Where is Taiwanese Identity?

This paper explores the ambivalent space between subjective authenticity and objective analysis which characterizes attempts to define Taiwanese identity. The paper draws on Bhabha’s notion of “double writing” to suggest that while scholarship and nationalist ideology speak from different subject positions and from different institutional settings, they nevertheless convey similar forms of information about the constitution of identity in Taiwan. Taiwanese identity, therefore, operates in that space “between the pedagogical and the performative” The paper concludes that this feature of Taiwanese identity challenges the viability of sociological or political science approaches, and
enables an understanding of Taiwanese identity as unbounded and characterized by a dynamic process of political contestation.

In the last twenty years, Taiwan Studies has been developing as an autonomous field, drawing out of Chinese Studies, political science, international relations and cultural studies. It is forming into a received body of scholarship, with a canon, leading lights, controversies and methodologies.

As an academic discipline, Taiwan Studies is constituted by what Davies refers to as ‘truth statements’, particular categories the investigation of which constitute the work of that discipline.¹ Shapiro, developing these ideas in a post-structuralist critique of political science, calls these the discursive practices of a discipline:

discursive practices ... delimit the range of objects that can be identified, define the perspectives that one can legitimately regard as knowledge, and constitute the certain kinds of persons as agents of knowledge, thereby establishing norms for developing conceptualizations that are used to understand the phenomena which emerge as a result of the discursive delimitation.²

In the Foucauldian terms that Shapiro is using, Taiwan Studies, like Chinese Studies or political science (which is the object of Shapiro’s critique) is understood as a discourse characterized by specific practices which produce the effect of authority and of legitimate knowledge in the discipline. In a discursive sense, the discipline is structured and constrained: there are certain things one writes about and ways of writing which make a piece of work Taiwan Studies
rather than, say, Chinese Studies. And there are certain ways of writing, both epistemologically and stylistically, which make Taiwan Studies texts credible as expressing legitimate knowledge about Taiwan.

The categories which have come to generate the questions one asks when one is doing Taiwan Studies include democratization, economic development, China-Taiwan relations, Taiwanese literature, especially nativist writing, and Taiwanese identity. Doing Taiwan Studies might mean asking “does Taiwan have a national identity?” or “how successful has Taiwan’s democratic transition been?”. This paper, being about one such truth statement in Taiwan Studies, the problem of identity, is part of its discursive production.

Debating answers to these questions and others is the process by which the limits of the discipline are established. For example, on the question of democratization, work done in the early 1990s in the years immediately after the lifting of martial law, debated the stability of Taiwan’s democratic transition and possibilities of a relapse to authoritarianism. By the late 1990s, the issues had moved on to include the problem of corruption and negative campaigning in Taiwan’s democratic system. Following the 2004 election, the debate will no doubt shift to the problem of legitimacy. “Democratization” remains the key category in this example, and its elaboration by scholarly debate is how it is established and reproduced as one of the questions that delimit Taiwan Studies. Scholarly controversy often oscillates around such truth statements: criticisms of the “maturity” of Taiwan’s democracy have been presented as challenges to the notion of Taiwan’s successful democratic transition, but they nonetheless
continue to work off, and reproduce, “democratization” as a category that is studied when one studies Taiwan.

Within the discourse of Taiwan Studies is an epistemological structure which legitimizes specific forms of knowledge, proscribing what counts as knowledge and what does not. Taiwan Studies in its present form exists at the intersection of a range of modern social sciences which have been applying their methodologies upon the most basic truth statement in Taiwan Studies, which is the meaning of “Taiwan” itself. While Taiwan Studies could claim to be “multidisciplinary”, its epistemological structure is based on those of its primary disciplines, and out of political science, anthropology, economics, international relations and others have come a broadly positivist inclination.

The positivism which characterizes Taiwan Studies argues for an empirical basis for knowledge of Taiwan. This means that what is written and argued about is done so on the basis of the belief that the world is comprised of objects separate from language but to which linguistic terms can be made to correspond. That is, while objects in the world and their inter-relationships can only be expressed, described and understood using language, they are understood to be nevertheless autonomous from it. Producing knowledge about Taiwan means inquiring into the properties of those objects, terms or definitions and establishing relationships between them, or theories. For example, Taiwan scholars identify objects of study, such as “democratization” or “national identity” the properties of which are refined by institutional scholarly processes (“unstable”, “not mature”, “emerging”) and which are then placed in
relationships to make theories. Shapiro explains this mode of knowledge in the following way:

If one is to make correct inferences about the world, one must develop conceptual systems or theories as sets of statements that are semantically and syntactically coherent. Hypotheses about experience must be logically derived from initial premises and statements that are more abstract, and observations must be linked to theoretical terms in an orderly, rule-governed way, for example, through the development of operational definitions that prescribe the method for identifying the data which are the referents of the theoretical terms.6

So the linguistic object “democratization” might be linked by a causal relationship to another object like “the middle class” in a sentence like “the rise of the middle class led to democratization”. Chiou has put forward a version of this actual argument in the context of Taiwan and China: “a stable democracy requires high economic growth, while low economic development makes democratization more difficult and democracy less secure and stable.”7

In this instance, “growth” and “democracy” are linked in a logical relationship, and Chiou’s use of qualifiers “more” and “less” is a rhetorical device to avoid the statement being absolute. Instead of A equals B, it becomes A tends to equal B, although Chiou does not specify just how often A can fail to equal B and still have the statement maintain its explanatory power.

“Identity” is a foundational category in the development of Taiwan Studies and has been subject to the same epistemological treatment. Especially after the missile crisis of 1996, identity has become a key “motivation” in the
narrativization of Taiwanese politics. There are many versions of this, but the most basic and sensationalist is the place of identity in a crisis scenario between China and the United States: Taiwan develops a Taiwanese identity and declares itself the independent Republic of Taiwan; China launches an invasion; and the US steps in to defend Taiwan, so being drawn into a war with China. The baldest depiction of such a scenario is Bernstein and Munro’s Harrison Salisbury knock-off “The Coming Conflict With China”.

The problematic of identity has received a very sophistication treatment in theoretical work in scholarship on gender, race, post-coloniality, and so forth. Therefore, Taiwan Studies is unusual is its combination of a social science-dominated field with a cultural studies-dominated problematic. The study of Taiwanese identity as a scholarly category within Taiwan Studies remains dominated by positivist methodologies. Like “democratization”, Taiwanese identity has often been treated as a social object, amenable to the refinement of its categorical definition and placed into syntactically correct sentences to produce theories. For example, the subtext of much work on Taiwanese identity is the status of cross-straits relations, and “identity” becomes a variable in a geo-political equation: in a kind of linear relationship, the greater the national identity, the greater the likelihood of war.

The problematic of identity is a feature of seminal works on Taiwan in English through the 1990s, including Gold, Wachman, Hughes, Corcuff and a large amount of scholarship in Taiwan itself, from Li Xiaofeng, Chang Maokuei, Hsiao Hsinhuang, Wu Naide and many more. Rigger, seemingly unaware of the broader epistemological issues, acknowledges that “Taiwanese scholars and
political activists have constructed extremely sophisticated analyses of national identity. But operationalizing this concept as a measurable variable has proven difficult.” The notion that identity is a “measurable variable” is as stark a statement of the objectivist assumptions of political science as it is possible to make.

The standard methodologies for studying identity are mass opinion surveys and targeted interviews. In Wachman’s work, he conducted interviews with leading citizens such as Ma Yingjiu and Antonio Chang, to elucidate meanings for Taiwanese identity which are legitimised by the political, social, or economic status of his interview subjects. He did not use representative sampling to produce legitimate knowledge, but rather interviewed “important people”, whose views are legitimised and made representative by their social, economic and political power. In the chapters of Memories of the Future by Marsh, Corcuff, Lin and others, surveys and interviews are analysed using statistics to report on the rise and fall of Taiwanese identity. Wu Naide’s work has used surveys on questions about Taiwanese independence and unification to make objective statements which purport to be a measurement of Taiwanese identity over time.10

This approach rests on the epistemological assumption that “Taiwaneseness” or “Chineseness” are qualities which exist outside of the interviewees use of language, as “sentiments”, “convictions” or a “sense” of Chinese or Taiwanese identity. Identity is treated as a measurable substance, or as if Taiwaneseness was a condition for which a person could be tested. History is to identify events when these identities came into being, the “causes”
or “origins” of Taiwanese identity, interviews are an attempt to fix their meanings, and survey data is used to report on the rise and fall of identity at the social level. The logic of this approach is entirely consistent with a positivist theory of language: identities are already “out there”, as a set of fixed categories (“Chinese”, “Taiwanese”), they just need to be “found”. Identity becomes an object which transcends language to reveal itself outside of it, as an emotion or feeling, something which no longer needs language to be meaningful, or, as Eagleton sharply describes it, “a violent stabilizing of the sheer precariousness and ambiguity of ... identity to some spuriously self-identical essence.”\(^\text{11}\)

This epistemological assumption slips easily into the rhetorical modes of scholarship on Taiwanese identity. An example in Western scholarship is the tendency to refer to the “sense” of identity in Taiwan. For example, Hughes has written: “... neither the Taiwanese, nor even many of the Mainlanders, had really consolidated any sense of national identity.”\(^\text{12}\) Wachman writes: “Those on Taiwan have developed a sense of belonging to a group defined by residency on the island ...”\(^\text{13}\). Or Gold: “Ironically, visiting ‘the motherland’ for many people, Taiwanese and mainlanders, reconfirms their sense of Taiwan's distinctiveness rather than its essential ‘Chineseness.’”\(^\text{14}\) As such a social fact or phenomenon, a “sense” of national identity or a “sense of Taiwan's distinctiveness” is something other than language, perhaps behind it, or under it, something directing people to write and speak about their identity in a particularly “Taiwanese” way. Therefore, when we try and study Taiwanese identity, positivist or objectivist theories of knowledge suggest that it is a viable
project to go looking for something called “Taiwanese identity”, on the streets, in people’s houses, in their restaurants or in their dress. “Taiwanese identity” becomes a kind of natural force which makes people say and do certain things.

Positivism has been widely criticized for many decades in linguistics, post-positivist international relations and political science, and the various fields inflected by post-structuralism. This is the endpoint of Rorty’s “linguistic turn”, of which logical positivism is, ironically, the start.

The critique of positivist social science suggests that language and the world are not so neatly separable, and that theories of language must be the basis of our attempts to understand the social world. In Shapiro’s specific critique of Robert Carnap and the Vienna Circle, using John Austin and Michel Foucault, he argues that assuming an unproblematic relationship between language from the world mitigates against a viable social analysis. For Shapiro, and many other post-structuralist theorists, it is the process of writing, as the production of meaning, which creates and structures experience:

language is not about objects and experience, it is constitutive of objects and experience. This is not the subjectivist position that there is nothing (no thing) in the world until we recognize it or speak of it. Rather, it is the position that the world of ‘things’ has no meaningful structure except in connection with the standards we employ to ascribe qualities to it. We therefore cannot speak about the world of experience without beginning with some presuppositions about the boundaries that distinguish one object or event from another.15
In other words, our understanding of the social world must take into account the way that the world is made meaningful only by the language we use to describe it.

In the first instance, this approach avoids using the pretence of the totalizing potential of language to legitimize knowledge. It is self-evident that a scholarly work can never encompass the totality of a social experience as fully self-contained and internally coherent, without imposing conventions of syntax and logic and rhetorical style upon that experience. The real world is always more complex than the academics’ efforts to generalize, summarize and structure it. The semiological approach privileges those boundaries of discourse, where the generalizations find their exceptions, because that opens possibilities for being attentive to new and counter-discursive identity formations, and makes possible a critical scholarship.

The critique of positivism also suggest that in social analysis, objectivity is simply a textual effect. It is a rhetorical and narrative style and an epistemology which produces an objectified social world, writing as if the process of writing was itself not part of the creation of the meaning of social life. It produces the effect that experience has a coherent structure independent of our own use of language to describe it. For scholars like Shapiro and Davies, acknowledging this is a crucial opportunity to step beyond the abstracted language games of terms and relationships which characterizes the positivist social sciences. Davies writes:

‘when one sees beyond the easy homogeneity of 'words which mean exactly what they say' to textual operations which produce the effect of
'words which mean exactly what they say', then one stands a real chance of being challenged by the text, about its assumptions as well as one's own. In the process, discursive practice becomes open-ended, self-reflexively unprogramatic and, as Foucault puts it, 'endlessly accessible to new discourses and open to the task of transforming them'\textsuperscript{16}. And for Eagleton, implicitly, an objectivist attempt to fix the meaning of identity in scholarship is nothing other than a political act, a “violent stabilizing”, which implicates the scholar as much as the ideologue in the political process by which identity is constructed.

Homi K. Bhabha’s work is a detailed attempt to navigate these problems and possibilities, with his attentiveness to strategies of writing and modes of rhetorical address which, for him, make up the materiel of the nation. Identity is found in the “catalytic forces of writing” which narrate the nation’s relationship to the world and attempt to narrate a coherent subjectivity for the national.

Bhabha’s work explicitly operates at a meta-textual level above ideology and positivist scholarship. For Bhabha, working with the full implications of post-structuralist theories of epistemology and language, the nation is constituted out of acts of narration - of its history, its identity, and its contested subjectivities. These narratives are produced by an array of actors, from ideologues to academics, with a range of subject positions: both the authentic, unmediated claim upon the nation, and its objective distanciated description. For Bhabha, it is the ambiguity of the subjectivity of the nation which is the fundamental characteristic of nationhood. He implicitly rejects the viability of “explaining” the nation through the rhetorical effect of objectivity of the political and social
sciences, and instead argues for becoming attentive to the rhetoric itself. The nation is not written, it is writing, in the broad Derridean sense of the term, and as such is constantly being inscribed in the process described by Derrida’s neologism *différance*. For Bhabha, *différance* implicates the nation in a political process, in which through the play between sign and supplement, and the drawing out of the trace, a field is opened for its political contestation.

In the narrative address of the nation, Bhabha has identified what he calls its “double time”:

... a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pregiven or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process.¹⁷

For Bhabha, the basis of the nation’s rhetorical address is a national who both speaks his or her national identity and also speaks to the identity of the nation. The national’s mode of address expresses it as an indivisible “self-identical essence” (“I am Taiwanese”) and objectifies it (“we are Taiwanese”, “to be Taiwanese is...”) as something shared and outside of an individual’s subjectivity. Bhabha argues that it is the tension between subject positions, between the “performative” and the “pedagogical” which characterizes the
nation’s narrative. This speaking and speaking to creates an ambivalent discursive site in its narrative movement, in which the objective nation, “the people” is invoked as it speaks from a subjective mode of speech or writing.

One can pursue these observations in terms of the political practices of the nation. The ambiguity inherent in the nation’s narrative address opens up a range of rhetorical strategies which contest for legitimacy to speak for it. The emotional and subjective or the rational and objective are deployed as rhetoric within the national context as part of its politics. One can also, as Bhabha does, draw out the problematic of time in the narrativization of the nation: the performative compresses the nation’s history into a singular moment, in which the nation no longer has a history and ceases to be contingent, again a “violent stabilizing”, while pedagogy traces a line through history as a teleology of the realization of the national subject, excluding alternative histories, and inscribing a coherent identity to “the people”: “In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuous, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation.”

At the Hand In Hand rally on February 28 2004, when as many as two million Taiwanese people formed a human chain from one end of the island to the other, a group of participants stood along the road shouting, simply, “Taiwan Jiayou!” (“Go Taiwan!”). Bhabha’s attentiveness to subjectivity is illuminating in this context: he prompts the question of to whom were they shouting: themselves, “other” Taiwanese, China, the rest of the world? Where
was the location of this “Taiwan” which they were exhorting to “jiayou”? Was it in themselves, in their own “sense” of Taiwaneseness? Their slogan invokes their Taiwanese identity, in terms of their own unmediated subjectivity, but in their speech they were inscribing a Taiwan to which they themselves could address objectively. Their part of the “double-time” of the nation was the “recursive strategy of the performative”, creating a site in which the nation of Taiwan could be inscribed as simply a name. From the other side of double-time, that “Taiwan”, the one urged on by the performance of “Taiwan Jiayou”, is addressed by history, and is historicized by the accumulation of events like the Hand in Hand rally into its historical narrative. That is, Taiwan as a nation is inscribed atemporally in the individual, indivisible acts of naming and invocation, a Taiwan made present at that moment that is not contingent, but “always already there”19 in the moment of enunciation of the name Taiwan. Simultaneously, the nation so inscribed is accumulated into a temporal narrative by the practice of writing its history. The complex of subjectivities evinced in a group of enthusiasts shouting “Taiwan Jiayou” creates a discursive location for the Taiwanese nation which is the historicization of a moment without history. They were shouting to the camera but they were also shouting to each other, and shouting to us. Their slogan was a discursive strategy which created a location for the nation right there by the side of the road in the discursive space between them. But it was also a moment in the narration of the historical relationship between Taiwan and its “others” - China, the pan-Blues, the rest of the world. This new Taiwan, a Taiwan-by-the-side-of-the-road, a Taiwan with no
history other than that one moment, is stitched into the narrative of the “whole” Taiwan along with all the others.

The well-known French Taiwanist, Stéphane Corcuff has asked the question “Where is the nation?”, and answered, “The nation is everywhere.” The work of Bhabha suggests that this answer needs to be refined. Taiwanese identity does not simply have a location and Taiwanese identity is as much nowhere as everywhere. A Taiwan-by-the-side-of-the-road contests with the “whole” Taiwan for authenticity and legitimacy as the location of the “real” Taiwan. Therefore, it is as much in the rhetoric of locating it, of asking the question of where it is, and in producing the double narrative movement, the historicization of the collapse of temporality in the single utterance which can be Taiwanese identity. It is invoked by the catalysis of writing which opens a discursive location that is nothing other than the differentiation of meaning at the intersection of an ambiguous and contested subject position.

One of the implications of Bhabha’s work is that scholarship is as much implicated in the narrative address of the nation as a Taiwanese person. A complex contention of the legitimacy to speak for and about Taiwan which operates in this field of rhetoric is suggested by this implication, but it is nonetheless something which needs to be taken seriously: at the very least it needs to be acknowledged that the narrative which tracks the rise of Taiwanese identity in the 1990s\textsuperscript{20} is also tracked by the growth in Taiwan Studies as an autonomous and legitimate field of scholarship. Given the impossibility of the totalizing discourse of the text, and the importance of remaining attentive to the boundaries of discourse, it is an inadequate response to merely mark off
“Taiwan” from the rest of the world using the rhetoric of objectivity. This relationship must be theorized in order to develop a comprehensive and critical response to Taiwan’s identity problematic.

The importance of this project is evidenced when one reviews scholarship on Taiwanese identity. Although much of it attempts to describe the historical, political and cultural processes by which the “rise of Taiwanese identity” is occurring, the act of description of identity slips into becoming a statement of it. As Bhabha indicates, a national identity simply is not a self-contained, totalizing discourse which can be described from outside because this produces a whole basis of identity that is “ontological empty”. Real identity takes place at the edges of the attempts to mark it off.

This implication can be seen in the blurred boundaries between scholarship and ideology. An academic can write a sentence like: “to be Taiwanese is to be on the frontier of China and Japan” in order to offer elucidation, insight or even an explanation for Taiwanese identity, but a Taiwanese nationalist can make the same statement as an ideological belief. The objectification of identity implicates the scholar in its production. By reporting identity as if it is an objective fact, a statement about, for example, a “sense” constantly threatens to become an expression of it. This is necessarily so, if one takes Bhabha seriously: speaking to the nation as if it was “out there” is a foundational element of the nation’s narrative movement, and yet this is precisely the project of much of the scholarship on Taiwanese identity. The complex political and subjective relationship is disguised by the language and style of academic objectivity, but
the impossibility of the totalism of the text constantly subverts the institutional and rhetorical attempt to mark off scholarship from Taiwan itself.

In 1965, Ko Kiansing attempted to define the essence of Taiwanese identity: What is this nation called Formosa? The Formosan and the Chinese themselves correctly distinguish one another by instinct. ... Now, to come to the point, the Formosan may be defined as those, their descendants inclusive, who 1) had maintained continuous living in the island until the time of its cession to Japan on 2nd June, 1895, in consequence of the Sino-Japanese War terminated earlier that year, 2) chose to remain Formosan by staying in the island after 8th May, 1897, the day the people of Formosa were given a chance to decide their future path - whether or not to leave the island of Formosa. ... Their decision was, in fact, an indication of the will of the Formosan to share the same fate with the land and, furthermore, of the birth or awakening of the "Formosan Consciousness" omnipresent in the minds of the people of Formosa.22

Like the enthusiasts shouting “Taiwan Jiayou!”, Ko’s “definition” is an example of the “contested cultural territory” where the Taiwanese are the “historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy” and also the “'subjects' of a process of signification”. Ko speaks from and of a self-identical, atemporal essence of “instinct”, and also opens a discursive location for the Taiwanese as an objective definition. As such he is writing in the space between an authentic subjective expression of identity and an objective description of it. His narrative inscribes a Taiwanese people to whom he can address even as he speaks as one of the people.
Scholarship, with notable exceptions, such as the work of Chow, Davies, Spivak or Kristeva, tends to delegitimize authenticity and subjectivity in the production of knowledge. But this legitimacy structure is rhetoric, part of the “theatre of scholarship”. And the contingency of this theatre is evidenced in the slippage between the language of the nationalist and the scholar: For Ko, the true Taiwanese has “maintained continuous living on the island”, but for Wachman, for example, one of the “causes” of Taiwanese consciousness is that “those on Taiwan have developed a sense of belonging to a group defined by residency on the island”. Or Maguire: “The island of Taiwan was only incorporated into the Chinese empire in the 17th century and was not even made a formal province until the 1880s. For most of that time it was a lawless frontier province and there were numerous uprisings against the government.”23 And this from Li Xiaofeng: “Taiwanese history cannot be brought into the study of Chinese history, on the contrary it can only be brought into the study of world history. In the three or four thousand year history of China, the period which included Taiwan was very short, from 1684 to 1895 in the Ming and Qing eras, and from October 1945 to the end of 1949 in the period of republican control.”24

The institutional practices, rhetorical modes and epistemological bases of scholarship produce a particular subject position, nationalism another: Ko and Li speak as authentic subjects, in terms that might be emotive and declamatory, with the immediacy and urgency of the nationalist, while Wachman and Maguire speak as foreign scholars objectifying Taiwanese identity with knowledge authorized by academic rhetorical strategies.
All are producing something that is “between the performative and the pedagogical”. On the one hand, the assumption of objectivity produces legitimacy for the Taiwan idea by its appeal to knowledge outside of the subjective and emotional. On the other, legitimacy is maintained by the authenticity of the voice of a “real” Taiwanese. For Ko and Wachman, both of their respective “explanations” spoken in different institutional settings, reproduce a subjective experience: we/they are Taiwanese because we/they live here/there. The academic is speaking about a Taiwan that he imagines is “out there”, applying a belief in objectivity based on assumptions about a relationship between language and the objective world. The nationalist speaks on the assumption that his language is Taiwan; he is not describing but creating it.

This argument suggests that the non-national also operates in the “contested cultural territory” identified by Bhabha. The foreigner is as much implicated in the inscription of a nation’s narrative as the national. An effective understanding of Taiwanese national identity can only become possible when the narrative movement between statement and description, between “language as Taiwan” and “language and Taiwan”, is made explicit, because it is these interplays of subjectivities, positionality, and self-reflexivity and subjectivity that are the key element of the development of the national idea in Taiwan.

Davies suggests that the purpose of this kind of analysis is to remain “challenged by the text” so that “discursive practice becomes open-ended, self-reflexively unprogramatic”. Shapiro writes:

If we recognize that among the conventions which give statements meaning are those that determine who must make the statement for it to
have a particular meaning, we are in a position to relate the meaning of statements to the distribution of power in a society. To ask about the meaning of the statements that comprise a discourse, for Foucault, is to ask, among other things, ‘what is the status of the individuals who alone have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse.’

Yet, highlighting the role of scholarship in narrating and legitimizing Taiwanese identity might sound like hegemonic practice, and presumptuous, too. To announce that “we in the academy are participating in the production of Taiwanese identity” stakes a claim over it, legitimized by the arch and difficult writing of the post-isms. However, I would suggest that it is only this approach which can disentangle the complex of power relations which continue to structure the relationship between places like Taiwan - as the non-west - and the west.

For Eagleton, unpacking the issue of identity is not merely to understand it better, but to recognize that it too, is a site of political action: “such ... categories, ontologically empty though they may be, continue to exert an implacable political force.” That scholarship could maintain the pretence that “Taiwan” as an analytical category can be understood by Taiwan Studies as bounded and autonomous is an example of misrecognition, the willful forgetting of the real, global structures of power which are being reinscribed by the global institutions of knowledge. Therefore, understanding Taiwanese nationhood means dissolving the rhetorical divide between scholarly methodology and objects of analysis, between “method” and “data”. Such a rhetorical divide is nothing but
the reinscription of power relations between the describer and the described. This, in fact, is hegemonic practice, and scholarship must accept both the political and scholarly implication of the nature of identity in order to navigate this structure of power. This is not an awkward or difficult thing to do unless one wishes to be willingly implicated in hegemony. As Bhabha says: “The signs of cultural difference cannot then be unitary or individual forms of identity because their continual implication in other symbolic systems always leaves them 'incomplete' or open to cultural translation.”26 The Taiwanese understand this explicitly or implicitly. The exclamation of “Taiwan Jiayou!” is heard literally or metaphorically outside of Taiwan, as part of the real political, cultural and social practices by which “Taiwan” as an identity is legitimized around the world, an unfinished project which needs to rest of the world to be meaningful.

It is twenty-five years since Said problematized the narration by scholarship of the imperial relationships between the west and the “Orient”, yet Asian Studies, Chinese Studies and Taiwan Studies continue to struggle to embrace the implications of Said’s critique. This is part of the real geopolitical process of a shift in the power relations between Asia and the West. These imperial relationships are still extant in the world, relegtimized in different forms and rhetorical styles. Even efforts to problematize Asian Studies after Orientalism have sometimes produced just another language of global hegemony, for a new generation of 21st century “creoles” to appropriate and wield in their own cultural and social practices. As Ping Huiliao has suggested, much of the work in Asian Studies in Taiwan that is inflected with Cultural Studies and post-colonial theorizing is simply taking on a new arch language of obscurantist
theory in order to re-inscribe the process of “doing” Asia in Asian Studies in Asia itself:

“The critical genealogy of postmodernism and postcolonialism as these terms are appropriated in a Taiwanese context should be of interests to scholars in comparative culture. For in Taiwan it is often the writers who are against localization processes .. that advocate the idea of postmodern heterogeneity or of postcolonial multivocality. they condemn nativist movement in the name of cultural constructionism that everyone on the island is but a “fake” Taiwanese.” 27

For a small number of scholars in Chinese Studies, such as Rey Chow and Gloria Davies, the key problematic is no longer undivided categories such as “China” or “Taiwan”, but the way scholarship narrates power relations in and between the discourses of “China” and non-China. They fully understand, as Said wrote in 1978, that as academics they are political actors whether they like it or not, and their own scholarship, legitimized by the globalized institution of the university, becomes a key site for the renegotiation of these power relations. They reject the rhetoric of positivism and objectivity because they recognize that those methodologies are political choices, and are ones which they are not prepared to make.

Taiwan’s marginal position in global geopolitics makes the problematic of orientalism all the more acute. The rise of Taiwan Studies is part of the rise of Taiwanese identity. It is part of the legitimization of the existence of Taiwan as an autonomous polity. Objectifying the Taiwanese nation, reducing it to statistics and graphs or meaning objects in causal relationships, or (worse still) a
discursive space or a liminal subjectivity as an object of “doing” cultural studies, is a political act which legitimizes Taiwanese identity and Taiwan itself. And yet, it remains an inadequate one. To suggest that we are “here” and we can study a Taiwan which is simply “there” is to efface political implications of scholarship and to replicate and participate in the unequal distribution of power between Taiwan and the rest of the world. It also fails to recognize that the real location of the object of our scholarly work, and what makes possible being 'endlessly accessible to new discourses and open to the task of transforming them' is the very fact that Taiwanese identity has no location. Bhabha again, “Cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of identification, through processes of negotiation where no discursive authority can be established without revealing the difference of itself.”

Writing about Taiwanese identity is the process of its establishment, narrativization and transformation, and this must be done fully cognizant of its political and epistemological implications.


5. ibid., 11.

6. Shapiro, ibid., 11.


18. ibid., p.297.


25. Shapiro, M., ibid., 149.

26. Bhabha, ibid., 312.

27. Ping Hui-liao, "Theorizing the 90s: How Not to Talk about Taiwan In Terms of the World System, Global Cultural Economy, etc.", Paper presented at Re-mapping Taiwan: The Fifth Annual Conference on the History and Culture of Taiwan Culture of Taiwan, University of California, Los Angeles, October 12-15, 2000.

28. Bhabha, ibid., 312.