Mainlanders’ Nostalgic Writing in Taiwan: Memory, Identification, and Politics

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During the Chinese Civil War (1945–49), one of the largest Chinese migrations of the twentieth century occurred. About 1.5 million mainland Chinese followed the KMT government to Taiwan, an island off the southeast coast of China that had been a Japanese colony before the end of World War II (1895–1945). In claiming itself as the legitimate government of China and regarding Taiwan as the ‘last fort against the communists’ (反共堡壘), the KMT never prepared to stay permanently on the island—until it realised there was no chance of going back. To strengthen its rule, from 1949 to 1987, the Nationalist government imposed martial law on Taiwan—a period...
Taiwanisation in the 1990s.

The strait thus separated these émigrés and their families for four decades.

Longer-term settlers and indigenous people in Taiwan often call Chinese Civil War migrants and their descendants ‘mainlanders’ or waishengren (外省人, literally, ‘people from other provinces’) — a term that characterises the group’s identity as outsiders. About half of these émigrés were KMT soldiers and government officials, while the remainder were civilians. Many of them did not know Taiwan before they arrived there. Under strict political control, there seemed to be no way to express their bitter homesickness. Since literature was one of the very few emotional outlets available to them, they poured their feelings of homesickness into literary works.

Scholars of Taiwanese literature occasionally mention the genre of mainlanders’ nostalgic literature (懷鄉文學) (Chen 2011; Yeh 2010); however, it was the subject of few systematic discussions before the 2010s. Yang Ming’s Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Nostalgic Literature by Chinese Civil War Migrants (鄉愁美學: 1949年大陸遷台作家的懷鄉文學, 2010) was one of the first studies to examine mainlanders’ nostalgic writing closely. Yang argues that while the largest number of nostalgic works by mainlanders was produced in the 1950s and 1960s, the works of the second generation also merit inclusion in the discussion, since they ‘inherited’ their parents’ nostalgia, along with their perceptions of China (Yang 2010: 208–9, 225). Indeed, mainlander writers’ nostalgia did not freeze at the moment of their departure from home, but developed and evolved in Taiwan, reflecting the war migrants’ anxiety and frustration about living in exile under KMT martial rule. The migrants passed down this sense of nostalgia to their children. This sentiment later turned into a heavy cultural and identity burden for the second-generation mainlanders who were born in Taiwan, educated to love China, and presented with the dramatic socio-political transformations of democratisation and Taiwanisation in the 1990s.

This essay traces the trajectory of mainlanders’ nostalgic writing from the 1950s to the 2010s, from the works by the first generation of Chinese Civil War migrants to those by the second generation. It examines how this nostalgic writing was exploited by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT to serve the respective parties’ political agendas. The essay argues that mainlanders’ nostalgic literature shows the émigrés’ divergent interpretations of China in different spatiotemporal contexts and their increasingly distant relationship to it.

The Use and Abuse of Nostalgia

In The Future of Nostalgia (2001: 8), Svetlana Boym associates nostalgia with the concept of home, writing that modern nostalgia ‘could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history’. That is, the place for which the memory-bearer feels nostalgic represents the person’s longing, sense of belonging, and identification.

The most well-known nostalgic writing by Chinese Civil War migrants from the early days in Taiwan is often characterised by the authors’ strong emotional and cultural ties to mainland China. As Taiwan is most often described as an alien land, this writing can be rightfully considered as part of Chinese diasporic literature. Because the writers still had clear memories of their lives in their homeland, their narratives of China are vivid, lively, and relate closely to their personal experiences. Lin Hai-yin’s (1918–2001) Memories of Peking: South Side Stories (城南舊事) (2010) is one of the most representative nostalgic literary works from this period. It is a collection of short stories about a girl named Ying-zi, a fictionalised version of the author. The work recounts Ying-zi’s (Lin’s) childhood experiences in Beijing in the 1920s and presents the distinctive lifestyle and cityscape of Beijing during the Republican era (1912–49). The warm tone and subtle narrative style have been praised by many mainland Chinese literary critics, such as Zhang Fan (2015: 82), who said Lin’s narratives of the ‘cityscape and society in
Beijing during the Republican period reveal a sense of cultural nostalgia, showing a strong “mainland Chinese feature”.

In the realm of poetry, Yu Kwang-chung’s (1928–2017) 1971 short poem ‘Homesickness’ (鄉愁) is the most well-known, showing the mainlander poet’s painful nostalgia for homeland and family:

When I was young, my homesickness was a small stamp,
I was here, my mother was there.

After [I grew up], my homesickness was a narrow ticket,
I was here, my bride was there.

Later, my homesickness was a little tomb,
I was outside, my mother was inside.

And now, my homesickness is a shallow strait,
I am here, the mainland is there. (SCMP 2017)

The poem is brief and the language is simple, yet the emotion it reveals is intense and touching. By using a parallel sentence structure to narrate various forms and understandings of separation at different stages of life, Yu shows an émigré’s irrecoverable loss and sorrow.

The literary value of Lin Hai-yin’s and Yu Kwang-chung’s work lies in their reflections on war migrants’ collective trauma, suffering, and strong yearning for their homeland at a time when going home was forbidden. However, whereas both Lin’s and Yu’s literary narratives emphasise their very personal nostalgia for their homeland and families, and avoid sensitive cross-Strait political issues, they have been widely used by the KMT and the CCP for political purposes. In fact, the popularity of their oeuvres owed much to the two parties’ political dictatorships. In Taiwan, Yu’s poem above was published when the KMT government exercised strict censorship, and its message fit with the KMT’s ideology of Chinese nationalism and its call to ‘go back to/fight China’.

In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Yu’s poem served as an example of ‘Taiwanese’ people’s desire for reunification. Lin’s and Yu’s works were included in primary and secondary school textbooks on the mainland (BBC News 2017). For many postwar mainland Chinese, the great nostalgia the works by the two authors expressed became their first impression of Taiwan and the Taiwanese people, which led them to believe an ‘inseverable affection’ existed between Taiwan and China.

An important factor to consider is that migrants’ feeling of nostalgia was subject to transformation over time, as individuals gradually settled into their new place. As Shu-mei Shih (2013: 37) pointed out in her research on overseas Chinese migrants, ‘diaspora has an end date’—that is, migrants tend to localise. In 2003, then premier of the PRC Wen Jiabao quoted Yu Kwang-chung’s poem, saying: ‘A shallow strait is our deepest national trauma, our strongest homesickness’ (一彎淺淺的海峽, 是我們最大的國殤, 最大的鄉愁). However, Yu once said that after visiting China several times, he realised there was no cure for homesickness (Huang 2021: 135). While Wen used the trope of homesickness to justify the PRC’s national goal of reunification, he neglected the fact that mainlanders’ nostalgia continues to metamorphose with the changing social and political situation on the island. Wen also failed to mention the changing cross-Strait relations, particularly after the end of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, when mainlanders were finally free to visit or move back to China. Many mainlanders were disappointed with the China they found and decided to stay in Taiwan (Fan 2011). Yu was one of them.

Similarly, in 1983, Lin Hai-yin’s Memories of Peking was adapted into a film of the same name, directed by mainland Chinese Wu Yigong (1938–2019). The film won China’s Golden Rooster Awards for Best Director, Best Music, and Best Actress in a Supporting Role, as well as several international film awards. China’s marketing of Lin’s œuvre often highlights the theme of nostalgia but understates or even overlooks how Lin contributed to the formation of Taiwanese literature in Taiwan—a genre the CCP sees as contesting the One-China Policy. Lin worked as an editor of several important newspapers and literary maga-
zines in Taiwan during the martial law period. She played an important role in encouraging local Taiwanese writers to express alternative opinions to the Chinese nationalism promoted by the KMT. This led to the emergence of Taiwanese literature, which emphasises Taiwan’s distinct culture and values compared with those of mainland China.

Lin’s and Yu’s works demonstrate the complicated, entangled relationships between mainlanders’ nostalgic literature and political dictatorship. Although these authors did not write to serve politics, politicians of all stripes have used their writing. In contrast to political discourses that tend to be relatively rigid and fixed, the two writers’ works capture a certain moment in their nostalgia; yet, these emotions changed over time against the shifting social background.

In the early days of the KMT’s relocation to Taiwan, the party not only exploited mainlanders’ existing nostalgic writing for its own purposes, but also actively took advantage of mainlanders’ homesickness to further its political agenda, as exemplified by the emergence of anticommunist literature (反共文学) during the 1950s and 1960s. The KMT encouraged this genre through its establishment of a party-sanctioned Chinese Writers’ and Artists’ Association (中國文藝協會) to seize control of media and publications, hold writing competitions, and provide monetary rewards. The organisation effectively dominated the direction of mainlander authors’ writing.

Anticommunist literature often took the form of fiction, with the stories set in mainland China. The authors expressed the pain of losing their country (that is, the Republic of China) through the fictionalisation of righteous and loyal KMT supporters fighting against evil communists. Novelist Pan Ren-mu’s (1919–2005) 1952 book, My Cousin Lianyi (漣漪表妹, 2001), is one such example, as it depicts how the Chinese communists mislead a university student named Lianyi and ruin her life. Yet, as Taiwan-based literary critic Chen Fang-ming (2011: 299) commented, ‘as the anti-Communist writers all focused on the imagined setting [China], their literary works ultimately broke away from the reality [of their life in Taiwan]’. Indeed, anticommunist literature represents a simplified and formulaic interpretation of China constructed within the ideological KMT–CCP binary. Blending the political advocacy of anticommunism with nostalgia, such narratives about a homeland lose their sincerity. This genre provoked severe criticism from young mainlanders in the 1960s who were discontented with the KMT’s political manipulation of literature.

Evolving Nostalgia: Second-Generation Mainlanders’ Writing

As the Chinese Civil War migrants’ stay in Taiwan lengthened, their children gradually came to regard their parents’ intense homesickness and nostalgia as the means by which the first generation evaded dealing with the difficulties they faced on the island. Pai Hsien-yung’s (1937–) highly acclaimed work Taipei People (台北人) (2018) offers such a critical stance, but with deep sympathy for the first generation of mainlanders. Pai was born in 1937 in Guangxi Province, China; he and his family moved to Hong Kong in 1948 and to Taiwan in 1952. He is one of the key people who introduced literary Modernism to Taiwan as he sought literary freedom through internal exploration, to contest the KMT’s political dictatorship. The main characters in Taipei People are mainlanders who feel ‘trapped’ in Taipei. The book is most notable for the characters’ indulgence in their nostalgia as they remember their days in mainland China, which blinds them to the reality of their relocation to Taiwan. Literary critic David Der-wei Wang (2018: xi) remarks that ‘the people in these stories turn their nostalgia into lived reality’. Indeed, the nostalgia in Taipei People belongs solely to the mainlander characters. The stories arouse not so much the readers’ nostalgia towards China as a sense of sympathy for the émigrés, since Pai presents all the mainlander characters as painfully trapped in their memories of a sweet past in China and, thus, failing to recognise they have a present and a future in Taiwan.

Pai authored most of the stories in Taipei People after his move to the United States in 1963. One may regard this work as Pai’s re-contemplation
of mainlanders’ nostalgia from a distance after he experienced his second relocation. In comparison with Pai Hsien-yung, who critically addressed the first-generation mainlanders’ indulgence in their memories of China, the second-generation mainland writers—who were born in Taiwan during the 1950s and 1960s and were educated in the KMT’s ideology of Chinese nationalism—tended to ‘inherit’ the previous generation’s nostalgia and unwittingly replicated the state ideology in their work. The postwar mainlanders’ ‘inherited nostalgia’ is most evident through their shared ‘quasi-exilic mentality’ (Hsiau 2010: 16). Although they never lived in China, their writing reveals a strong spiritual attachment to an imagined China and detachment from Taiwan.

Rich examples of this sentiment in literature are Chu Tien-hsin’s (1958–) biographical novel, *The Song of Life* (擊壤歌, 2011), and novella, *Everlasting* (未了, 2001). In these works, the narrators put forward a strong affirmation of mainland China as their real homeland. Yet, in both works, the image of ‘China’ is abstract and stereotypical: the narrators only mention China when they describe their and their parents’ anticipation of a ‘return’ (Huang 2021: 51). They depict nothing concrete about China, which demonstrates the fragility of such secondhand nostalgia.

The more concrete narratives of nostalgia by second-generation mainland writers can be found in *juancun* literature (眷村文學), a genre that emerged in the late 1970s and reached its peak in the 1980s and early 1990s. Prominent writers of this genre include Chu Tien-hsin, Su Wei-chen, Yuan Chung-chung, and Chang Ta-chun. *Juancun* literature can be seen as a product of the KMT’s authoritarian regime, as *juancun* (or ‘military dependants’ villages’) were compounds the KMT established for its soldiers and their families in the 1950s. Under direct military management, these enclosed communities facilitated the development of a distinct mainland culture in Taiwan.

The 1980s and 1990s were turbulent decades for most mainlanders, particularly for those who lived in *juancun*, because they faced several significant social and cultural changes. In those years, the Taiwanese Government demolished the military dependants’ villages for the sake of urbanisation, forcing those who had lived there for several decades out of their homes. This reminded them of their traumatic experience of losing their homes in China. In addition, starting from 1987, mainlanders were finally allowed by the Taiwanese Government to travel to mainland China. Nonetheless, a great number of the returning mainlanders were disappointed by their trips. Their closest relatives on the mainland had already died and PRC society resembled neither the homeland the first-generation mainlanders remembered nor the homeland the second-generation mainlanders imagined (Fan 2011).

At the same time, Taiwan rapidly moved towards political democratisation and cultural Taiwanisation (or *bentuhua*, 本土化). More and more residents in Taiwan became conscious of the fact that post-1949 mainland China had become a totally different society from Taiwan. As the KMT’s China-centric ideology gradually lost its dominance, most mainlanders felt left out of the huge social change (Yang and Chang 2010). Many mainlanders suffered multiple losses and felt exiled once again after losing their *juancun* home in Taiwan, their spiritual home in China, and their belief in the superiority of Chinese culture.

The changing social milieu forced the second-generation mainland writers to reconfigure their self-identity and reconsider what it meant in the context of Taiwan. *Juancun* literature presents the second-generation mainland writers’ transformation from having a high level of self-confidence in the 1980s, when the KMT’s Chinese nationalism was most dominant in society, to ‘a significant degree of self-doubt’ in the 1990s (Huang 2021: 59). A major feature of the *juancun* writing published in the 1990s is the authors consciously depicted *juancun* instead of China as their characters’ nostalgic home. For instance, the narrator in Su Wei-chen’s (1954–) *Leaving Tongfang* (離開同方) (2002) notes that his mainlander mother’s last wish was to return to Tongfang New Village—the *juancun* where they had lived for about 10 years. He also directly calls the village, not China, his home (Su 2002: 3–6). By tackling the second-generation mainlanders’ emotional attachment to China, the novel shows this cohort’s idea of ‘China’ is in fact based on their
experience in juancun. As the narrator says, when they were young, they believed the juancun was China and that ‘to be outside the juancun was to be outside China’ (Su 2002: 153). Although Su’s work presents the author’s uncertainty about the identity of mainlanders in Taiwan, it also reflects a momentous shift in the idea of homeland these mainlanders held, showing how they had started to pay attention to their lived experience in Taiwan.

The script of the 2008 theatrical production The Village (寶島一村, 2011) by Lai Sheng-chuan (1954–) and Wang Wei-chung (1957–) is an example of mainlanders’ most recent nostalgic work. Akin to nostalgia for juancun, The Village is significant in that both Wang and Lai have been active in mainland China: Wang has produced several variety shows there since 2010, and Lai co-founded the popular Wuzhen Theatre Festival in Zhejiang Province in 2013. The Village allows us to examine how mainlanders’ self-identification was informed by China, as they expanded their businesses there.

In presenting Wang and Lai’s confidence in calling Taiwan home, The Village tells the stories of three mainlander families who moved to the island with the KMT. It follows them from the early days when they saw themselves as exiles in Taiwan to the present when they finally call Taiwan home. China plays a minor role in the play. Only one scene, ‘Visiting Families’, is about China, and it depicts the three families’ ‘reunions’ with their mainland relations. Yet, all three reunions are painful and ‘unfulfilled’: one character finds his beloved family members have already died, while another character dies, leaving his son to take his place to reunite with relatives he has never met. The third character finds his wife, whom he left behind in China, still waiting for him, but he has already remarried and has a happy family in Taiwan. The play does not end with the cross-Strait family reunions, but continues to depict these mainland characters as they decide to live in Taiwan. By emphasising the harmonious relations between mainlanders and Taiwan’s majority Hoklo Taiwanese population, as well as the shared memories of the two groups, The Village reveals the authors’ attempt to ‘Taiwanise’ juancun by showing the characters’ identification with juancun and belonging to Taiwan. As the first-generation mainlander character Old Zhao says, he has ‘set roots down’ in Taiwan. In other words, ‘mainlanders’ are no longer represented as outsiders or ‘people from other provinces’, but as settlers who belong to Taiwan.

No Longer Home

The rapid increase of cross-Strait interactions in the past three decades led many Taiwanese, including a significant number of mainlanders, to move to China. Yet to interpret this as a representation of the Taiwanese migrants’ longing for a return to their original homeland, or as evidence of their support for cross-Strait reunification, is to oversimplify and overstate the case. If, as Boym (2001) argues, the place for which one feels nostalgia reveals one’s belonging and identity, by tracing mainlanders’ nostalgic writing from the 1950s to the present, this essay has argued that their work reflects the group’s transformation from identifying China as their homeland to affirming their belonging to Taiwan. Such a change is especially noticeable in the second generation’s work.

This identity transformation in mainlanders’ literary work corresponds with the results of a long-term survey of Taiwanese self-identity conducted by the National Chengchi University, which indicates that increasingly fewer Taiwan residents call themselves Chinese (Election Study Center 2022). In 2021, only about 3 per cent of the interviewees identified themselves as Chinese. Most residents in Taiwan neither regard China as their home nor identify as Chinese. Although the influence of China on Taiwanese migrants in China requires further analysis, it is certain the discourses the CCP most often adopts to arouse Taiwanese people’s nostalgia for China—phrases such as ‘blood is thicker than water’ (血濃於水) and ‘Come back home, Wan Wan’ (灣灣回家吧)—have lost their appeal among most Taiwanese, including mainlanders.