**The Encounter of Hybridity through Space in Narratives:**

**Life Stories from Taiwan's Military Dependants' Villages**

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**Abstract**

After the defeat of the Kuomintang (KMT) by the Chinese Communist Party in the second civil war, over six hundred thousand soldiers and their dependants followed the KMT government's retreat to Taiwan in 1949. The KMT government settled those soldiers and dependants in different counties in Taiwan in so-called "military dependants' villages." With the gradual elimination of these old villages, the experiences of living in their crude, crowded houses have become memories shared among older residents. The project researcher has employed in-depth interviews and narrative criticism to examine the life stories of the residents of the old villages in Pingtung City, the administrative capital of the southernmost county in Taiwan. The purpose of this project is to investigate the interrelationship of space, diasporic experiences, and hybrid identity in narratives. It is expected that the results of this project could enhance the cultural studies of the old military dependants' villages in Taiwan. This research project is financially supported by the National Science Council, Taiwan, R.O.C. (NSC 100-2410-H-128-022-MY2). The results discussed in this project are from the first half of a two-year research plan.

**Introduction**

As Crang (2005) has indicated, the development of culture cannot be separated from place; not only declaring where people live and where they are from, a place also represents how people identify themselves. Crang's claim clearly explains the relationship among culture, place, and people's self-identification. In the case of Taiwan, over six hundred thousand military soldiers and their dependants followed the Kuomintang (KMT) government in retreat to Taiwan in 1949 following defeat in the second civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party. In order to settle those soldiers and their dependants, the KMT government expropriated the living quarters originally built by Japanese, built temporary housing, and took over the permanent buildings donated by the National Women's League of the R.O.C. (Republic of China) in different counties in Taiwan. These villages have become unique landscapes on this small island and developed a hybridized identity among the residents who lived, or are still living, in the villages in a diasporic context.

Recently, high-rise public housing has replaced the old military dependants' villages. When the residents of the villages changed their living space and lifestyles, as well as faced the complicated political environment, a unique culture developed in the villages, but in recent times that has become increasingly less adopted and gradually consigned to history. Following the collapse of military dependants' villages throughout Taiwan, many residents have become nostalgic for the time when they lived there. One possible reason is that the childhood memories of living in these old villages represent the "good old days." That could explain why the television programs, dramas, and other

exhibitions related to these villages attract a lot of attention and have become popular in Taiwan.

In this research project, the researcher used semi-structured interviews with 15 residents who had lived or are living in the abovementioned villages. Applying narrative criticism to analyze the themes of the life stories expressed by the interviewees, the purpose of the project is to investigate the interrelations among space, diasporic experiences, and hybrid identity in the narratives. Because they have lacked attention, the researcher selected the military dependants' villages located in Pintung City; which is the administrative capital of the southernmost county, Pingtung, in Taiwan. The results of this project could enhance the cultural studies of the old military dependants' villages in Taiwan.

**Narrative Space**

The development of narrative theory can be traced back to formalism in the early 20th century, especially Propp's works on linguistics. As Martin (1986) indicated in *Recent Theories of Narrative*, in the 1960s and 70s, the development of narrative theory became central to the humanities and social sciences; using Thomas Kuhn's words, it might be called a "paradigm change." The paradigm change is the shift away from using the philosophical approaches of objectivism, rationality, and empiricism as ways to understand adequately society, culture, and human interactions. Influenced deeply by constructionism, narrative theory has attracted attention from various disciplines. As Herman and Vervaeck (2005) pointed out, constructionists seek to investigate the gap between the surface represented by any symbolic system and its deeper structure. Therefore,

the fundamental aim of narrative theory is to explore the links between what people perceive from the external world and how those people's perceptions are transformed into their knowledge systems.

With respect to rhetorical studies, Walter Fisher has provided a theoretical framework for narrative studies. According to Fisher (1984), the narrative approach "has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination" (p. 2). In other words, narrations simultaneously link the real world and the imagined world, as well as linking real experiences in real life and imagined story plots; through the process of "telling a story," people then construct their awareness of so-called reality. In terms of the characteristics of narrative, different scholars (Hart & Daughton, 2005; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Labov, 1972; Brooks, 2000; Todorov, 1981) have made different claims; elsewhere (Lee, 2010), I have concluded them to be temporary, casual relationships of narrative structures, plots, and cultural backgrounds.

From the above characteristics, most of the researchers who have applied narrative theory agree that temporality is an essential feature of narrative. In his work *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984) claimed that "[t]he world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. […] [N]arrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (p. 3). Hart and Daughton (2005) also reminded us that "[t]here are beginnings, middles, and endings to narrative […]. All stories, even bad stories, inspire the need to see how it turns out" (pp. 88-89). However, the importance of space in narratives has usually been ignored by many narrative researchers. In his research project, Baynham (2003) suggested that space and time are not a

homogeneous contextual backdrop of narrative; he then claimed to focus on the centrality of spatial orientation in the construction of narrative. In fact, Zoran (1984) attempted to establish a theory of space in narrative by addressing three levels of space constructions in text and the horizontal structures in narrative. Zoran acknowledged that his project was limited to the existence of space and did not deal with its functions; he then suggested that future researchers could focus on single texts and emphasize the systematic components of space in narrative. For the above reason, the theoretical aim of this project is to focus on the living space mentioned in the narratives of the life stories of those from military dependants' villages in order to enrich the discussion of space in narrative theory.

**Narrative Criticism**

In rhetorical-studies methodology, the purpose of narrative criticism is to use the whole text as an object and, by analyzing the structure of the narrative, to discover the motives and ideology hidden within the narratives (Stokes, 2003). As Foss (1996) expressed, examining the narrative comprehensively and selecting units on which to focus are the two steps in conducting narrative criticism. For the first step, Foss suggested eight units for the critic to choose in order to identify characteristics of the narrative: Setting, Characters, Narrator, Events, Temporal Relations, Causal Relations, Audience, and Theme. The next step, according to Foss, is to focus on those units which are the most significant and relevant to achieving the research purpose. On the other hand, Hart and Daughton (2005) pointed to three critical probes for critics to examine narratives

exhaustively. The first probe is to investigate the roots contained within narratives. Secondly, critics need to discover what propositional content is designed to be revealed by the narrator. Lastly, critics have to consider a narrator's hidden purpose in deciding to describe a narrative in a particular way. In addition, Hart and Daughton mentioned that a possible fourth probe is to evaluate the effectiveness and faithfulness of the narrative. They stated Walter Fisher's work on narrative probability and fidelity. Especially for narrative fidelity, as Hart and Daughton suggested, a narrative critic needs to consider what was knowable in the narrative and by the storyteller, as well as "how faithfully the resulting narrative captures what was known" (p. 92).

Accordingly, this project follows Foss as well as Hart and Daughton's suggestions and applies a thematic analysis to examine the narratives collected from in-depth interviews. Analyzing the theme of the given narratives, as Foss (1996) indicated, is to discover "the theme articulated in the narrative—through the depiction of setting, characters, or events or through the narrator's commentary" (p. 405). In this project, after reviewing the interview transcripts, the author identifies three themes revealed in the narratives: diasporic experiences, the living spaces of old military dependants' villages, and insider versus outsider. By analyzing the above key themes, the author intends to develop a comprehensive picture of the culture of the old military dependants' villages in Taiwan, as well as to discover how diasporic memories and living space interrelate in the process of identification.

**Thematic Analysis**

As mentioned above, three key themes were identified from the 15 interview transcripts, and they were: diasporic experiences, the importance of living space, and insider versus outsider. The aim of this section is to analyze the above themes in detail in order to discover the interrelations among space, diasporic experiences, and the sense of self versus other.

**Diasporic Experiences**

As stated in the introduction, the residents of the military dependants' villages were the soldiers and their dependants that followed the KMT government in retreat to Taiwan in or after 1949. The people, including their descendants, who followed the KMT government to Taiwan from China are recognized as an ethnic group called Wai Sheng. Three other ethnic groups are generally recognized in Taiwan: Hoklo, Hakka, and Indigenous Taiwanese. Before the 1949 retreat, the first generation of the Wai Sheng people had already lived through war and experienced a number of battles during the Second World War or even earlier. For them, retreating to Taiwan was a hiatus in their lives; most did not imagine that they would live on the island for 50 years or even longer.

There were several interviewees who described similar story narratives about treating their houses in the military dependants' villages as temporary accommodation. For instance, when a first-generation woman described her experiences of living in such a village in Pingtung City, she said that she clearly understood that the house where she had lived for over 20 years did not belong to anyone in her family; instead, the house belonged to the nation and would be

taken back by the government one day. Thus, the old lady described her experiences of working hard at different kinds of business in order to "buy our own house." Also, when several second-generation dependants recalled their childhood memories of living in the villages, they all described the crude conditions of their old houses. According to them, their parents did not complain about living in such rough dorms because they treated the houses as temporary accommodation in their military careers. Thus, at the beginning, the first-generation residents did not expend a lot of energy on improving the condition of the house. One second-generation male dependant told me his father's story. According to him, when his father arrived in Taiwan after the end of WWII, he was assigned to live in empty living quarters built by Japanese in Pingtung City. His father's superior told him that he could choose any dormitory he wanted. The interviewee's father, however, only chose a very small one because he thought that he would merely be stationed there for a short period. The father did not know that he and his four family members would live in that tiny Japanese-style dorm for the next four decades. According to the interviewee, his father once told him that nobody would have argued at that time if he had chosen two empty dorms and combined them into a bigger one; thereby his family would have had a bigger space and better living conditions in the village. However, as his father sighed, "who knew that I would stay here for over 40 years?"

The human interest in the military dependants' villages was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees. The major reason is the diasporic experiences shared commonly among those residents who lived in the villages. As many

interviewees said, the experiences of leaving hometowns had made them establish close relationships with their neighbors. According to one second-generation male resident, people would naturally learn how to maintain harmonious relationships with others in the villages. Because all of their families had left their homes, and none of them had relatives in Taiwan, "there is no other way; we have to help each other." A second-generation female used the activities of sharing food as an example to portray the close interpersonal relationships in her village. According to her, almost all female dependants of her parents' (first) generation were housewives, and they were from different mainland-Chinese provinces. In the 1950s and 60s, they all had difficult living conditions; however, when one mother cooked food from her hometown, she would share the food with her neighbors, and teach the other housewives how to cook the dish. Gradually, many housewives came to be able to cook regional cuisines by learning from their neighbors. This kind of mixed-style cuisine developed in the military dependants' villages later became popular in Taiwanese society at large.

In addition, the diasporic experiences affected the style of education in the villages. Almost all second-generation interviewees mentioned their strict family education. According to them, corporal punishment was very common. One second-generation male vividly described how his father tied him up and spanked him at midnight. Another female interviewee explained that the strict family education was common in the villages because even though many first-generation residents believed that they might go back to China in the future, they realized that their children would need to live on in Taiwan for a longer

period.

Without the traditional support system from the family, the second-generation residents of the villages did not have enough commercial properties or farms. Thus, to be well educated was the only way in which the second generation could compete with other people from outside the villages. However, another male resident gave a comparatively negative reason to explain the situation. For him, the anxiety of living far away from home made the first generation seek something certain in their lives, but all shared the similar difficult living conditions. Thus, competition among children over grades was a way to achieve a sense of superiority.

**The Importance of Living Space**

One characteristic of the houses in military dependants' villages, whether they were built by Japanese or the KMT government, or donated by the National Women's League of the R.O.C., was the very small size. In the 1950s and 60s, many Taiwanese families had more than three children, and this applied also to the families in military dependants' villages. Thus, it was common for four or five children, along with their parents, to live in a little house with one or two bedrooms, a living room, and no lavatory. One female, second-generation resident used the term "railway carriage" to describe her old house in the village. As she explained, one side of the residential area in her village contained four rows, and each row had ten houses; the whole village was separated into many living areas. Using her family as an example, she said that ten family members lived in a rectangular house with only one living room and two bedrooms.

However, in occupying the first house on the row, her family was lucky enough to have a front yard, which provided extra living space.

For those houses built temporarily by the KMT government or donated by the R.O.C. National Women's League, the building materials were very simple and crude. For instance, one second-generation female recalled her mother's saying that, when her family had just moved into the village, the central parts of the house walls were bamboo frames which were spread with a layer of mud mixed with straw. Another male interviewee presented his very first memory of the old house in his village. According to him, what impressed him the most was that the ceiling and the top sides of the walls did not join together; in other words, the ceiling of his old house appeared to be suspended in midair. The reason was that his old house was converted from a rectangular warehouse, and the arc ceiling was only connected to the two side walls of the warehouse. The houses built by Japanese were comparatively better. However, as one male interviewee who lived in a Japanese-style dorm in an army village indicated, there was only one room in the house; therefore, he and his sister had to sleep in a built-in cabinet.

The external living spaces of these villages were similarly crowded. In most villages, the back door of each row directly faced the front door of the next row in a living area. This kind of crowded living space enhanced interpersonal interactions among neighbors. Many interviewees, mostly second-generation males, shared a similar story: if a parent of one family punished his/her child, the child always cried out for help and the neighbors then swiftly arrived to save the child from further corporal punishment.

The above story is told repeatedly in many village families, and has become a collective childhood memory among these second-generation village residents. They usually went to the same elementary school; no matter whether during or after school, the children of the same village did almost everything together. Along with similar diasporic experiences and family backgrounds, the second-generation village residents easily developed lifetime friendships with their neighbors. For the first generation, living and sharing everything together meant that neighbors replaced the traditional family role as the support system. When the second-generation interviewees recalled their parents' stories, they usually agreed that, while their parents might compete and argue with, sometimes even dislike, their neighbors, they still developed long-term friendships with them.

Most older interviewees positively described their memories of living in the villages. However, after analyzing the narratives, one could view the crowded living spaces and the firm ties with the military as having given the government a chance to keep the residents loyal to the KMT and the R.O.C. regime. For example, many second-generation villagers expressed their childhood experiences in terms of taking military buses to go to and from school, using military materials in their daily lives, and going to elementary schools established especially for the children of soldiers. In one interview, a second-generation resident related one story that made an impression on him as a teenager. One day, a public lavatory near his home was found to have some anti-government sentences written on a wall. Someone living in the village reported this to the authorities. A few days later, the residents around the living area were collected

together, all adults and teenagers being required to write sample words in order to check the handwriting.

Even though most of the interviewees denied that they had felt the pressure of living in military dependants' villages, the collective living style did make it easier for the government to control the soldiers and their dependants. During the martial-law period, the steady condition of the military helped the KMT maintain its power and the R.O.C. its regime over Taiwan.

**Insider versus Outsider**

Because of the collective living space and the unique connection with the military, every village mentioned in the interviews revealed a strong sense of community. Even contemporary Taiwanese society is sensitive to the ethnic issue. Almost all interviewees denied that ethnic differences had prevented them from developing interpersonal relationships with other ethnic groups outside the villages. Those who held this viewpoint agreed that ethnic polarisation is caused by unethical politicians, and that they had never felt any differences during their childhoods. However, from analyzing the narratives, the sense of "insider versus outsider" is revealed in many accounts. For instance, one second-generation female agreed that her strict family education made her different from others especially in terms of self-confidence and development of personality; and she attributed the results to her life experiences in growing up in a military dependants' village. According to the woman, after she grew up and moved out of the village, she was identified as a resident of such a village. The one who identified her had a similar background, and told her "I knew at first sight you had lived in a military

dependants' village because we are different from the ones outside the villages."

Several of the second-generation residents interviewed in this project went to elementary schools sponsored by the military, especially the Air Force. They agreed that they rarely had the chance to interact with other ethnic groups. Other interviewees went to regular elementary schools and, therefore, had more chance to interact with classmates from other ethnic backgrounds. According to those who went to regular elementary schools, inter-ethnic friendships were mostly positive among children. Nevertheless, when children fought, in-village and extra-village groups were usually formed quickly, and they might yell out prejudiced words against each other. According to some of the interviewees, the children living in the military villages hardly ever visited their classmates' homes outside the villages, and the people who lived outside the villages usually did not come to visit. From these stories, it seems as though an invisible line separated the in- and extra-village groups as if two different worlds.

Dialect was another way to distinguish "insiders" from "outsiders." During the period of martial law, the KMT government pushed a "Speaking Mandarin" movement at all levels of schools. In elementary schools, therefore, speaking a different mother tongue would be punished. However, as one second-generation male indicated, at that time, almost all second-generation residents of the military dependants' villages in Pingtung City, no matter what their original dialects, spoke a revised Si Chuan dialect. The village children could speak the Si Chuan dialect at school; and the dialect itself was a sign of identity. Thus, the punishment only applied to those who spoke the native Taiwanese Hoklo dialect in school.

In Taiwan, there are several gangs that originally developed from within the military villages. One interviewee in this project insisted that he was not a gangster as such but just a "rascal"; according to his definition, rascals in the villages referred to those who did not like to study and sometimes were mischievous. However, he is familiar with the reasons for and history of gang developments inside the villages. According to him, the original reason for the development of gangs was the youths of the villages uniting together and fighting against the threats from outsiders. Throughout his narrative, "sense of community" was a key expression which described his life as a rascal. Nevertheless, one point that needs to be addressed is that the village rascals not only fought and threatened outsiders; to those who lived in the village but did not obey the rules, the village gangs would mete out punishment. Several other interviewees' narratives contained stories of village gangs; however, those who did not have a background in a gang reported that village gangs only fought with outsiders and protected the residents living in villages. From the account of the gang member described above, the major purpose of joining a gang was indeed to fight against outsiders, which helped develop a sense of community through self-protection; however, on the other hand, punishment applied to both insiders and outsiders who disobeyed the rules.

**Discussion**

The major reason for conducting this research project is to discover how the experiences of living in military dependants' villages influenced people's self-identification. Unlike other ethnic groups such as Hoklo, Hakka, and

indigenous Taiwanese, the Wai Sheng was not organized along geographical, cultural, or dialect lines. Rather, the Wai Sheng group was formed by historical conditions—the 1949 retreat. While much time has passed, and social and political conditions have changed, the more hybridized identities of the later generations have, in fact, accelerated the collapse of the Wai Sheng group.

One of the major sources of the Wai Sheng group, the residents of military dependants' villages, had lived and grown up in a separate living space. For first-generation residents, their strong desire to go back to China allowed them to accept harsh living conditions. After a few decades, many of them realized that they might have to stay on the island for the rest of their lives. When second-generation residents discussed their parents in interviews, they mentioned the older generations' mainland Chinese identity; however, many of them described their parents' journeys of "going home" after the R.O.C. government allowed the citizens to legally visit the Chinese mainland, and said that their home had already disappeared in China. Thus, their parents decided to return once again to Taiwan. One first-generation Wai Sheng interviewee even said that he did not feel any difference between Wai Sheng, Hoklo, or Hakka.

For the second-generation residents, the awareness of hybridity is stronger than that of their parents. Many of the second-generation interviewees were born in Taiwan and have had much more interaction with extra-village people from other ethnic backgrounds. In their narratives, when asked to recall their childhood memories, no matter what village they were from they shared similar stories in terms of family education, school life, interpersonal relationships, and so on. When asked to discuss self-identity, however, they had quite different

reactions. Many of them quickly confirmed their Chinese identity, but all of them refused to recognize the People's Republic of China as "home"; for them, Taiwan is the motherland. A few second-generation interviewees hesitated at first while answering the identity question. For those who showed hesitation, some then answered that they recognized their mixed identities, meaning both Chinese and Taiwanese. But one female interviewee clearly stated that she is Taiwanese: "I was born in Taiwan, grew up in Taiwan, and am living in Taiwan. Of course I am Taiwanese."

For those second-generation residents of military dependants' villages, their parents' diasporic experiences have continued and have been inherited via family education; thus they know the importance of education, and many of them have adopted their parents' Chinese identity. Also, the crowded, harsh living space of the villages has strengthened the sense of community and lifetime relationships with neighbors from the same villages. However, interactions with other ethnic groups during their childhood periods might undermine the awareness of hybridity. When the second generation left the village and their childhood neighbors, the break from the village also made them question how to identify themselves, especially as many had interethnic marriages, and their children a comparatively stronger sense of Taiwanese identity.

By analyzing the narratives of the residents of military dependants' villages in Pingtung City, one can demonstrate that the living space could benefit people in maintaining memories of diasporic experiences, to enhance interpersonal interactions, as well as to strengthen a sense of community and identification. Today, most of the old villages have been torn down and replaced by high-rise

public housing. Leaving the old villages might make the residents reexamine their self-identification. From the ways they cherish the memories of living in military dependants' villages, the invisible line of the villages may not disappear from their lives.

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