chang's stories, these Taiwanese migrants' original national and cultural identities bring more baggage than glory in the US.

III. The Superior Taiwanese in China

In sharp contrast to Chang's narratives of Taiwanese characters' frustrating and ambiguous *huaren* identity in the US, in her stories set in China, "Taiwanese identity" is emphasized and even magnified. "*Taiwan ren*" (Taiwanese) represent a higher social class which may not be as superior as Americans (or Westerners) but is seen by the narrators and Chinese characters as wealthier and more culturally sophisticated than mainland Chinese people. *Confessions* includes six stories set in China. Except for "Cut in Line," which is narrated from the perspective of a Taiwanese male, the protagonists of the remaining five stories are wives of Taiwanese businessmen or Taiwanese American professionals. Similar to her stories set in the US, husbands are often missing from the major plots, and wives are usually presented as lonely and isolated from local society. Yet, the major difference is that these Taiwanese women are not shown as feeling inferior; instead, they are presented as privileged in the PRC because of their wealth.

The most common theme of Chang's "Chinese stories" is the rich but lonely Taiwanese wives' affairs with Chinese men, with the wide disparities between them as a focal point. For example,

"Bitter Bamboo" recounts the flirtation between a Taiwanese woman, "she," and her Shanghainese language teacher, "he." The third-person narrator states that her Taiwanese background "makes her exotic. In addition, she lives in a rich compound. Her luxurious lifestyle is far beyond his imagination" (*Confessions*, 189). In "Tango Dance," the Chinese character Xiao Fan lives in a so-called "civilian community" (*wenming xiaoqu*) in Shanghai.

> The area has gradually been occupied by Japanese and Taiwanese. The homes in the newly-built, upper-class complex often have lawns and security staff. There are many Japanese clubs, Taiwanese restaurants and Taiwanese street foods. Walking on this road, he feels as though he has entered an alien land. (*Confessions*, 226)

Similar descriptions are seen in most of Chang's "Chinese stories," showing how Taiwan is associated with civilization and affluence. The texts demonstrate not only the huge financial disparity between the Taiwanese migrants and ordinary Chinese but also the cultural distinctions between them, as Taiwan is often depicted as feeling "exotic" or "alien" to the Chinese characters.

Chang's narration of the huge gap between Taiwanese and Chinese to a great extent reflects the actual situation in China as it was in the early 2000s, presenting the complex post-war relationship between Taiwan and China. During the three decades of China's closure to the outside world from the 1950s to 1980s, Taiwan developed into a Westernized society. Due to the influences of the US and Japan (which had modernized Taiwan during its colonial period), Taiwan not only advanced in economic performance but also served as a hub that produced a modernized "Chinese" culture, as exemplified by the popularity of Taiwan's pop culture in China and other parts of Asia in the 1980s and 1990s (Gold, 1993). As Wei-ming Tu in his 1991 article "Cultural China" remarks, overseas Chinese communities like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore surpassed China in terms of providing a model of modernized Chinese culture: "the transformative potential of the periphery is so great that it seems inevitable that it will significantly shape the intellectual discourse on cultural China for years to come" (1991, 28). Although in the past decade the PRC has proven that it has the ability to construct a modernized society with its strong economic power, since Chang's stories were written in the 2000s, the relationship between the PRC and Taiwan presented in her works is by no means one with China as the center and Taiwan as the periphery, either culturally or economically. Belinda Chang's stories astutely represent how in the earlier years of China's opening to the world, Taiwan was a role model for Chinese modernization in the PRC, shaping China's understanding and imagining of modernized Chinese societies. While historian Arif Dirlik has argued that China's economic success has not come at the cost of its political and cultural autonomy (2007, 17–18), Chang shows that ordinary Chinese people in fact strongly admired Western culture and that Taiwanese people, particularly those with experience living in Western countries, exploited this for their own benefit in China.

"Cut in Line" best represents Chang's view on the triangular relationship between China, Taiwan, and the US, as well as transnational migrants' complex articulation of identity in the context. The story was written and published in 2008 when many Taiwanese people were moving to China for better career opportunities. "Cut in Line" can be seen as a continuation of Chang's "American stories," in some of which frustrated *huaren* further migrate to another country. The

protagonist's experience of living across multiple countries leads to a hybrid and fragmented sense of self—an unhappy hybridity that is reflected in his psychological struggles with navigating multiple cultures. In the text, the character's attempts to constantly reshape his identity in order to conform to social expectations highlight his internal conflict and desire to secure a higher social status. The protagonist Peter Wang of the story is a Taiwanese who received a degree in the US and lived there for ten years. Feeling isolated and displaced in the US, he then decides to move to Shanghai and work at a Taiwanese company. Unlike Chang's other "Chinese stories," which often emphasize the protagonists' Taiwanese identity, Chang underplays Peter's Taiwanese background but underscores his American background by stating that he has American citizenship and suggesting that, compared with his Taiwanese background, his American background serves as the more useful social capital in China. As is shown, Peter's American background is the main reason he is seen as a golden bachelor by Shanghainese women. Peter appears to be highly Westernized: He works with Westerners, speaks English, and "despises anything that doesn't fit Western cultural norms" (*Confessions*, 208). As the story unfolds, Peter's actual feelings about the US come into focus. It turns out that his lived experience in the US brought him trauma and humiliation rather than any feeling of belonging: Poor, marginalized, and culturally alienated, Peter, like other of Chang's Taiwanese characters in the US, struggle to survive in American society. Yet, when he moves to China, he intentionally presents himself as coming from Western culture, clinging to this Western identity to maintain a sense of superiority in China. Readers are told that when he was in the US, he did not really like coffee; drinking coffee was simply a way to help him fit in with the culture. In the English-speaking world, his English was not good enough; nobody cared what he wanted to say. Only when he migrates to China does he start to "embrace the Western culture, wear Western brand names, visit Westerners' communities, and make friends with Westerners" (*Confessions*, 206). "Cut in Line" presents the fraught politics of identity among overseas Taiwanese, showing that the protagonist's actual identification is secondary to his concerns about living well in another country. To explain based on Ien Ang's idea, the major consideration for the protagonist is the usefulness of this identity in the social context where he lives. In Chang's handling, the concept of "Taiwanese identity" becomes slippery and ambiguous.

It is notable that Chang's "Chinese stories" in *Confessions* contain quite a few negative narratives of China, which may be seen as refracting the author's own cultural bias towards the US and her identification with Taiwan. In "Wars between Cats and Dogs," the protagonist/narrator Mrs. Lin, like Chang, lived for years in the US and then moved to Shanghai with her husband. Chang puts forth some of her views of China through Mrs. Lin by showing her shock at the slight worth of a Chinese life. Mrs. Lin describes how a taxi driver tells her and her husband that, in a traffic accident, it is better to crush and kill a pedestrian than leave them alive since killing them means you only need to pay some compensation to their family rather than having to take care of them for life (*Confessions*, 247). The protagonist says that she is stunned by the statement, which obviously goes against her moral values. The story goes further to present Mrs. Lin's distrust of the Chinese government. She associates Chinese government officials with brutality and cruelty, even to the extent that she admits, "I cannot help feeling scared of the Chinese police. It is similar

to my fear of the People's Liberation Army, because they make me think of China's threat to massacre Taiwan. The reaction is an instinct beyond rationality" (*Confessions*, 251). Mrs. Lin, a Taiwanese American living in China, is thus shown as never feeling at home in China. She intentionally keeps her distance from society, as her Taiwanese identity and American identity as well as the cultural values that come along with these identities make her unable to identify with PRC society and its values.

In contrast to her discomfort with Chinese people, Mrs. Lin is depicted as feeling more at ease with her Japanese neighbor, Mrs. Narita. Chang uses this contrast to highlight the complexities of Mrs. Lin's hybrid Taiwanese identity. Chang especially demonstrates the contrasting attitudes between PRC people's hostility toward Japanese and Lin's warm childhood memory of her parents and grandparents using Japanese as their daily language. As the first-person narrator, Mrs. Lin reflects on how the "numerous Japanese elements" in her life, shaped by Taiwan's colonial past, have been internalized and become part of her identity (*Confessions*, 247). The story portrays Mrs. Lin as sympathizing with her Japanese neighbor when tensions rise between Japan and China, and Japanese migrants in China become targets of hostility. In this way, Mrs. Lin's Taiwanese identity is shown as infused with Japanese cultural influences, and further blended with her American identity. Notably, the concept of Chineseness in relation to Taiwanese identity is absent in the story; China is depicted merely as the place where Mrs. Lin resides, but not one in which she feels a sense of belonging.

IV. Conclusion

In portraying Taiwanese migrants' lives in the US and China, Belinda Chang's *Confessions of the Woman in the Locker Room* shows that overseas migrants' "Taiwanese identity" is malleable and adaptable, with the answer to the question of what this identity means becoming ambiguous. While Chang appears to distinguish Taiwanese identity from a hierarchical Chinese identity, she does not offer a rigid or essentialist interpretation either, in terms of what it means to be Taiwanese. Instead, her characters' social and cultural identities are portrayed as evolving—gradually adapting to, yet not entirely assimilating into, different contexts. With each relocation, the characters' identities become increasingly layered, complex, and marginal, which is often presented by their psychological struggles and conflicts. Chang's work underscores the inherent difficulty for transnational migrants to feel a sense of belonging, even with respect to their homeland.

In her earlier works, Chang narrated the experiences of Taiwanese migrants in the United States, a destination often idealized as a land of opportunity. Yet, upon arrival, her characters encounter isolation and rejection, challenging the popular myth that immigration to Western countries guarantees a brighter future. Despite the evident disillusionment, the characters persist in adhering to this myth, suggesting a deep-seated hope or denial of the harsh realities. Chang's narratives in this period also demonstrate a sense of empathy for all Chinese migrants in the US by blurring the distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese identities, which converge into the broader *huaren*

category. However, in her later works set in China, Chang sharpens the distinction between Taiwan and China, portraying Taiwan as more advanced and civilized and depicting her Taiwanese characters as consciously repulsing pressure to assimilate into the local culture.

Whether in her "American stories" or "Chinese stories," and regardless of the characters' social or financial standing in their host countries, Chang's Taiwanese characters remain unsettled. They grapple with loneliness and face persistent struggles, their experiences reflecting the complexities of migration and identity. Chang's work ultimately challenges the dominant narratives of successful migration, offering a portrayal of the lived realities of transnational migrants—frequently marked by alienation, ambiguity, and unfulfilled aspirations.

Focusing on Taiwanese migrants, Chang's work challenges the meaning of "Taiwanese identity," which turns out to be ambiguous and fluid because of the characters' transnational migration experience, adoption of multiple identities, and use (or abuse) of these identities. Chang's interpretation of Taiwanese identity diverges from the prevalent nationalist discourse in mainstream Taiwanese society, which often emphasizes a distinct *bentu* culture rooted in the land and delineated by clear national boundaries. By addressing the transformative experiences of Taiwanese migrants, Chang's writings acknowledge the inevitability of identity evolution when individuals move across borders in global contexts. Her literary exploration of Taiwanese migration articulates a sense of transnational Taiwanese identification—one that remains connected to Taiwan but extends far beyond its geographic and cultural confines.

Works Cited

Alba, Richard and Victor Nee. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Ang, Ien. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Chang, Yuan. *Dang Chang Ailing de linju: Taiwan liumeike de jinghu shenghuoji* [*Being a Neighbor of Eileen Chang*]. Taipei: Jianxing [健行文化], 2008.

Chang, Yuan. *Gengyishi nüren de gaojie* [*Confessions of the Woman in the Locker Room*]. Taipei: Unitas [聯合文學], 2018.

Chang, Yuan. *Ling yizhong shenghuo* [*Another Kind of Life*]. Taipei: Unitas [聯合文學], 2018.

Chang, Yuan. "Wenxue Taiwan: haiwai pian 4 : Chang Yuan/Chunri zai tianya" ["Literary Taiwan: Overseas 4: Belinda Chang/Spring Days at a Distance"]. *Lianfu Dianzibao*, vol. 6164, 8 Nov. 2018. https://paper.udn.com/udnpaper/PIC0004/333429/web/ Accessed 4 June 2023.

Dirlik, Arif. "Global South: Predicament and Promise." *The Global South,* 1, no. 1, (2007):, 12–-23.

Fan, Ming-ju. "Yixiangren de wenxue xinglü" ["The Literary Journey of an Alien"]. In *Gengyishi nüren de gaojie* [*Confessions of the Woman in the Changing Room*]. Taipei: Unitas [聯合文學], 2018, pp. 3 – 8.

Gold, Thomas B. "Go with Your Feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan Popular Culture in Greater China." *The China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 907–925.

Hsiau, A-chin. "Narrating Taiwan out of the Chinese Empire: Rewriting Taiwan's History from a Taiwanese Perspective in the 1970s." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 18, no. 2 (2018): 93–126.

Hsieh, Hsin-chin. "'Taiwan liumei ke': Chang Yuan *Dang Chang Ai-ling de linju* de kuajie yidong yu chengshi shuxie" ["'A Taiwanese Guest in the US': Cross-border Movement and Metropolitan Writing in Belinda Chang's *Being a Neighbor of Eileen Chang*"]. *Wenshi Taiwan Xuebao* [*Taiwan Studies in Literature and History*] 10 (2016): 155–174.

Liu, Jun. "Cong guozu lichang dao shijie zhuyi" ["From Nationalism to Globalism"]. In *Niuyue Ke* [*New Yorkers*], edited by Hsien-yung Pai. Taipei: Erya, 2007, pp. 1–12.

Martin, Fran. "Guest Editor's Introduction—Expansive Trajectories: Remapping Transnationalism in the Global China Era." *positions: asia critique* 32, no. 3 (2024): 771–796.

Shih, Shu-mei. "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production." In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 25–42.

Tu, Wei-ming. "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center." *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (1991): 1–32.

Wang, Der-wei. "Ai zai winyi manyan shi: ping Chang Yuan de *Yi*" ["Love in the Time of Mosquito Disease: On Belinda Chang's *Disease*"]. *Lianhe Wenxue* 222 (2003): 124–125.

Wang, Gungwu. "Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice." In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 131–144.

Yang, Chia-hsien. “Fumeng yu shiwang: dachengshi li de nürenmen” [“Dreams and Reality: Women in Big Cities”]. In *Huangjin Nanren* [*Golden Bachelor*] by Chang Yuan. Taipei: Unitas, 2020, pp. 3–7.