

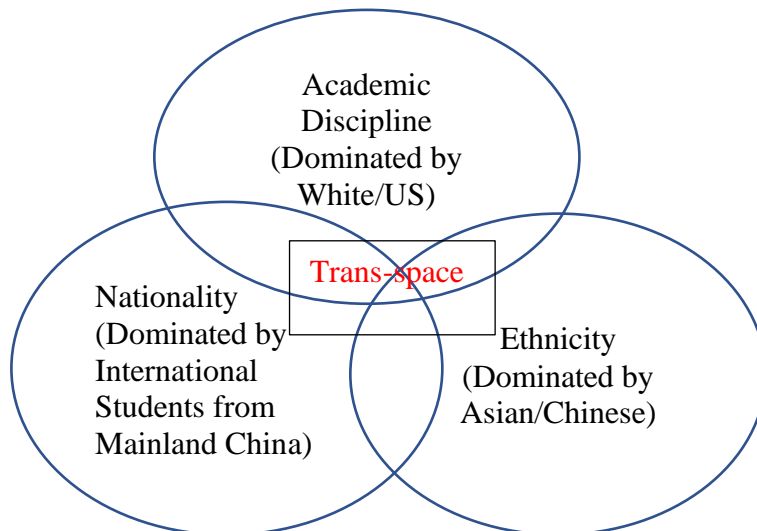
Becoming Trans-sectional: Negotiating Intersectional and Transnational Identities by Taiwanese Graduate Students in the U.S.

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Introduction (*ALSO Institutional Description*)

In the academic year 2018-2019, 1,095,299 international students registered in academic programs or participated in Optional Practical Training (OPT) in the United States (Open Doors on Report on International Educational Exchange, Institute of International Education, 2019). Of the registered international students in 2018-2019, 230,780 pursued Engineering-related studies whereas 203,461 Math & Computer Science (Open Doors on Report on International Educational Exchange, Institute of International Education, 2019). Of the registered international students in 2018-2019, 16,786 pursued Education-related fields whereas 17,013 Humanities (Open Doors on Report on International Educational Exchange, Institute of International Education, 2019), the two occupying the least attended academic programs in the United States by international students.

Of the same academic year, 377,943 international students were registered in graduate programs in the U.S., and among them, 279,766 were based in Asia and 133,396 in China, making it the largest export country of sending its students to pursue postgraduate studies in the U.S. Among the Asian-Chinese group is that of Taiwanese (students). Although People’s Republic of China (China) and Republic of China (Taiwan) share similar cultural and ethnic roots and identifications (i.e., Han people), they are socio-politically and socio-culturally separated, with China being reigned under communism whereas Taiwan under democracy. In light of the complicated narrative and reality of cultural commonality and political division between the two nation-states, Taiwanese international students majoring in Education and Humanities face the following three triple minority identities: (1) disciplinary representation (in the academic year 2018-2019, there were 23,369 Taiwanese international students, with only 1.7 % pursuing academic programs in Humanities and 2.2% in Education); (2) national representation (compounded by both the cross-straits differences and similarities in the East Asia and by the global political competition between the two power political regimes—United States and China); and (3) ethnic representation (despite being Asian and Chinese in ethnicity—thus making them the majority, Taiwanese people occupy a uniquely minoritized cultural site where their national-cultural-ethnic identifications cannot be readily categorized). Thus, this study aims to theorize and articulate the intersection between these three laminated and layered intersections, as visually represented below, by addressing the following two research questions:



Research Questions:

- How do Taiwanese international graduate students in Education & Humanities reposition their *Taiwanese* identities in the U.S. academic context?
- How do they leverage academic situated activities to negotiate their multiply-minoritized identities in the Western academic landscape?

Literature Review (*ALSO Key Theorists*)

Transnationalism and Transnational Literacy

Empirical investigations of literacy and language learning in the landscape of transnational migration have been burgeoning in the past few decades, thanks to globally scaled labor migration fueled by a globalization and translocalization of economic (re)configuration. Such geoeconomic and geopolitical transformation on a global scale has brought forth newly emerging forms of communicative and digital media (Fraiberg, Wang, & You, 2017; Lam, 2011; You, 2016), the rising prominence of which has informed how language and literacy are being practiced to forge cross-border inter- and intra-relations.

Transnational literacy researchers have recently shifted gears towards understanding more expansively and capaciously how literate acts and practices mediate transnational actors' performance and enactment of their cultural, economic (Lagman, 2015; Vieira, 2010, 2016, 2019), political, educational (Fraiberg, Wang, & You, 2017; Lam, 2011), or legal identities (Vieira, 2010, 2016, 2019; Wan, 2014) that share a similar sentiment of New Literacies Studies (e.g., Street, 1995), which focuses on the ways in which literacy is processually and contextually sensitive to the political-ideological structure where it is enacted and practiced (Bloome, Castanheira, Leung, & Rowsell, 2019). For instance, Fraiberg, Wang, and You (2017) ethnographically probe into how Chinese international students engaged in the underground literacy, frowned upon by the (institutional) authority, to advance their academic learning and to resist the standardized and streamlined learning regime levied by universities in their host country (e.g., U.S.). They articulate that Chinese international students are wired and tangled in a convoluted, and oftentimes conflicting, knotwork of economic, political, technological, educational, institutional, and cultural ideologies under which they strategically maneuver these complex transnational and translocal entanglements (Rhee, 2006) in order to make sense of who they are and who they can become in a new cultural context.

Although these studies dynamically shed light on the rich textures of transnational literacy in differential discursive sites, one common thread underlies these studies: the destabilizing of the nation-state apparatus that premises the functioning of transnationalism (Willis & Yeoh, 2004). More specifically, transnational literacy has been recognized as a sustaining activity that plays a pivotal role for migrants to maintain an intricate web of relationships with their host communities and home countries, the transnational discourse of which troubles the geospatially and geographically grounded concept of nation-states. For instance, Vieira (2010) ethnographically documents how Azorean and Brazilian immigrants to the United States and Azorean-Americans trouble the assimilationist ideology imposed by the U.S. mainstream culture via legal immigration documents, the acquisition of which implicates a physically and mentally taxing process (pp.57-58) that might expand across decades, with no guarantee of secured legal status and documentation. As what Vieira (2010) reports, one of her participants—Cristina, an Azorean immigrant who had legally resided in the U.S. for more than three decades—was denied for the status as a naturalized American citizen after her multiple attempts at passing the naturalization test, which involves a mastery of literacy skills, had foundered (p.58). Despite Cristina's eventual passing of the test and

her becoming *as* a naturalized citizen of the United States, Vieira (2010) points out that Cristina's *American-by-paper* identity upsets the wholeness of Americanness for immigrants, as their becoming as Americanness is not only literacy-bound but also "conditional" (p.58), contingent largely finally upon whether immigrants could pass the naturalization test. Vieira's ethnographic study not only sheds light on the ways in which literate practices figure into one's migratory and assimilationist trajectories but also unsettles the bounded one-on-one-mapping of national geographical parameters with legal citizenship. That is, who and what is an Azorean? Who and what is an American? Who and what is an Azorean-American? Answering these questions requires transnational researchers to pay more meticulous attention to probe into how transnational and translocal sites afford spaces for diasporic subjects to narrate their *becoming* processes.

Intersectionality

Another area of foci for transnational studies is to investigate the interconnectedness between identity categories among transnational subjects during their acculturation and adaptations to their host countries. For instance, Rhee (2006), using autoethnographical approach, examines the three juxtaposed subjective positions of Korean women in the US higher education and their particular transnational experiences that connect three distinct domains and histories (p.596). In espousing for a less essentialized view of sociological categories, Rhee (2006) enunciates that at once embracing and rejecting Western epistemological domination and reproduction enables the generation of different epistemes and leave behind the necessary historical records. The enunciated transnational experiences that unfold disparate geographical, sociocultural, and educational locations and histories permit Korean women in the US higher education to simultaneously appropriate and undermine their gendered, racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized identities in order to rework their positionality in their transnational lives and to recuperate their uniquely situated agencies in the regimes of global/local epistemological production.

Although the framework of intersectionality is not explicitly named and invoked as a theoretical framework in a large body of transnational and migration studies as Rhee's (2006), one would be naïve to ignore the intersectional sentiment that undergirds the theoretical backdrop of those studies. As a critical paradigm purported to have its genealogical roots in black feminism to contest heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy and to militate against social injustice and inequality, *intersectionality* has been proteanly applied in many lines of research across differing disciplines to better fathom complex configuration of interacting variables. In particular, intersectionality has been prominently deployed in an avalanche of identitarian work to theorize the ontological and epistemological anatomy of multiple power vectors in relation to the performance and enactment of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, among other identity categories. As the intersectionality framework has traveled (e.g., Hancock, 2016, p.4) and become a prevailing lexicon, however, the framework itself raises a host of theoretical and methodological apprehensions and quandaries. The first concerns the loosening of the more critical capacity initially envisaged and espoused by intersectionality scholars who averred that one of the political projects by intersectionality scholarship should pertain to its criticism of hegemonic infrastructure that essentializes identity categories (e.g., Anthias, 2012) and that naturalizes the intersecting state of subjugation as well as injustice. The bereaved critical capacity of modern intersectionality can be attributed to its increasingly popular discursive exercise of intersectionality both inside and outside academe. For example, many intersectionality-thinking scholars have noted that intersectionality is simplified in many research projects. Such projects do not concern

the ontological troubledness of identity categories; rather, they reduce identity categories to one additive formula wherein one identity is added onto one another. The additive model preserves the ontological separatism and binarism that is characteristic of identity politics and thus saps the epistemological prowess of intersectionality to question the spurious stability of intersectionality.

Theoretical Interventions

- Intersectional identities are often theorized to be separate (intercategorical intersection; see also McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008), even though more fluid, in a transnational context
- → For instance, it presupposes the existential separatism and ontological beings of nation-states (e.g., Yeoh & Willis, 2004)
- → e.g., Taiwan as a geographical fixity that automatically confers (political, economic, cultural, legal, etc) citizenship → Transnationalism needs to be able to account for more fluidity in how transnational actors could create a *trans-space* intersected by different identitarian discourse and hegemonic regimes

Thus, this study aims to merge the intersectionality and transnationalism to theorize the trans-space that is often neglected by many transnational-intersectional studies.

Glossary:

Intersectionality, Transnationality, Higher Education, International Students

Methodology

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher commenced with designing the project in light of his own etic positionality (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p.24) and a theoretical inclination that identifications in relation to identity signifiers are not essentialized. Thus, a case-study design to this project was adopted. For the case-study presented and reported in this article, the researcher interviewed four Taiwanese graduate students, the recruitment of whom was mainly carried out through social media announcement taking place from Spring 2020 to Summer 2020. The recruitment was thus an integrated version of convenience and snowball sampling.

The semi-structured interviews spanned across four months in 2020 and was conducted predominantly in English, with an option given to the participants should they decide to express themselves in Mandarin Chinese. This methodological consideration is to reflect what Blommaert (2005) argues about how in high-stakes interviews, communicative resources commanded by interlocutors would inform the contour of narrated and storied events (p.60). The length of each interview varied, contingent upon the autobiographical information supplied by the interviewees, and the medium of the interviews took place over Zoom, with the interviews recorded by the built-in voice-recorder. The field notes were taken by the interviewer, and the participants' autobiographical narratives were transcribed in verbatim for data coding later. Although data of this study were elicited through the semi-structured interview, the researcher also blended the interview questions with the solicitation of the participants' autobiographical accounts that could illuminate their transnational and intersectional experience.

Name	Enrolled Graduate Program	Academic Standing (at the time of data collection)	Legal Citizenship
Sylvia	Curriculum & Instruction	Ph.D.	Taiwan, America
Diane	Education	Ph.D.	Taiwan
Dana	Linguistics	Ph.D.	Taiwan
Anna	Educational Psychology	Ph.D.	Taiwan, Canada

Data Coding Procedure

Analysis of the interview data involved qualitatively-inclined inductive and interpretive coding. The researcher first assigned preliminary two-word codes to the interview transcripts and the second pass of coding was done to collapse and merge the previously established codes whose themes were similarly shared. The final pass of coding established key linkages across the four autobiographical accounts that were situated in relation to the larger analytic and theoretical frameworks of this study, to wit, intersectionality and transnationalism. Thus, the qualitative data coding produced two important themes that could help answer the research questions laid out earlier: the contestation of academic homogenization and the enhancement of disciplinary visibility.

Findings

Dual Legal Citizenships to Contest Academic Homogenization: Sylvia & Anna

By being situated at the intersection of nationality, gender, race, and ethnicity along with institutional representation, the four Taiwanese international graduate students not only pictured eastward (from the geographical standpoint of being situated in the U.S) an imagined, unified, and collective understanding of what it bespeaks to be Taiwanese but also positioned themselves uniquely and singularly in relation to local, translocal, and global network of different academic and non-academic relationships. In particular, they negotiated the institutional affiliation to their respective disciplinary identities, paradoxically, both by hewing to rigorous academic expectations (e.g., fulfilling coursework requirements) and by defying top-down homogenizing academic literacy conventions, thus successfully traversing terrains of academy without being unqualifiedly subsumed under it.

For example, as a Taiwanese-American who possesses dual citizenship in academy, Sylvia has strategically navigated and utilized her Taiwanese-American identities to disrupt the preconceived notion of being a Taiwanese or being an American and the (prospective) pathways associated with being either of the two identities laid before her. Sylvia's hyphenated identity affords her the capacity to move *beyond* an imagined, boxed identity in her own department and to reap (academic) boons. To exemplify, Sylvia's advisor, according to Sylvia, tends to regard her as an American citizen and so do her cohort members.

“so my cohort, everyone's white. And I feel really hard fitting in because they're not only they're white, they're all like 35 Plus, I'm like the youngest. I'm the only Asian. So every time in our gatherings I feel really hard fitting in. But, um, but the weird thing is like, I'm also American. So they treat me as Americans and my advisor talked, talk of me as a citizen

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to like when we're applying for grants or whatever. She'd 'you're a citizen, don't worry' whatever...they treat me as an American because they know that I'm a citizen, but I'm not. I'm also Asian. I don't think they really addressed the fact that I'm Asian” (Sylvia, personal communication, April, 2020)

“We kind of talked about how she decided that she wants me as a member of the cohort like so she talked about what she looks for in a PhD student, especially for international PhD students, but also not internationals, like she talked about, like, first of all her students need to understand her English because she speaks super, super, super fast. Very, very fast...And that's like the first, like what she wants, like she wants to be able to communicate clearly smoothly. And she made a comment about how I talk like Americans and I barely, like, if she doesn't see me in person, she would think that I am like another white, not white, well, like Asian American or American like talking to her.” (Sylvia, personal communication, April, 2020)

However, Sylvia, as of the time of data collection (April, 2020), was then recruited to be part of a research project on Hong Kong by her advisor because of her being a Taiwanese, whose Asianness (not Americanness) could lend a critical lens into the research, given the geographical proximity between Taiwan and Hong Kong.

“I'm Asian, I look Asian, it's very hard to ignore and like, my me and my advisor, I just got a new assistantship working on one of her research in Hong Kong and I guess I have like that cultural lens and I can translate and bring offer more to those tables and some from Taiwan. So that's one knowledge as yeah, but aside from that, like in our gathering, they don't really treat me differently (as an American)” (Sylvia, personal communication, April, 2020)

Leveraging her identities, paradoxically, as a foreigner and as a citizen in the American higher education granted her opportunities to advance her academic career: instrumentalizing the Americanness to receive research grants and Asianness to participate in other research-based projects.

Another telling example that can substantiate this notion of doubly-nationalized identity to disrupt academic homogenization and to contextualize a more fluid academic-national identity resides in Anna, a Ph.D. student in educational psychology. With dual citizenship in Taiwan and Canada, Anna, when approached by the other Chinese international students (those originally based from the Mainland China) and inquired about the sovereignty status of Taiwan and its political relation with the Mainland, would showcase a predilection for juxtaposing her Taiwanese citizenship along with her Canadian one, in an effort to dilute the undesired and uninvited confrontations that might rise from the culturally-and-politically charged understanding that Taiwan could belong to the Mainland China.

“So my intention is to reach out to people like to be friends and I, I don't want to have any like, um, I don't want people to have some sort of prejudice against me, I guess. So, um, I because, you know, you know, the sensitive issue going on between Chinese and

Taiwanese. Yeah. So, um, so I, I would, you know, try to play out my Canadian identity when I yeah, so when I, when I speak to them because I don't want them just to focus on this person...I want to be friends with different people from different backgrounds. I want to hear them out as well, even though we might have different opinions about things. But I just wanna, you know, be friendly and all that. So that's why I tend to play up a little bit of my Canadian identity when I introduce myself to them so that they can kind of let down their guard. And they're more willing to talk about stuff.” (Anna, personal communication, August, 2020)

Bent on revealing her ‘other’ legal citizenship status in her intermingling with Chinese international students, Anna finesses the possible and allowable identity-crossing to grant herself opportunities to negotiate what being Taiwanese, Canadian, and Asian in America means to her and to her interlocutors. That said, this act of sporting her Canadianness does not mitigate or nullify Anna’s affinity with her Taiwaneseness. Rather, such a rhetorical move is to resist against the essentializing demarcation of how she designates herself and her intersectional identities.

In light of Sylvia’s and Anna’s accounts, both of them work *towards* and *against* the academic homogenization in accommodating and resistant ways by propitiously and discursively underscoring their dual (legal) citizenship in different academic scenarios. **(another sentence or two to finish up this paragraph)**

Trans-Sectional Identities to Enhance their Disciplinary Visibility : Dana & Diane

Dana, with her research centralizing on language assessment, indicated that the ethnocentrism that often characterizes the research in language assessment in the U.S. context encouraged her to integrate some of her cultural backgrounds and insights into her own research. For instance, Dana reflected that much of the language assessment scholarship focuses on ESL classrooms whose immediate extracurricular surround is dominated by English as the first language being spoken and practiced. Therefore, Dana oftentimes attempted to enrich the parameter of the language-assessment scholarship by raising the awareness of different EFL contexts in the administration of language assessment and testing. Dana’s uniquely positioned identity in opposition to the monopolization of ESL language assessment places her identity-making as a dichotomized relationship with the U.S.-and ethnocentric language-assessment scholarship from the West. That is, by advocating for more inclusion of EFL language-assessment research into linguistics, she is positioning herself as part of the group membership that is often considered “othered,” such as, in Dana’s case, Asian versus Western. When pushing against such larger scale of academic monopolization, Dana engages in her pan-identification by associating herself with the other Asian scholars and Asian contexts that are together suppressed in the Western-based language-assessment scholarship. However, echoing the sentiment discerned in the invocation of dual citizenship discussed in the foregoing section, Dana further stratifies and distinguishes herself from the Asian language-testing scholars, the majority of whom are based in the Mainland China and Korea. In particular, Dana lamented that the language-testing scholarship in Taiwan has received little disciplinary attention or channeled most of its foci to the reading and listening assessment; the status quo of such, nevertheless, fortuitously allows her to frame her budding disciplinary identity in linguistics and in language testing, inasmuch as she could contribute to the disciplinary enrichment by proffering inputs from her cultural and national

identity and contributing different lines of research to the current scholarship in language testing in the Taiwanese, Asian, or Western context. Through Dana's constant negotiation of her in-flux fashioning and refashioning of her niche in the discipline, the transnational academic identities intersect with Dana's dynamic re-imagining and moving-across minoritized Taiwanese-ness, goading her to remain cognizant of the transnationally-embodied politicized and institutionalized power

Discussions & Implications

- (1) Contesting the pan identification of Asian/Asian American/Chinese (international) students → unwarranted assumptions
- → Yeo et al. (2018) definition of international students: “as students from countries outside of the United States, especially those students from different racial/ ethnic, historical, social, cultural, political, linguistic, and religious backgrounds” (p.98)
- → over-emphasize the geographical fixedness as well as the identity fluidity that belies the nationalist and politically fixed identification
- (2) A pan designation of Asian international students forecloses the possible coalition and overlooks more complicated political competition across continents
- (3) A more expansive definition of “trans-national literacy” or “academic literacy → “trans-sectional literacies” (not a big T and a single y) that are geotemporally mediated and sociogenetically informed (Prior et al., 2006, p.740)
- “Even in the face of fatal empirical evidence and theoretical critique, these ideologies reanimate a host of zombie concepts (e.g., discourse communities, autonomous texts, singular authorship, literal meaning, stylistic clarity, writing ability as a psychological trait) and continue to ensnare practice theories of academic literacies and human becoming” (Prior & Olinger, 2019, pp.127-128)
- (4) Culturally sensitive, politically conscious, and ethnographically faithful → ethnographically documenting how disciplinary enculturation informs the performance and enactment of the academic literacies in relation to the development of disciplinary identities

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