“The Sum of my Margins may be Greater than your Centre”: Journey and Prospects of a Marginal Man in the Global Economy

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Abstract
Relatively few papers in the social sciences have provided subjective (i.e. auto-biographical) examinations of minority identity experiences through the lenses of the scientific literatures of social identity theory and acculturation theory from social and cross-cultural psychology. Just as few papers in psychology have examined subjective experiences of identity as informed by sociological theory and the literary tropes of minority writers like Fanon. The sociological theory of the “marginal man” is revisited in the context of the global economy, where connecting margins is often as rewarding as adhering to centres. The author describes his acculturation experiences as a Chinese-American-New Zealander through migration and transmigration, and provides evidence of cultural integration, separation, marginalization and assimilation in various phases and situations in his life. He rejects the notion he has either a single unified notion of self or a single acculturation strategy, but rather locates identity within the web of power relations consisting of cultural and institutional resources and constraints (for Asians in New Zealand and in global society). According to this author, the emotional difficulties of marginal positions are married to immense opportunities for building bridges and being part of the connective tissue for global consciousness.

I do not come with timeless truths. My consciousness it not illuminated by ultimate radiances. Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think it would be good if certain things were said.
Franz Fanon Black Skin, White Masks (1968/70:7).

There is a burgeoning literature on subjective experiences of identity by minorities writing in a post-colonial vein, informed by literary tropes and sociological theory (e.g. Fanon 1968/70; hooks 1990).

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Comparatively little has been written from the perspective of minority writers steeped in contemporary psychology, where the main tropes are derived from natural science and theories focus more on the individual than society. In effect, post-colonial theorizing on identity is largely divorced from the findings on minority identity that have emerged from more empiricist traditions. As a Chinese-American-New Zealander, and an academic psychologist, my purpose in writing this paper is to provide a personal account of my experiences in migration and transmigration through the lens of current theory and data from social and cross-cultural psychology. My account is informed in particular by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell 1987), acculturation theory (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder 2006; Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001), and my own work on history and identity (Liu & Hilton 2005; Liu, McCreanor, McIntosh & Teaiwa 2005). By fusing these empiricist traditions with a narrative of my personal experiences, I hope to provide insight into how members of the Chinese Diaspora may align the marginal positions typically available to them in Western societies with transnational opportunities to take productive roles in the global economy.

**Psychological Theories of Social Identity and Acculturation**

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979) has emerged as one of the most influential theories in social psychology over the last quarter of a century. In its fully elaborated form as self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987), the theory holds that each person has a repertoire of self-concepts available, ranging from personal (e.g. I am a kind person) to group (e.g. I am a woman) to humanity (i.e. we are all human beings). Thought and action change qualitatively depending on what aspect of identity is activated or made salient in a given situation. So for instance, if Condoleezza Rice represents the United States as its Secretary of State in the United Nations, her identities as “American”, and “Secretary of State” would be salient, and her identities as “woman” or “academic” would be dormant. The former identities would govern her thought and action more than the latter. By contrast, if she were invited to give a speech at an academic conference on feminism, the opposite would be true. Her behaviour could thus appear to be quite different across the two situations. Identity according to self-categorization theory functions as a navigation system, providing a diverse
repertoire of tools (many of them implicit) that allow a person to adjust to situation appropriate norms. Identity emerges out of an interaction between the individual’s repertoire of self-concepts and the expectations held by other people in the situation. The theory does not specify how different identities are combined except to say that activation of group-level identities suppress individual-level identities and vice-versa (Turner et al. 1987).

Hence, it is the acculturation theory of John Berry and his colleagues (Berry et al. 2006) rather than social identity theory that has been most influential in conceptualizing how minority group members adapt to a new culture as a consequence of migration. According to Berry et al. (2006), the migrant or sojourner asks him or herself two questions (1) “Do I want to maintain my heritage culture”? and (2) “Do I want to adopt aspects of the culture of the receiving society”? The answers form a 2x2 matrix that results in four possible acculturation strategies. If the answer to both questions is yes, then the acculturation strategy that emerges is described by Berry et al. as integrated. The “integrated” profile includes high subjective identification with both heritage culture and the culture of the receiving society, endorsement of integration (with respect to cultural traditions, marriage, social activities, friends from both groups, etc.), being proficient in both languages, and having strong ethnic peer contacts. This is the most common and most preferred profile among ethno-cultural youth and it is associated with the most positive outcomes (Berry et al. 2006). The second most popular profile is separation (maintaining heritage culture, language, and social networks, and maintaining distance from the receiving society and its members), followed closely by assimilation (giving up heritage culture and adopting the host culture); these are associated with intermediate adaptation outcomes, whereas the worst outcomes are had by those who are marginalized, or unable to maintain heritage culture and unable to be accepted by the mainstream.

The preceding paragraphs are not meant to summarize well-developed literatures that consist of more than a thousand publications. They are intended as thumbnail sketches for the purpose of discussion. I use these theories to guide an account of my life story, using a narrative psychology of history and identity (Liu & László 2007), where “the rules of plausibility and verisimilitude more than the rules of factuality and logic govern acceptability” (Liu & Atsumi 2008).
A Personal Journey of Migration and Transmigration

The so-called 2x2 “Berry Boxes” are a snapshot of a moment in time for migrant experiences rather than the narrative continuity that I now present. My personal impression is that I have inhabited all four quadrants of Berry’s acculturation space over the course of my forty some years of experience, and I move between the three more adaptive strategies on a daily basis.

I was born in Taiwan, where my parents emigrated from mainland China after World War II and the Chinese Civil War as refugees. For them, life was difficult during formative years. My mother remembers when she was a little girl in China, her father pointed “look” at a man who was then executed by a pistol shot to the head. Her family evacuated the city of Nanjing ahead of the Japanese army, barely escaping the massacre to follow. On my father’s side, when his grandfather’s sugar warehouses were bombed by the Japanese, a street in Shanghai ran red with molasses. All their businesses were lost after the war. My father took an examination to enter National Taiwan University as an undergraduate, being the only member of his nuclear family to leave the mainland after the Communist takeover. He was offered a position as a Professor of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University (SIU) after completing his Master’s Degree in Taiwan and PhD in the United States. We moved to Carbondale, Illinois, a small Midwestern town in the United States to join him when I was four.

Despite the fact that they lived in Carbondale for more than a dozen years, and that my mother holds an American passport, I would not describe my parents as Americans. They are Chinese through and through. While my father was a successful Professor at SIU, he specialized in Chinese philosophy, and all of our close family friends were Chinese. Our family made several trips back and forth between Southern Illinois and Hong Kong during my childhood, and finally when I was an undergraduate, they went to Hong Kong for good. They currently reside in Taiwan, where my father is a Professor Emeritus at Academia Sinica, and among the best known neo-Confucian philosophers in the world. Chinese identity for them is a state of being, a simple statement of who they are. It is an essentialized position not requiring qualification nor inducing reflection.

The situation for me was quite different. Acculturation theorists have long noted the “acculturation gap” between older new migrants and younger ones. As a “1.5” generation migrant (one who is born overseas but
arrives in a receiving society early as a child), I quickly learned English and began to acquire American behavioural memes, like a love of basketball, football, and TV shows like “Combat”. At home, we spoke Chinese or “Chinglish”, and our food preferences and social habits were Chinese. This private separation and public (economic) integration is a pattern often observed among first generation migrants (Navas, Rojas, Garcia & Pumares 2007).

I would not say that we were explicit targets for discrimination. My father’s promotions in his department were performance-based and quick. My progress in school was similarly exemplary. While I remember being in a fair number of fights as a boy, they were not explicitly associated with being called “Ching Chong Chinaman”, though this was an occasional feature of my social life (far behind being asked whether I knew kung fu, the typical conversation opener). But we certainly were not popular among the locals. The only family invitations to white households I recall were to that of co-workers in my father’s department, never to neighbours. My mother, who was a homemaker, had no white (or black) women friends.

Rather than explicit racism, what we faced was a more implicit form of social exclusion. The public integration/private separation profile that we exhibited was not only chosen by us, it was also a preference shown by members of the majority group. New techniques for measuring implicit racial attitudes pioneered by Devos and Banaji (2005) show that all Americans, white, black, and Asian, see white faces as more closely implicitly associated with symbols of America like the flag and bald eagle. They exhibit faster reaction times in pairing white faces with symbols of America than Asian faces. These implicit biases are larger and more reliable than for explicit measures, and they are part of a syndrome that has been called “modern racism” (McConhay 1986). Whether or not I knew this at a conscious level, I was being conditioned on the one hand to want to be an American, but on the other hand was socially excluded from this privileged status. This pattern also holds for New Zealand, as recent evidence from my own lab shows that Chinese are implicitly considered less closely associated with New Zealand symbols than either Pākehā or Māori (Sibley & Liu 2007).

In many respects, I was marginalized as a boy growing up in Southern Illinois in the 1970s. I did not especially desire association with the Chinese children of my parents’ friends. We children had the intuition
that we were so outnumbered in everyday life that to seek association with one another in school would be to invite discrimination. We never spoke Chinese with one another, though some of us were fluent. I was even more marginalized in the three years we lived in Hong Kong as a Mandarin but not Cantonese speaker with a Chinese face. The travel between locations played havoc with my social life.

In Carbondale, where I completed high school, I found a peripheral circle of white friends, who enjoyed marginal activities like fantasy role playing games, and reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I did not go to my school prom and I did not date as an adolescent in high school. In retrospect, if I were a girl back then I wouldn’t have dated me either: my haircut, my activities, my clothes all marked me as a “geek”. I was a target for racial discrimination by one large boy, in the football team, who once pulled down and ripped my shorts while we were going to gym class; I will never forget the humiliation and laughter that followed. Despite this, I do not remember those years as unrelieved misery: adolescence involves angst for many teenagers, and I did have a circle of friends who shared many of my interests and among whom I had some social standing. But for me, the best part of adolescence was that it was soon over.

As an undergraduate studying Computer Science and Engineering at the University of Illinois (UI), I experienced a happier, more assimilated phase of existence. I fell in with a group of Jewish boys from Chicago in my residence hall. Before, I was not aware of Jews as separate from other majority group members, but soon found that our shared experiences of being minorities and our parents’ experiences of suffering during the war created a bond between us. I adopted many of their memes, that influence me to this day: cynicism of authority expressed as sarcasm, contempt for the popular and dominant groups (the fraternity/sorority system was our favourite target), detailed analysis of quality films, and a love of progressive rock music. For the first time in my life I was assimilated and accepted within a tight circle of white people. Oh Happy Days! I remember meeting with the son of the greatest Chinese philosopher in the world, who also happened to be studying at UI. He had arrived from Hong Kong for his undergraduate studies and was very lonely, but I had no interest in befriending him. I learned later with sorrow and regret that he experienced mental illness later, in part because of his social isolation at UI.
I was learning how not to be a geek (which in my mind, was associated with being Chinese). My grades suffered, but not so much that I wasn’t offered a lucrative job at an aerospace company in Southern California. One of my best friends was an ABC (American born Chinese) co-worker, who as a Californian made a clear distinction between himself and the FOBs (Fresh off the Boats). My degree in Computer Science gave me the ticket to an excellent income for a young man. I got an apartment in Redondo Beach. I got tanned and played beach volleyball. I got a Mazda 626 with a sunroof. I got laid.

I think that for young Asian men growing up in Western societies, one of the keys to acquiring confidence is sexual maturity. Western gender stereotypes emasculate Asian men (especially East Asians) while positioning Asian women as desirable (see Liu, Campbell & Condie 1995 for survey results; Fanon (1968/70) and hooks (1990) provide theoretical analysis for black folks). More colloquially, Jackie Chan and Jet Li could kick your ass, but you wouldn’t want to get in bed with them, whereas Ziyi Zhang and Michelle Yeoh could theoretically also kick your ass, but that would not be the primary attraction. For many young people, social standing is derived from the quality of their other sex associates, and in multi-ethnic California by contrast to mono-cultural Illinois, I discovered that I had some market value. Taking psychology classes for fun at UCLA (also known as the University of Caucasians Lost Among Asians), I met my wife-to-be Belinda, a first generation Filipino during an introductory lecture in social psychology. I became bored with computer systems, and was becoming interested in human systems.

Belinda and I got married, and I went to graduate school in psychology while she worked an office job. With my marriage and the demographic opportunities of Southern California, I began to think of myself as Asian rather than Chinese. My literacy and verbal fluency in Chinese decreased through lack of practice, as Asians communicate to one another through the shared medium of English. I never developed much attachment to Chinese speaking communities as a consequence of my marginalization in Illinois, whereas Belinda, as a first generation immigrant who arrived in California as a teenager, was deeply imbedded within Filipino social networks that I enjoyed. To this day, our family life is more permeated by social relations with Filipinos than Chinese.
I earned a PhD in social psychology (on cognitive processes in stereotype formation), did a post-doctoral fellowship at Florida Atlantic, and got my first job as an academic at Victoria University of Wellington in 1994. The first thing I did was visit the Department of Psychology and get my relocation cheque. The second thing I did was visit the Department of Māori Studies. My best friend, a Carbondale boy I’d gone to kindergarten, high school, university, and graduate school with, had majored in anthropology at UCLA and done his thesis on the evolution of political complexity in Māori chiefdoms (see Liu & Allen 1999 for psychological interpretation of his archaeological data from Hawke’s Bay). So I knew enough about Aotearoa to realize that I should visit tangata whenua, and this act turned out to be the first step in a journey that has yet to end. A lecturer in the department invited us to a powhiri to remove the tapu (sacredness) from our feet. Later, I learned that according to Māori lore, a good caller can make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up when you are welcomed onto a marae: Te Ripowai Higgins certainly did that for me. The city melted away as another world, nestled under pohutukawa and guarded by ancestral memories emerged. Te Ripowai had just taken her class to Ruatahuna as a practicum and they were sharing their experiences; most of the students were urban Māori and asked questions about Tuhoe Māori protocols that were highly informative to me. A few months later, Te Ripowai’s sister Aroha was in need of a ride home to Ruatoki, and we volunteered to take her. She led us on a magical mystery tour, guided by the invisible strands of whakapapa that connect Māori to the land and to their relations throughout Aotearoa. We got to know Aroha’s family, rode horses up the Whakatane River, and hunted eels by moonlight.

Aroha’s son Ati once told a rich Texas oilman, whom they’d met at a diner, who was flush with cash but had no children, that it was they not he who was rich. I learned the truth of those words as I experienced a side of New Zealand that few new migrants get to see. Before I had a chance to get socialized into the negative stereotypes of Māori that one sees on TV and reads in the press (Barclay & Liu 2003; Liu & Mills 2006), I met the people from whom those negative statistics are drawn face to face. I went to parties where a large percentage of people were missing teeth, had tattoos, and were in various states of inebriation, but felt welcome, safe and learned more than in most classrooms. It was in Te Urewera where I discovered that I was a cross-cultural psychologist, by life experience. Interviews
conducted in collaboration with Pou Temara with community members taught me much; but the best parts of these interviews were not captured on tape. The process of self-presentation and negotiation required to reach the point of informed consent where the Children of the Mist agreed to be interviewed and recorded by me was the real test. The perspectives held by Tuhoe are deeply grounded in the history of the land, and a knowledge of the past (see Liu & Temara 1998 for analysis of these interviews). I began to realize New Zealand’s bicultural heritage and learned how to articulate it formally using the methods of empirical social psychology (Liu, Wilson, McClure & Higgins 1999). I have helped my students and they have helped me to rewrite the literature on a bicultural psychology for Aotearoa/New Zealand (Barclay & Liu 2003; Harrington & Liu 2002; Kirkwood, Liu & Weatherall 2005; Liu 2005; Liu & Mills 2006; Rata, Liu & Hanke in press; Sibley & Liu 2004; Sibley & Liu 2007). We have developed a theory of history and identity (Liu & Hilton 2005), where we can empirically determine what and how people and events are drawn from history to form an iconic system of meaning that enables a culture to maintain its traditions while absorbing the implications of current events (Sibley, Liu, Duckitt & Khan 2008).

From Tuhoe I learned that my cultural heritage was not something to be dismissed, as I had during my assimilationist phase at UI. If Māori could fight against such odds and with such tenacity for their culture, should I not exert a little effort to retain my own? At exactly the right moment, I received notice of the inaugural meeting of the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) in Hong Kong in 1995. I presented a paper co-authored with my father entitled “Modernism, post-modernism, and Neo-Confucian thinking: A critical history of paradigm shifts and values in academic psychology” (Liu & Liu 1997). Through writing this paper I got to know my father better. This paper earned me an invitation to become the first Insular Pacific regional representative for the association, and from there I have served as Treasurer, Secretary-General, and am currently Editor-in-Chief of the association’s journal, the Asian Journal of Social Psychology. AASP has been going from strength to strength, with a rapidly growing membership of currently 300 members, an SSCI journal with an citation impact rating of 0.6-1.0, and a biennial conference recently attended by more than 700 scholars (see www.asiansocialpsych.org). Within the association, I am sometimes known as an “honorary Taiwanese”, though this status, like
all my others, is provisional (see Huang, Liu & Chang 2004). My regular visits to Taiwan (where my parents now live) have greatly improved my fluency in Putonghua (Mandarin). Through the association my collaborations extend to Southeast Asia (e.g., Liu, Lawrence, Ward & Abraham 2002) and Japan (e.g., Ikeda, Liu, Aida, & Wilson, 2005; Liu & Atsumi 2008). I maintain a distinctly Asian sphere of activities that is largely separate from my cultural activities in NZ. I regularly visit Taiwan and hardly speak a word of English during these visits, but I also regularly travel to Japan where English is all I speak.

With this account, I draw my personal narrative to a close: for all the resources that I have been gifted and burdened with for the management of identity have been disclosed. Unusually for a psychologist, my approach to social identity focuses on the resources through which identity is mediated: institutional forms, shared knowledge structures, and social relations (Liu & Hilton 2005). It is to these that I now turn in providing a theoretical analysis of the journey and prospects of a marginal man in the global economy.

**Marginal Positions and the Laws of Supply and Demand**

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre*
*The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*
*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

*W.B. Yeats*

Robert Ezra Park (1950) writes:

> It is characteristic of marginal types that they are able to look with a certain degree of critical detachment upon the diverse worlds of their parents. At the same time they are likely to feel themselves not quite at home in either (p.111).

Park describes characteristics of the marginal man as including:

- spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness, and malaise… It is in the mind of the marginal man—where the changes and fusions of culture are going on—that we can best study the processes of civilization and of progress (p.356).

Leaving aside the biological essentialism and unfortunate notions of racial superiority that marred their analysis, Park and Stonequist
Stonequist (1937) make some astute observations about the social identity of bicultural individuals that I shall pursue. But the professed Olympian detachment of their writing as “scientists” can be seen as time-bound assertions of white privilege when examined through the theory of race as power and language articulated by Fanon (1968/70). Fanon deconstructs their “personality theory of the marginal man” as an historical consequence of power, privilege, and language. Fanon says that “the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of French language” (p. 13). The superiority of the white man taken for granted by Park is re-inscribed as a neurotic aspiration for black men in Fanon’s account:

When it comes to the case of the Negro… He has no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past’. This may be the reason for the strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of black civilization to the white world at all costs. Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him (p. 25-26).

Fanon and Park can be read as locked into a dialogue that is situated within social and historical circumstances that provide reflections, but not a mirror for the story told here. Fanon writes further that “A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (p. 14). And it is here that we part ways for reasons of power: Chinese language proficiency provides communications access to a population of more than 1.3 billion people, who possess a state with the fastest growing economy in the world. The days are long gone when overseas Chinese could proclaim without irony, as they did in a special issue of Daedalus published at the height of international acclaim for the economic miracles of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, that “the center has become the periphery”. In the Chinese-speaking world, the centre is the middle kingdom again (Kynge 2006). Fanon’s underlying theory of identity is a theory of power, and the distribution of power has shifted dramatically since the middle of the 20th century, when Western powers could more or less dictate to the rest of the world. America still attempts to dictate, but the world reacts in a way that can only be described as multi-polar. An international economic system has risen out of and sometimes supersedes the political state system (Lynne 2005), where China is the now manufacturer of choice for a wide range of global goods. The identity
strategies open to marginal men and women, particularly those of Chinese heritage, today far exceed the possibilities envisioned by Park or Fanon. They still revolve around bridging roles and their associated characteristics, but their value has increased because the colonial centres cannot hold.

**Social Identity as a Tool Rather Than Essence**

To illustrate, the only phase in my life when I regretted my Chinese-ness was during adolescence, and this rejection was more for social purposes than a wholesale devaluation of Chinese culture. Lu Xun’s famous story of Ah Q, the Chinaman who cries out “what has the world come to when the son is beating the father”, and has delusional confidence in his own value despite a series of beatings, resonates more with my sense of marginality than Fanon. In terms of representational resources to construct my identity, I grew up in a rich atmosphere of stories in Chinese of Yueh Fei, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Making of the Gods*. I abandoned these narrative materials for self-construal during adolescence when I perceived that they had no value in the eyes of my peers, and untenable costs. But they were inscribed in my memory, and when it became again adaptive to know such things, as in interacting with professional associates from Asia, I found that I could draw from these as models of identity in a situated manner as tools (see Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez 2000 for experimental evidence). I do not unconsciously apply them in every situation as a person with an essentialized Chinese identity might.

In Taiwan, I speak more softly (in Chinese with fewer hand gestures), I address my elders with deference, I regard my students as my children as best I can, and I consider the ramifications of my actions in terms of how they will reverberate through the community of social psychologists in Taiwan rather than considering their impact on each individual in isolation. These are distinctly different modes of behaviour to what I do in New Zealand, where I gesture widely, speak more loudly, treat my students and other staff as colleagues, and consider actions with respect to their categorical effects on ethnic minorities. Through skilled use of social identity as a tool, I can be accepted as a marginal, but respected member of both societies. I am neither fully one with the in-group (remember at the implicit level, Asians are neither fully Americans in the
U.S.A. nor fully Kiwis in New Zealand), but nor am I an out-group member. While I do not seek (nor am I given) resources and power according to a central position in either society, my social relations are good. At the interstices between societies is my power, marked by a central position in the Asian Association of Social Psychology, which is a bridging institution itself. The irony is that this interstice is possessed of resources (at least in terms of journal impact ratings) beyond that of any of the centres of social science in either Taiwan or New Zealand.

The point is that power underpins the utility of reacting to situations in normative or stereotyped ways (see Radford, Ohnuma & Yamagishi 2007). When the China factor, as Ip and Pang (2005) call it is weak, Diaspora Chinese do well to keep their heads down and act as launderers or market gardeners (19th-early 20th centuries), or as professionals and technocrats (late 20th century), to fit with the positions available to them in Western economies. But there is no utility in internalizing such modes of behaviour when these same Western economies are now falling over themselves to get into China. I am writing these words in Hong Kong, where there are laser sensor wash basins even in the wet markets; thirty years ago there were live chickens on the trains and you were lucky to find a free (let alone clean) toilet anywhere. The payoff of the misery of being Chinese and not-Cantonese during my childhood is that I now speak functional Cantonese, and Hong Kong is another of the places where I can move freely; academic salaries and research funding is considerably more generous in Hong Kong than in New Zealand. When my father left Taiwan in the 1960s, it had a per-capita GNP equal to Jamaica’s, and New Zealand was one of the richest per-capita economies in the world. Thirty years later, the material standards of living in Taiwan and New Zealand are comparable. In particular segments, like investment in social science research, for example, Taiwan is far more generous than New Zealand. My largest grant, from 2005-2008, I was funded out of Taiwan to study “Realistic conflict and Chinese identity politics”, and involved colleagues in Taiwan, mainland China, and Japan (Liu & Atsumi 2008; Takahashi et al. 2008). I am immensely proud of the progress made by Chinese people over the course of my lifetime.

The larger corpus of work I have produced with my students on New Zealand identities, by contrast, has been funded by dribs of money from my department, and is driven more by the interest and goodwill of my
students and self than economic incentives. One of the wonderful things about being a marginal man in New Zealand is that New Zealand itself occupies a delightfully marginal place in the global economy: comfortable enough, not despised by anyone, but not on anyone’s radar either in any domain except maybe tourism and agriculture. The markets for research on New Zealand identity are considerably smaller than the markets for research on Chinese identity. At the national level, funding for social science research in New Zealand is poor. My wife is fond of describing New Zealand as “outside the Matrix”, in terms of both resources and constraints. There has been for me a great freedom to do creative work because of the small size (including the low number of social scientists interested in NZ national identity) and lack of institutional straitjackets. I have made a career out of creating a substantial body of research without much in the way of grant money or interest from the big journals in psychology. In some ways, a freedom from grant money and from institutional requirements to publish in the highest impact journals has allowed me to pursue a particular line of innovation, born of marginal status. It has also allowed me to be more of a New Zealander on the dimension of bicultural knowledge of Māori and Pākehā than most native-born people.

It is true that New Zealand is sufficiently different from Asia that the ways of interacting in these societies sometimes fail to connect. Identity has become for me a practice of adapting in optimal ways to a variety of situations using cultural tools acquired over a lifespan. The more familiar Western personality model of Erickson, where the goal is to achieve a single integrated identity, is sub-optimal for me because of the range of disconnected social and economic structures that I inhabit. As I shall detail in my final section, such an identity strategy is not without emotional costs.

Marginal Positions and Affect

Thus far, I have offered an account of my personal journey as though instrumental rewards and costs were the primary drivers of my actions and identity. But the fundamental insight of social identity theory is that identity is a heuristic that can lead to irrational choices, based on social comparison and the affect associated with comparisons rather than calculations of instrumental value. The two formative political events of my early years as a social scientist were the Rodney King beating and the
Tiananmen uprising. These emotional events rocked me to the core and motivated me to follow courses of action that resonate with a need for social justice and practical concerns (Liu & Liu 1999). In some ways, there is no percentage in my working on New Zealand identities, because I am well-aware that in many quarters, my Asian skin precludes my ever becoming an authority on such matters. My role is as a teacher and cultivator of outstanding kiwi students of both Māori and Pākeha descent who are able and willing to take this work to another level. I did not grow up in New Zealand and do not have the same emotional affinity for the topic as they do. The ability to look at the symbols of nationhood for New Zealand with detachment is both a blessing and a curse. As Park noted, my emotional detachment enables me to examine such symbols with acute consciousness, but it also prevents me from taking comfort in their promises of immortality (see Liu & Hilton 2005). So it is true that I often feel restless and spiritually unstable. I cannot act out of the unquestioning convictions that people with a more unified sense of identity seem capable of, and as a consequence I sometimes fall into a malaise of self-doubt about the value of my undertakings or my ability to achieve them. Whether this is due to my temperament or to acculturative stress I cannot say. But I do thank my wife for putting up with my emotional ups and downs.

On the sociological level, what this translates into for me is a reluctance to assume leadership roles. I am alternatively a maverick, a consensus seeker, one who acts with caution, is eager to please, is emotionally remote, and is unlikely to push his more visionary ideas of interconnectedness (Liu & Liu 1995; 1997; 1999). The habits of social identification formed in my youth and childhood have not been greatly changed by the higher statuses that I currently occupy in the academic world; in some respects, I choose now to be marginal because that is the comfort zone for my identity. I crave the stimulation of the border zones of inter-connectedness, not the peaceful hegemony of established centres.

By articulating my journey and limitations, I hope to have set out a set of markers so that others walking along the same paths may recognize the forces carving the terrain beneath their feet. The Hegelian Torch of history passed from Britain to the United States with World War II, and I believe that it passed from the United States to humanity when the U.S. invaded Iraq. The loss of moral legitimacy for the U.S.A. has been catastrophic since then, as numerous social surveys have found (Pew
Reports 2006). The world no longer finds American naïveté in international relations charming. In the 21st century, where Anglo-American hegemony is loosening its hold, marginal men and women are needed more than ever to build bridges, to look for new forms of managing consensus, for articulating inclusiveness without forcing consensus. The marginal role is a bridging role, and its prospects are considerably brighter than half a century ago. But in the future, the art of both building and maintaining bridges between people who do not desire assimilation, who reject the need for homogeneity while maintaining a desire to be interconnected, will have to be refined. It is my belief that global consciousness is plural consciousness, and in this coming century every centre would be wise to nurture and promote its marginals, its biculturals (see Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond 2008), within them are life skills to help build connective tissues to assuage the friction between centres that is simultaneously advancing human society and a major source of future peril.

Notes

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1 Blacks were the largest minority group in Southern Illinois but in no way was this a “bicultural” society. About half of the whites in Southern Illinois fought on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War, and to this date the racial hierarchy is clear and certain.

2 Defined by Park as “Hybrid peoples, particularly if they are the product of the inter-breeding of stocks so physically divergent that the resulting hybrid can be readily distinguished from both parents…a man who is predestined to live in two cultures and two worlds” (p. 111).

3 I doubt I would have found these stories so appealing had I been born female, but gender and acculturation is a story for another time.

References


Rata, A., Liu, J.H. and Hanke, K. (in press). "Te Ara Hohou Rongo (The Path
to Peace): Maori Conceptualisations of Inter-group Forgiveness”. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*.


