The China that was not to be: nostalgia and the exilic imagination of Taiwan’s mainland diaspora

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Studies of diaspora typically inquire after culturally homogenous populations driven from their homelands and living as subalterns in their new environs. In this paper, we look at such an exiled population living not at the periphery, but in the upper rungs of its host society, and as such is able to impose its ancestral language, literature of nostalgia, and exilic world view upon its host population. We show how mainland refugees of the Chinese Civil War entering Taiwan between 1945 and 1949 have managed, for some 40 years, to import an exoglossic linguistic standard, set literary trends born of nostalgic longing, define a culture of pan-Chinese nationalism, and impose an imaginary geography of historical China upon the local population. We further illustrate how this nostalgia-tinged interpretation of Chinese history and culture has shaped a generation of Western views of China and imparted a literary and cultural legacy far beyond expectations generated by the diaspora’s small numbers. Finally, as travel bans are lifted and counter-diasporic movement made possible since the 1980s, we show how contact with reality spells the death knell for diasporic identity and vitality, which, among Taiwan’s third-generation mainland diaspora, are now little more than a historical curiosity and cultural commodity with which to look back in wonder.

Keywords: diaspora; transnationality; nostalgia; exile; Sinophone literature; Taiwan

The year 1949 marks an abrupt turning point in Chinese cultural history, a point at which the decadent material culture of old capitalist China parted ways with the austere idealism of Marxist China – and it was Marxism that carried the day, over the greater part of the Chinese mainland at least, leaving the remnant of the Nationalist old guard scurrying for cover on a small island off the East China Sea, an island known to the world as Taiwan.

It soon became clear that this mainland influx, numbering close to a million and including much of China’s elite business, military, and intellectual class, was arriving not merely to seek...
refuge, but to wield political power, ruling over the native population of seven million. This led to the creation of separate ‘native’ vs. ‘mainlander’ identities, correlated with different levels of intellectual and socio-economic achievement – a class division which divides Taiwanese society to this day.

No less interesting than the native-mainlander political divide however is the exilic nature of this mainland cultural colonization. Taiwan having been cut off from the mainland in every way after 1949, the ‘mainland’ culture that was introduced to the island was a culture frozen in time, hailing from the pre-communist era of prosperity and opulence, standing in stark contrast to the political upheavals in China proper after the communist takeover. As time progressed, the version of mainland language, mainland history and mainland geography taught in Taiwanese schools drifted progressively away from reality. The standard language of the island was based on educated Pekinese of the 1930s, which differs subtly from the norm used in present-day mainland China. The geography of China taught in Taiwanese schools was based on a map few on the mainland would recognize – one which labels defunct provinces and annexes Mongolia into its territory.

In the sections that follow, we trace the formation of this diasporic mindscape, beginning with the circumstances of the mainland exodus, followed by an exploration of language policies which, on the one hand, fomented separate native and diaspora identities and, on the other hand, set the stage for an imagined homeland which loomed large in the high culture of the island. The extent to which this imaginary homeland dominated the literary and cultural discourse of the 1950s to the 1970s is then detailed, followed by an account of the unravelling of the delusion as China opened up to the world.

Exodus 1945–1949

Between 1945 and 1949, somewhere between 930 thousand and 1.2 million mainland Chinese refugees relocated to Taiwan as communist forces swept through territory previously held by Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist forces (Her 2009, 385). This mainland diaspora consisted mainly of military personnel, civil servants, and their dependents, together with non-government and non-military personnel who had the means to make the timely crossing, making for a mass exodus of China’s sharpest minds. Taiwan’s mainland diaspora population, defined as those who relocated to the island after 1945, was to eventually account for 14% of the island’s population, and to this day is viewed as distinct from the local Taiwanese in terms of language, customs, and socio-economic status. Language-wise the immigrants were speakers of non-local dialects who communicated with each other using a Mandarin koine – what was to evolve into Taiwan Standard Mandarin as the koine underwent creolization in the diaspora’s second generation (Her 2009, 388–390). In terms of occupation, the newcomers worked mostly in cities in government, military, and educational posts, professions which were heavily subsidized by the government and commanded greater respect, which imparted elevated social status. To this day, the level of educational achievement among second- and third-generation mainlanders is significantly higher than that of Taiwanese of local origin (Her 2009, 399–400) – this unfair edge, the source of much resentment in the local population, is termed by some diaspora authors as the mainlanders’ ‘original sin’ (Chu 2006, 48–49; Her 2009, 397–398).

The mass migration of mainlanders between 1945 and 1949 has been the subject of renewed academic and popular interest of late, with many papers re-examining the mentality and experiences of first- and second-generation mainland diaspora (Hu 1990; Huang 1993; Her 2009) and works of popular culture revisiting the tragedy of families separated by the Chinese Civil War. The theme is explored in the television series ‘Letter 1949’ (Eastern Shine Productions 2008), in which separation is forced upon two newlyweds by history as the wife boards a passenger
ferry for Taipei but the husband is left behind, leading to 40 years of uncertainty and anxiety bound by a shared yearning for what could have been. The topic is revisited in Woo’s 2014 motion picture epic ‘The Crossing’ (Beijing Galloping Horse, 2014), which chronicles the fates of those who did and did not make it aboard the Shanghai-based Taiping steamer bound for Taiwan. In Lung Ying-tai’s collection of short stories Big River. Big Sea (2009), the reader is offered a glimpse into the disrupted lives of those who unknowingly became exiles in Taiwan, who had initially placed their faith in the Nationalist slogan of ‘preparedness in a year, counteroffensive in two, destruction of the enemy in three, all-around victory in five’, whose dreams of reunion with their loves ones were extinguished with the death of generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in 1975 as they came to realize that they were stranded on the island for good and constructed an elaborate alternative reality to cope with the pain and loss, an imaginary China of yesteryear which was to fuel the social mores, cultural values, and literary aesthetics of a generation.

A fictitious geography

Between the handover of Taiwan in 1945 and the Kuomintang retreat to the island in 1949, the Nationalist government had produced its first major geographical survey and national census of China and decreed that the data be used in all newly-minted official maps and textbooks throughout the country. By the time the textbooks went to print however, the Nationalist government’s de facto control of the country had effectively shrunk to only Taiwan and minor outlying islands – Taiwan became the only part of China to base its geography curriculum on the 1947 survey and census data.

Extensive as it was, the 1947 data soon ceased to be current. Since its takeover of the mainland in 1949, the communist government of the People’s Republic of China had moved the national capital, redrawn and renamed provinces and cities, signed new border treaties with some seventeen countries, and built new motorways and railway lines, none of which made their way into the maps and geography textbooks used in Taiwan.

Not that there was no opposition to this distortion of reality – Taiwan’s Ministry of Education was actually more sympathetic to the incorporation of changes made under the communist regime (Wang 2008, 201, 230), but the Ministry of the Interior was adamant that curriculum content not be at odds with the national constitution, which saw the Nationalist government as the sole legitimate government of the Republic of China (and hence the government of the People’s Republic of China as illegitimate), whose territory was not to be altered because of ‘temporary incursions by imposters and bandits’. Indeed, the mood in 1950s Taiwan was staunchly anti-communist, and in the view of the government, communist occupation of the Chinese mainland was soon to be reversed when Nationalist forces launch a massive counteroffensive to ‘retake the mainland’ and ‘annihilate the infinitely evil communist bandits’ – slogans widely circulated at the time.

In 1953, relations with Russia soured over the Soviet Union’s support of Chinese communist forces, resulting in the Nationalist government’s revocation of the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance and its withdrawal of support for Mongolian independence, effectively reincorporating Outer Mongolia back into the territory of a China it no longer controlled – which explains the most salient discrepancy between maps of China published in Taiwan and those published on the mainland. Chinese territory depicted in mainland maps are said to be in the shape of an ‘old rooster’, whereas the Taiwanese version describes itself as a ‘begonia leaf’ (see Figure 1), the difference being in their treatment of the territory of present-day Mongolia.

The end of World War II saw the delivery into Nationalist hands the Northeastern territory of China, previously occupied by the Japanese, who had, since the Mukden Incident of 1931, set up
a puppet state run by Qing aristocracy known as Manchukuo. The Nationalists divided the region into nine provinces for administrative purposes, but never actually gained control of the territory, as the handover was overseen by communist forces friendly to the Soviet Union, who after 1949 promptly dismantled the nine provinces and reverted to the three province setup of the Qing dynasty.

In maps published in Taiwan however, the number of provinces in the Northeast remained nine, for, as described in guidelines issued by the Executive Yuan in 1962:

Regarding the territory of our nation and the configuration and naming of its administrative regions, we must adhere to practices adopted prior to the illegal occupation by the communist bandits. No unilateral changes effected by the communist bandits will be recognized, nor will we allow the publication of these changes on maps that we issue. (Wang 2008, 238)

When Nationalist forces ruled over the mainland, the national capital was Nanjing, a city upon which Taiwanese geography textbooks heaped high praises, describing it as being lined with magnificent structures such as the presidential palace, the national legislature, and various government buildings. What was left unmentioned however was that these buildings were now little more than historical relics, as Nanjing had long ceased to be the capital of any regime: in the People’s Republic, the national capital had since 1949 moved to Beijing, and in the Nationalist-controlled Republic of China, which no longer controlled any mainland territory, Taipei served as the temporary capital. Nanjing was a capital of myth, but was nevertheless marked on all maps and described in all textbooks published in Taiwan as the capital of all China.

The choice of Nanjing as capital meant that the use of the word ‘jing’ (京), meaning ‘capital’, became taboo in the names of other cities. In 1928 the Nationalist government renamed the Qing dynasty capital of Beijing as Beiping (or Pei-p’ing using Wade-Giles romanization). When the Chinese Communist Party changed the city’s name back to Beijing in 1949, the change was not acknowledged by the government in Taiwan, whose maps and geography textbooks continued to use their own designation of Beiping. This discrepancy in naming extended not only to the name of the city itself, but also to roadways and rail lines whose names made reference to the city. The Beijing-Shanghai railway line, for example, is known as the Jinghu Railway (京滬鐵路) in China proper, but was renamed the Pinghu Railway (平滬鐵路) on maps published in Taiwan, so as to be consistent with the name of Beiping.

It is apparent that the Nationalists, like exiles, emigrants and expatriates the world over, were in the business of creating ‘fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands’ (Rushdie 1982, 18). What with different national borders, a different national capital, different administrative regions, different names of major cities and provinces, and different names for major transportation lines, the mainland diaspora government on Taiwan had, from the 1950s to the 1980s, effectively created a China of the nostalgic imagination that differed
drastically from the facts on the ground. Throughout this period, books from mainland China were banned for fear of citizens falling victim to mainland propaganda, further ensuring that the populace at large had no direct access to updated and more realistic depictions of the mainland, making conditions ripe for a collective nostalgia for an imaginary China of yesteryear in literature and popular culture.

This doctoring of geographical details mattered little when there was next to no direct contact between Taiwan and the mainland. All that was to change however under the regime of Chiang Ching-kuo, who lifted martial law in 1987 and allowed ordinary citizens, for the first time, to visit relatives in China without special clearance from the government. These visitors to the mainland would soon find that what they had learned in secondary school geography did not match the provinces, cities, and transportation lines they were to see first-hand in China, to which the Taiwanese government responded by stressing ‘a geography textbook is no substitute for a travel guidebook’, and urged travellers to purchase more up-to-date maps and guidebooks while in Hong Kong1 (United Daily News 1987, 2).

The chokehold of language

When Taiwan was returned to China at the end of World War II, what the Nationalist government inherited was an island that for 50 years was a Japanese colony, where since the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) Japanese had served as the prestige language towering over the local Chinese dialects of Min and Hakka. Among the Nationalist government’s priorities therefore was to purge the island of the Japanese language and replace it with the Standard Mandarin of the mainland.

In 1946, a Mandarin Promotion Committee was formed to implement a new National Language Policy, in which Japanese was outlawed and limited use of Chinese dialects was encouraged as a means to aid in the acquisition of Mandarin. Two years later, as Japanese language use waned and dialect use burgeoned, the dialects were declared ‘inadequate for academic and cultural communication’ for fear of interference with Mandarin promotion (Cheng 1979, 560). Repression of the dialects continued throughout the next two decades: in 1956 Mandarin was declared the sole medium of instruction in schools, and the ‘Mandarin only’ policy was strictly enforced in primary and secondary education, to the point where pupils speaking in dialect were subject to corporal punishment or monetary fines (Hung 1994, 128; Lung 1997, 71). Soon after, laws were passed to ban dialect films and limit dialect programming on television, eventually culminating in the Broadcast Bill of 1975, in which severe restrictions were placed on the use of indigenous languages and dialects in broadcast media (Huang 2000, 144).

In the discussion of inequalities between Taiwan’s native and diaspora populations, it is often assumed that the mainland diaspora spoke Mandarin natively or near-natively, and that this linguistic advantage over the local population was a big part of what fuelled their dominant influence in political and cultural spheres (Her 2009, 387). Only the latter half of the statement is true, however. Early census data show that less than 1% of the million-strong diaspora population were native speakers of Standard Mandarin, as the post-1945 influx consisted of speakers representing the full gamut of China’s major dialect families, who spoke Mandarin, if at all, only as an interdialectal pidgin, that is, no better than the native population of Min and Hakka speakers. In second-generation diaspora however we do see a rise in Mandarin ability that places them linguistically above the native population. The nativization and creolization of the interdialectal koine has been suggested as a factor (Her 2009, 387–388), but equally important is an exilic mentality of struggling against the settled population, who, unlike these newcomers, shared a sense of ‘belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage’, which ‘affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs’ (Said 2000, 176).
The promotion of Mandarin in Taiwan by the Nationalist government was, by all accounts, a tremendous success. By the 1990s the island had become 90% Mandarin-speaking, up from only 4% a half century ago (Li 2009, 136–137; Her 2009, 385–386), and the general populace had long since shifted to using Mandarin in all domains (Huang 2000, 148; Chen 2010, 86).

It has long been known that the variety of Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, like most exiled languages, exhibits some degree of substratum admixture, both from the local Min and Hakka dialects of Taiwan, and from the Wu dialects of the mainland coastal provinces from which the diaspora drew its main recruits (Cheng 1985, 334). The most exciting finding about Taiwan Mandarin in the past decade however is the discovery that many of its salient attributes come not from contact with its linguistic neighbours, but in fact resemble the Pekinese vernacular of the early twentieth century, preserving features long lost in present-day Beijing. Zhang (2010) and Hou (2011) both point to the Taiwan Mandarin pronunciation of the conjunction 和 (‘and’) as hàn, as opposed to the current standard mainland pronunciation of hé – the Taiwan pronunciation, they say, is a vestige of the Old Pekinese dialect, recorded in dictionaries from the 1930s to the 1960s. Taiwan Mandarin also assigns the second and fourth tones to many medieval ru-tone morphemes (e.g. 跌, 撃, 惜, 夕), in effect preserving Old Pekinese tonal patterns of the 1930s which have since drifted towards the first tone in the present-day Beijing vernacular. Typical of enclave dialects born of mass exodus, the version of Standard Mandarin exiled to Taiwan in the 1940s is in many ways more conservative than what is to be found in Beijing today.

And the conservativeness in language does not end there. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese language on the mainland underwent drastic changes that never made their way to Taiwan. In 1956, in an effort to boost literacy levels, the government of the Chinese Communist Party committed to the Chinese Character Simplification Scheme, which replaced some 2238 traditional characters with simplified forms, making a break with the legacy orthography that had defined Chinese literacy for over two millennia. With the simplification of characters came the Europeanization of script direction: from 1956 onwards, with the exception of calligraphy and reproduction historical documents, all major publications were printed in left to right horizontal lines rather than in the traditional right to left vertical orientation. Communist promotion of the proletarian further disavow the literary conventions and literary styles of the perceived bourgeois, promoting a ‘vulgarization and vernacularization of the common language’ (Zhou 2006, 142) born of the ‘standardized revolutionary working language’ of the Communist Party’s Yan’an beginnings, which, under the direction of Mao Tse-tung, sought to emulate the less-affected speech of farmers and workers (Guo 1999, 108–109), leading to what Hong Kong sinologist Yao (2011, 24) calls ‘the triumph of vulgarity over sophistication’. Linguist Diao (2013, 68–70) offers an interpretation of this bifurcation of Standard Written Chinese along two dimensions, namely, that the variety used in Taiwan bears closer resemblance to literary conventions of the early twentieth century, and that the language used in Taiwan exhibits greater contrast between spoken and written modes – a distinction which is fast disappearing in the standard language of the mainland. The observation is corroborated in comparative studies of Chinese news reporting, in which Taiwanese television news is said to use more literary expressions and preserve more features of pre-1949 newsprint style than news broadcasts on the mainland (Yang 1998, 24), and in studies of government missives and business correspondences, in which ‘the Taiwanese convention is more traditional and incorporates elements of literary Chinese, whereas mainland Chinese conventions seek to approximate the popular vernacular and simplify traditional formats’ (Cheng 2005, 101).

If language is among the means through which we construct a socio-cultural identity, then the mainland diaspora on Taiwan have done well, having distinguished themselves from the local population with their mastery of Mandarin, but also making sure, consciously or subconsciously, to create a nostalgic creole version of the ancestral language that better channels the imaginary
homeland they had left behind, one that is distinct from the more jarring sounds emanating from enemy-occupied territory.

Nativist political enthusiasts often blame the mainland diaspora for killing off Taiwan’s indigenous languages, and for the introduction of ‘Peking dialect’ – as they like to call Standard Mandarin – that ultimately led to the demise of their native tongues. Diaspora authors are quick to point out however that the first dialects to fall victim to the promotion of Mandarin were not Min or Hakka, but rather the dialects of the first-generation mainland diaspora – the regional dialects of China brought to the island that later died out due to the absence of a sustainable speaker population. The loss is lamented by diaspora cultural critic Lung Ying-tai, who writes:

This ever so beautiful Mandarin that I speak looks on the surface to be a grand leafy tree when in reality it is more akin to a telephone pole, which is connected to all the right circuits but does not really have roots in the ground. For the ability to speak Mandarin so beautifully I paid a huge price – that is, I’ve become a person without roots. This language of mine is characterized by perfect grammar, elegant diction, and standard pronunciation, but it lacks the distant memory of an ancestral home … The beautiful Mandarin that I speak is civilized, elegant, and pleasant-sounding, but it is also extremely anemic – anemic because its only source of nutrients is books and the public education system, but it lacks a close-knit community of living, red-blooded speakers. (Lung 1997, 73–74)

The literature of dislocation

In the 1950s and 1960s, mainstream literature in Taiwan maintained a focus on the mainland that was left behind rather than the population’s immediates environs. A common refrain in this mainland-themed literature is the frustration felt by the first-generation mainland diaspora that Taiwan is mere shadow of the glories of the mainland, that the lives they had left behind far outshines the deplorable existence they are eking out on the island. The frustration of having left behind splendours and riches to rot on a barren island is best captured in the short stories of first-generation diaspora author Pai Hsien-yung, whose vignettes deftly portray the desolation and helplessness of soldiers, chefs, and singsong girls stranded on a cultural wasteland, looking back at their glory years in a land from which they are forever cut off. In ‘The Eternal Snow Beauty’, the protagonist Yin Hsueh-yen, the émigré singsong girl who appears to defy age, stirs up memories of the splendors of Old Shanghai wherever she goes:

… ladies, under the leadership of Yin Hsueh-yen, toured the West Gate district of downtown, attended Shaohsing plays, ate cassia-flavored dumplings at the ‘Three-Six-Nine’, and momentarily banished from their minds all thought of the unpleasant things that had happened to them during the past ten years or more. A glorious musky fragrance of eternal Shanghai seemed to emanate from Yin Hsueh-yen, and it so intoxicated these middle-aged women in their present reduced circumstances that they began involuntarily to recount the pleasures of eating crab roe noodles at Shanghai’s famed ‘Five-Fragrance Pavillion’. (Pai and Yasin 1982, 6)

That the Shanghai of yesteryear was glorious where the Taiwan of today was mundane is reflected in comparisons of the age-defying Yin and her no longer youthful suitors:

Of those fashionable young men who had been her admirers more than a dozen years ago in Shanghai’s Paramount Ballroom, some had grown bald on top and some were graying at the temples; some on coming to Taiwan had been downgraded to the level of ‘consultants’ in the foundries, cement works, or synthetic fabric factories … (Pai and Yasin 1982, 1)

The comparison is repeated in ‘The Last Night of Taipan Chin’, in which the ageing cabaret dancer Jolie Chin, in a spat with club manager T’ung Te-huai, belittles Taipei’s Nuits de Paris club in a comparison with Shanghai’s Paramount Ballroom:
When I, Jolie Chin, first turned pro at the Paramount back in Shanghai, I’m afraid you hadn’t seen the inside of a ballroom yet... What a cheap creep! Nuits de Paris, Nuits de Paris indeed! It may not sound polite, but even the john at the Paramount must have taken up more room than the Nuits de Paris dance floor! (Pai and Yasin 1982, 51)

The mainland diaspora’s fond memories, of course, are not limited to nightlife in Shanghai. In ‘Glory’s by Blossom Bridge’, the unnamed restaurant owner from the southwestern province of Kweilin recounts how she ended up in Taiwan against her will:

I never would have dreamed I’d end up opening a restaurant after fleeing to Taipei. My husband wasn’t a businessman in the first place; he was in the service back on the Mainland. As a matter of fact, I was even a battalion commander’s missus for a few years back then. Who would have expected that in the battle of Northern Kiangsu my husband would be missing in action, swept off to God knows where. In the panic that followed, we military dependents were evacuated to Taiwan... Here I was, a lone woman stranded in Taipei. Had to find some way to make a living. I scraped together a few dollars here and there and finally had enough to open this little restaurant here on Changchun Road. Before I knew it I’d already been a ‘Boss Lady’ for over ten years. (Pai and Yasin 1982, 115–116)

The ‘Boss Lady’ goes on to compare the breathtaking scenery of her native Kweilin with the desolation of Taiwan:

Back home there were green hills everywhere – your eyes’ll grow brighter just by looking at them – and blue waters – you wash in them and your complexion turns smooth and fair. Those days I never dreamed I’d ever live in a dump like Taipei – a typhoon one year, an earthquake the next. It doesn’t matter what kind of beauty you are, this weather is enough to ruin anybody’s looks. (Pai and Yasin 1982, 118)

Green hills and blue waters were part of a strategy in the literature of nostalgia in which imagescapes standing in starkest contrast to the subtropical environs of island Taiwan were brought to the fore: deserts, steppes, snowstorms, and alpine ranges. This, paired with the rough and tumble slang and street language of the north and the exotic flavours and gung-ho personalities of the far west, together transport the reader to another place, another time – a world of opportunity and adventure to which claustrophobic Taiwan appeared but a pale imitation. We see this in diaspora poet Hsi Muren’s ‘Ballad of the Borderlands’ (Hsi 1981, 168), which conjures up exotic voices and unfamiliar scents to take the reader beyond the Great Wall and glimpse the glory of China’s imperial past:

Sing for me a ballad of the borderlands
In that ancient language of days gone by
And call out in beautiful lilting trills
To the rivers and hills of my mind’s eye;
That sweet scent of lands beyond the Great Wall,
And tunes of parting too wistful to recall,
Which you’d rather not hear as the lyrics address
A thirst for the homeland you no longer profess.
But we’ll go on singing these nostalgic tunes
And picture sandstorms over desert dunes
Along the Yellow River and the Yin Shan pass,
A glimmer of gold across green steppes vast;
Heroes high on horseback,
Making the long-awaited journey home.

The narrative begins in true exilic fashion with reference to a language lost in the mists of time, and goes on to construct an imaginary homeland – ‘the rivers and hills of my mind’s eye’. The poet then constructs a repartee to parody the contradiction that is nostalgia: the wish to forget the homeland of the past versus the conviction to go on pining for the ancestral home. And after a grand tour of the mainland’s steppes, mountains, deserts, and rivers, the Nationalist dream of ‘retaking the mainland’ and ‘restoring our rivers and hills’ is resurrected in the grand narrative of return – the image of warriors on horseback ‘making the long-awaited journey home’.

In 1978, the pretence that the Nationalist government of Taiwan represented all China came to an end as the United States made preparations to switch diplomatic recognition to Beijing. As if in a last ditch effort to prolong the fantasy, to shout to the world that Taiwan was the true heir to China, we see a flurry of nostalgia-laden, geography-inspired musical works. Perhaps the best-known musical lyric to come out of this period is Hou Te-chien’s ‘Descendant of the Dragon’ (1978), which, like Hsi Muren’s ballad, plays on the imagery of the Yellow River, only this time the narrator, typical of second-generation mainland diaspora of the 1970s, admits to never having seen the beauty of this waterway. For this generation, the ancestral home is ‘constructed as something sacred and desirable but also symbolic – mythical even – and thus to an extent unknown’ (Olsson 2008, 3), which is why the river is visible only in dreams:

Far to the east there lies a river.  
The Yangtze is its given name;  
Far to the east sits a waterway,  
The Yellow River is its name.  
Though I’ve yet to reach the Yangtze’s shores,  
Its beauty haunts me in my dreams;  
Though I’ve yet to hear the Yellow River roar,  
The clash of waves rings in my dreams.

Villages of the displaced

In May 2010, the restaurant Liang’s Village Cuisine opened its first branch in Northern California to much media coverage and fanfare (Holbrook 2010; Shi 2010). The word ‘village’ in the establishment’s English name suggests yet another food joint devoted to rural cuisine – nothing out of the ordinary in this part of Silicon Valley, but it is the restaurant’s Chinese monicker that gives a clue as to the cuisine’s unique appeal, one that had spawned imitators all over Southern California and later fuelled its expansion across North America. Known to the local Chinese population as ‘Mama Liang’s ‘Juancun’ Cuisine’ (梁媽媽眷村料理), the untranslatable designation juancun (眷村) holds the key to this diaspora cuisine – born of Chinese mainland diaspora who relocated to Taiwan at the end of the Second World War.

The ‘juan’ in juancun means ‘dependent’ – dependents of military personnel who travelled with the Nationalist government to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949. These juancun were ethnic enclaves – islands of ramshackle single story housing set aside exclusively for the mainland diaspora amidst large swaths of land occupied by the local Taiwanese population. Inhabitants of these military dependent villages on the one hand consisted of a mix of mainlanders from different regions of China, but on the other hand were united in their distinctiveness from the local Taiwanese population – there is probably no greater marker of mainland diaspora identity than an upbringing in a juancun, whose inhabitants were exiles in the truest sense, who, unlike
the local population, have no cousins to play with, no grandparents to visit, and no ancestral graves to tend to (Lung 1997, 82–85).

With military families representing China’s broad spectrum of languages and cultures concentrated in each and every one of these compounds – some eight to nine hundred of them distributed across the island, the juancun was, in effect, a microcosm of China on a five to fifty acre lot, teeming with the chatter of different dialects and the aromas of different cuisines (Lai and Wang 2008, 82).

Mainland diaspora and their offspring hailing from these juancun, owing perhaps to their better mastery of Mandarin and overall higher level of education (Her 2009, 387–388), were to produce more than their fair share of cultural icons. Juancun authors were the major force behind the Sansan Literary Group of the 1970s, through which cult writers such as Hsi Muren, Chu Tien-wen, and Chu Tien-hsin made their mark and defined the Taiwanese literary mainstream for a generation. The late Teresa Teng, believed to be the most popular cross-cultural Chinese diva of the twentieth century, also hailed from a Taiwanese juancun, as did actresses Brigitte Lin and Sylvia Chang, folk singers Tsai Ch’ìn and Richie Jen, and politicians such as Taipei mayor Hau Lung-pin, Taichung mayor Jason Hu, and Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou, the full list of which reads like a Who’s Who of contemporary Taiwanese political and media celebrities.

We have spoken at length in previous sections about the literary accomplishments of juancun writers and artists. Offering an interesting counterpart to this high culture is the low culture of food stemming from these diaspora enclaves that, like the writings of the displaced juancun inhabitants, give shape to a fantastic world removed from the traditions of the local population, yet is no longer to be found on the Chinese mainland. In many ways, juancun cooking preserves the flavours of a pre-communist China, a China of opulence and excesses which find expression in the cooking styles of the monied classes, a tradition which made its way to Taiwan, but was lost in the famine conditions and the purges of bourgeois traditions in Cultural Revolution era China.

Not only did the Taiwanese juancun preserve mainland culinary traditions lost in the whirlwinds of history (Teng 2012, 76), it invented new traditions which it deliberately attributed to its imaginary homeland. In 2014, the Taipei International Beef Noodle Festival entered its tenth year, celebrating a juancun-born dish that is now the signature food of the Taiwanese capital. Known in its early days as ‘Sichuan-style beef noodles’, this beef noodle stew claims origins that elude most historians, many of whom have tried and failed to trace its roots to the Chinese province of Sichuan. Food historian Lu Yao-tung surmises that the dish is most likely the creation of Sichuanese veterans who crossed the Taiwan Strait with Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist forces in 1949, who upon discharge from the military invented this hybrid beef cuisine using spices from their home province (Lu 1999; Liu 2006, 22–24).

Taiwanese diaspora interpretations of mainland cuisine, whether legacy or invented, have left their mark not only in Taiwan, but on the world stage. The Shanghai-style dim sum restaurant Din Tai Fung, widely regarded as the world’s premier purveyor of xiaolongbao soup dumplings, is a Taiwan-based diaspora enterprise that beats Shanghai at its own game. The restaurant made the New York Times’ list of the world’s top ten restaurants in 1993, and currently has branches in over ten countries. More of the invented variety of mainland Chinese cuisine is the notorious ‘General Tso’s chicken’ – named after the legendary Qing dynasty general Zuo Zongtang (a.k.a. Tso Tsung-t’ang 左宗棠), who was rumoured to have ‘turned his creative energies to the development and improvement of the aromatic, peppery, spicy Hunanese cuisine’ after retirement from the military (De Groot 1978, 3). General Tso’s chicken is described by food writer Jennifer Lee as ‘the most popular Chinese chef’s special in America’ (2008, 67). In her chapter titled ‘The Long March of General Tso’, she relates how she travelled to the General’s ancestral village in rural Hunan in search of the dish’s origins, only to be told ‘no one here eats this’ (Lee 2008, 71). As it turns out, General Tso’s chicken was invented not by General Tso, but by one Hunanese
diaspora chef Peng Chang-kuei, who travelled with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist army to Taiwan in the 1940s, and then relocated to New York in the 1970s, where he created this signature dish (Coe 2009, 242–243). By the time Lee was able to track down Chef Peng in Taipei, the chef had already retired, although ‘General Tso’s chicken’ was still on the menu of his chain of Hunanese restaurants, now run by his son Chuck Peng. Finally able to taste Tso’s chicken in its original, unaltered state, Lee’s reaction was that ‘It was good. And it was chicken. It just wasn’t General Tso’s. Or at least not the General Tso’s I had come to know and love’ (Lee 2008, 80). Alas, the diaspora who had invented an imaginary legacy had spawned new diaspora on a new continent who had put a new spin on the imaginary dish, to the point where not only was the imaginary creation unobtainable in its purported homeland, consumers of the invention’s new offshoots produced on the new continent find the original invention foreign and literally difficult to stomach.

Homecoming and disillusion

The selling of Chinese culture to the world, imaginary or otherwise, was an activity in which Taiwan’s mainland diaspora was busily engaged from the 1950s to the 1980s. This was a period in which Taiwan’s main adversary, the People’s Republic of China, was effectively closed off to the Western world, and the United States, in its anti-communist fervour, was largely willing to humour the Nationalist government on Taiwan in its belief that it alone represented all of China, however removed from reality, to the point where the United States government actively urged its allies to help the Republic of China (on Taiwan) preserve its seat among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

It was not until the 1980s that the delusion was shown for what it is. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in the late 1970s and Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy of the same period paved the way in 1980 for the first American students to study on mainland Chinese soil, setting off a trend that would never look back, eventually allowing the People’s Republic to overtake Taiwan as the setting of choice for Chinese language studies, as well as become, since 2009–2010, the largest provider of international students to American colleges and universities.

Back in Taiwan, after decades of solid economic growth, the island was turning into a prosperous first world economy where citizens demanded civil liberties along with their newfound economic freedoms. In May of 1987, ageing military veterans from the Association for the Promotion of Family Visits for Mainland Diaspora took to the streets in the tens of thousands, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the characters xiang jia ‘missing home’ as they clashed with police, demanding the right, after some 40 years of separation, to revisit the mainland they so longed for. The demonstrations, along with others by nativist groups to allow greater political participation, served as a catalyst for the end of authoritarian rule and the lifting of martial law. In 1987, President Chiang Ching-Kuo, son of the late President Chiang Kai-shek, removed from the constitution the ‘Special Provisions Effective during the Period of Communist Rebellion’ and ended 38 years of rule under martial law. With the lifting of martial law came the freedom to form new political parties and newspapers, and, in September of 1987, on humanitarian considerations, the lifting of the ban on military veterans to visit their kinsfolk in communist-occupied mainland China.

As imaginary homelands go, oftentimes the pretense can only be maintained when there is ‘loss of contact with the solidarity and the satisfaction of earth’, that is, when ‘homecoming is out of the question’ (Said 2000, 179). Once the longed-for home is within reach, imagined worlds collapse, and the vitality and creativity born of the nostalgia and hunger of a generation of exiles is suddenly doused, reduced to little more than a distant memory.
In many ways, the relaxing of mainland travel bans in 1987 spelled the beginning of the end for diaspora identity and productivity. By then the mainland diaspora was well into its third generation, whose members were no longer distinguishable from the native population in terms of Mandarin or dialect use (Her 2009, 407): diaspora offspring had since acquired the ability to speak in local dialects, and Mandarin ability among the native population had risen to match that of their émigré brethren.

Since the late 1980s, with the lifting of martial law and the restoration of political rights to the Taiwanese natives, literature and the arts had taken a decidedly nativist turn, with mainstream authors no longer writing about life in military housing projects or nostalgia for the pre-communist mainland – attention had turned to the here and now, a here and now in which native and diaspora identities had, for all intents and purposes, been merged and obliterated.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the Taiwanese mainland diaspora author is a dying breed – alive literally but all but dead creatively, as the historical canvas on which they told their stories has been taken from under their feet – for there is no need to fantasize about a China that is only an hour-long flight away, whose cities have, one after another, morphed into nondescript jungles of concrete and steel typical of any modern international metropolis.

The present age is one where the younger generation of Taiwanese look back at the mainland nostalgia of the exilic past with curiosity and distance. The anti-communist slogans that had so dominated the public sphere now sit, in true retro fashion, as refrigerator magnets for sale to visitors and tourists. Pictures of the two Chiangs – masterminds behind the ‘Period of Mobilization to Suppress Communist Rebellion’ that justified 38 years of martial law rule – are now plastered over mouse pads and thermos mugs, and are even made into action figures for sale in retro-themed boutiques in high end department stores.

A number of new television series and theatrical productions look back in period drama fashion at the lives of the first- and second-generation mainland diaspora, depicting not a nostalgia for the mainland, but in a postmodern twist, a nostalgia for the nostalgia of the early days.

In 2008, the television series *Time Story*, the work of noted television producer Wang Wei-chung, took the Chinese-speaking world by storm and suddenly made fashionable all things juancun-related. The series revolves around the lives of diaspora youths who navigate between native and diaspora identities and try to make sense of the nostalgic world of their parents in the context of a modernizing Taiwan. In Episode 13, protagonist Tao Fu-pang experiences an existential crisis when he catches his military veteran father cheating on his émigré mother with a local Taiwanese woman, leading him to question the values he was brought up with. The scene, with the ocean as backdrop, is easily interpreted as a protest against the quixotic and even hypocritical homeland hankerings of his parents:

You see someone telling a lie and you cannot expose the lie for what it is, but instead have to pretend there is nothing out of the ordinary, for you know if you were to call the lie it would only cause more suffering. So you join the liars in spreading these falsehoods and deceiving those who most need to know the truth.

That same year, Wang Wei-chung and screenwriter Stan Lai collaborated in the production of the stage play *The Village*, centred around the lives of three diaspora military dependent families over three generations. The play writes of a village with the ‘dialects, accents, and cuisines from every corner of China’ (Lai and Wang 2008, 82), chronicling how ‘a group of people who believed they would be returning home in no time ended up settling on the island’, going from ‘missing home to wanting to go home to calling this new place home’ (Lai and Wang 2008, 88).

The communities depicted in *Time Story* and *The Village* are no more, for the present is an age in which the physical and ideological limitations that haunted and perhaps ever so subtly empowered the mainland diaspora of earlier generations are all but erased from memory. No longer is the
Chinese mainland, now an economic powerhouse, out of reach, and no longer is any mention of any aspect of communist China taboo — gone is the pent up desire that powered a half century of prolificacy. No longer a present and relevant mindset, the motherland nostalgia and exilic imagination of the mainland diaspora, like the Cold War mentality and fragments of the Berlin Wall, appear to have been relegated to yet another historical curiosity, at which a new generation of Taiwanese, who have experienced neither exile nor displacement, can only look back in amusement.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note
1. Direct flights between Taiwan and the mainland did not commence until 2003, prior to which travellers could only reach mainland cities from Taiwan via the transit hub of Hong Kong.

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