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REFEREED PAPER

## Work, Life, and Identity Negotiation in a Foreign Land: A Study of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers in Belgium

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### Abstract

This study examined the living and working experiences of 14 Taiwanese working holiday makers (WHMs) in Belgium as they negotiate their identity and social lives while they live overseas, using both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The study demonstrates that the low salary level and high work pressure in Taiwan are two of the major factors pushing these young Taiwanese to leave their homeland and work overseas. However, the majority of these Taiwanese WHMs face difficulties in speaking Belgium's local languages, and their opportunities for work are further limited by the temporary visa regulations. Workplaces run by mainland Chinese, especially in the hospitality industry, have become vital places for Taiwanese WHMs to negotiate their ethnonational identity. Although they only have limited social lives and networks in the host society, they claim that they have developed intercultural competences and a greater open-mindedness by living in the multicultural and international environments of Brussels or other Belgian cities.

### Keywords

**Belgium; Chinese Catering Industry; Ethno-National Identity Negotiation; Taiwanese; Working Holiday Makers (WHMs)**

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## Introduction

In this study, the work experiences, social lives and ethnic identity negotiation practices of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers in Belgium were examined. There are several reasons for conducting this study. Firstly, facilitated by the rapid development of globalization and international business, several new migration schemes are emerging for Taiwanese youths, such as the working holiday programs that have been mutually constructed by Taiwanese and foreign governments. Since 2004, the Taiwanese government has established working holiday program contracts with many foreign countries. The first contract was signed with the Australia and up to the middle of 2020, the Taiwanese government had signed contracts with 16 other countries, including New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, German, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Czech Republic, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium. Although the regulations along with work and life conditions vary among the countries, they generally seek to attract and offer Taiwanese young people, aged between 20 and 30, the opportunity to live and work overseas for a year. Among the different contracts, the United Kingdom offers a two-year working holiday visa and Australia allows them to remain for a second year if they fulfil certain requirements regarding the special credit accumulation system ([Chi & Lin, 2017](#)).

A mutual working holiday contract between the Taiwanese and Belgian governments was signed in 2013, and it allows Taiwanese young people to work and live in Belgium for up to a year. The Belgian government offers the visa to a maximum number of 200 Taiwanese youths annually. The working holiday programs have become a popular migration pathway for Taiwanese youths not only to work and live overseas, but also to experience 'exotic' lifestyles. The programs have already attracted over 200,000 Taiwanese youths to migrate overseas temporarily according to statistical data from 2004 to 2019. In terms of demographics, the average age of the Taiwanese working holiday participants is 26.3, of whom 70% are female. Moreover, these Taiwanese youths are generally highly educated, with 85% of them having a bachelor's degree or higher. Accordingly, Taiwanese WHMs are mainly educated females. Since the salaries in most Western countries are higher than those in Taiwan, working and living overseas is attractive to many Taiwanese youths. However, the youths often face challenges when arriving in their host countries in terms of finding official employment in a job with a reasonable salary and work conditions. The average salary that Taiwanese WHMs earn in a year is approximately US\$12,000, while their annual expenses are around US\$7,670. Accordingly, the real amount of money they can save annually is only US\$4,300 ([CommonWealth Magazine, 2016](#)).

Approximately 70% of Taiwanese WHMs choose to work and live in Australia, because the program regulations are simpler and less strict and the working and living conditions are appealing. As a result, most of the identified studies have focused on Australia and other English-speaking countries' experiences, with only a limited study identified for Europe and none found for Belgium. As the programs become an increasingly important mobility avenue for Taiwanese youths, this study aims to fill that gap by examining Belgian Taiwanese WHMs' work and life experiences and the related issues of ethnonational identity negotiations that they experience while work and live overseas ([Chi & Lin, 2017](#)). It investigates their motivations for choosing to leave their homeland and work overseas, their experiences in searching for employment, their social lives and interpersonal relations while abroad, and the relevant issues regarding their ethnonational identity negotiations. Moreover, the special location of Brussels and its multicultural societal atmosphere further make Belgium's case deserve more consideration. The case of Belgium is interesting because of its central geographical location in Europe and, above all, because Brussels is the official seat of the European Union, supporting global governance and sustainability. This study will further demonstrate how Taiwanese WHMs discover these values during their stay so that their journey not only improves their economic livelihood but also has a deep imprint in their personal growth and their views on diversity, sustainability, equality, and accountability.

## Literature Review

Taiwanese immigrants are under-represented in and absent from many mainstream societal domains, including migration policy, the labor market, the mass media, daily discourse, and academic debates. In this regard, Pang (1999) utilized the word invisible to describe the disadvantaged social position that Chinese/Taiwanese immigrants face in Belgium's host society. In a similar vein, Lin (2018) advocates for more studies on Taiwanese immigrants and thus supports this study that provides a case study of Taiwanese in Belgium. It is important to point out that the social positions of Taiwanese WHMs in the host societies, whether in Belgium or other major working holiday destinations, especially Australia, are fairly different. In Australia, Taiwanese youths constitute a major part of the working holiday labor market, as Taiwan ranks as a top-five country of origin of WHMs in 2020 due to the fact that there have been tens of thousands of Taiwanese youths applying to work as WHMs in Australia annually ([Department of Home Affairs Australian Government, 2020](#)). In this regard, Taiwanese WHMs are more visible in Australia's mainstream society and its labor market. On the contrary, in Belgium, working holiday makers get little attention because they are small in number and scale, with only hundreds of participants. Accordingly, based on the arguments made by Pang (1999) and Lin (2018) and the different demographic structures and social positions that Taiwanese WHMs hold in Belgium and other major working holiday destinations, the case of Taiwanese WHMs in Belgium deserves more exploration, both from empirical and theoretical viewpoints.

The working holiday scheme of mobility originated in Western youth culture, as many Western youths choose to travel, work, and live overseas for their 'gap year' before graduating or entering employment. The concept of a gap year for Western youths is that youths aged between 18 and 25 backpack or participate in a working holiday program to experience different cultures and lifestyles outside of their home country. As such, the main purpose of a gap year or participating in a working holiday program for Western youths is not to earn money but to experience an 'exotic' life, explore their future ambitions, and foster self-development. In Western cultures, the gap year is regarded as an important period for transitioning from adolescence into adulthood. Moreover, the gap year is a vital component of youth mobility in Western culture ([Amit, 2012](#); [Cohen, 2011](#); [Clarke, 2004](#)).

In the Asian context and, more specifically, Taiwanese society, there is no tradition or culture of a gap year. Few Taiwanese youths elect to escape from their school life to have a gap year, travel, or work and live overseas. Accordingly, the reasons for participating in working holiday programs for Taiwanese youths are different from those of their Western counterparts. While the exploration of 'exotic' lifestyles and cultures and the ensuing transformative growth of the self during that journey loom equally large in the minds of Western and Taiwanese youths, one of the main differences in those participating in WHM programs is the importance of earning money during their time away from home. For many Western youths, working and making money is not the main goal but a collateral necessity to support their travel expenses. In contrast, Taiwanese and Asian youths intend to find employment abroad since salaries abroad are significantly higher than in their home countries ([Bui et al., 2013](#); [Kawashima, 2010](#); [Stephenson & Hughes, 2005](#)).

The outcomes of existing research into Taiwanese WHMs generally concentrate on English-speaking countries and are mainly focused on Taiwanese youths' motivations and the push and pull factors that attract Taiwanese youths to participate in the programs and leave their homeland ([Ho et al., 2014](#)), their intercultural communications and foreign language learning experiences ([Chi & Lin, 2017](#)), their job-searching experiences ([Peng & Hebbani, 2014](#)), and their personal growth and self-realization during the journey ([Tsai & Collins, 2017](#)). However, few studies have examined how Taiwanese WHMs negotiate their ethnonational identity or how they organize their social lives and make friends while working and living abroad ([Li, 2020](#)). As existing studies on Taiwanese WHMs are concentrated on specific geographies and research topics ([Yoon, 2014](#)), the authors of the present study believe that this study could expand and

deepen the understanding of Taiwanese WHMs' work and life experiences by probing into their professional lives, interpersonal relationships, and leisure activities abroad.

Taiwanese WHMs in foreign lands face many challenges, including finding a job and adapting to the work and private life of a foreign country with a different tongue and different cultural practices. Thus, this study explores how Taiwanese WHMs negotiate intercultural differences and how they identify themselves culturally and ethnically, since working holiday youths originating from Taiwanese society are likely to have a strong Confucian cultural imprint. In this study, cultural and ethnic identity are used interchangeably as these two theoretical concepts share similar meanings in some migration studies ([Zhu, 2017](#)). They both refer to how people identify themselves culturally and ethnically. It is important to note that people's cultural and ethnic identities are dynamic, fluid, and context specific rather than static or unchangeable. Scholars such as Barth, Eriksen, and others believe that people's cultural and ethnic identities are not only determined by themselves but are subject to change based on interaction with other actors in societies. People may further use both tangible and intangible markers for drawing boundaries to distinguish 'us' from 'others' in cultural and ethnic ways ([Barth, 1969, 1994, 2000](#); [Eriksen, 2001](#); [Eriksen & Jakoubek, 2018](#)). When encountering unfamiliar cultures or people with different ethnic backgrounds, most people become entangled in complex identity negotiation processes in order to foster a sense of culturally and ethnically belonging to a group in a new environment or under a specific interaction context ([Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2010](#)). Moreover, since societal and workplace cultures and ethnic contexts in Belgium are more diverse than those in Taiwan, young Taiwanese WHMs may have more opportunities to meet people with cultural and ethnic differences when living in Belgium. Therefore, in this study, the authors explore how Taiwanese WHMs negotiate their ethnic identities as well as their work and personal life experiences while living and working in the superdiverse Belgian society ([der Bracht et al., 2014](#); [Kenny & Briner, 2013](#)).

## Research Methods and Data Analysis

This study applied both netnography and semi-structured interview methods for data collection ([Berg, 2009](#)). The first author had conducted online participant observation during the period of 2017 to 2019 on several virtual communities (on Facebook) constructed by Taiwanese WHMs in Belgium. These communities include *The Office of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers in Belgium*, *The Student Alumni of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers in Belgium*, and *The Self-Help Association of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers in Belgium*. These three virtual communities have approximately 500, 2,000, and 1,500 online users, respectively. It is important to mention that the first author not only acted as a lurker; instead, when he was accepted to participate in the communities, he posted self-introduction information to let other online users know his academic background and research intention and asked for consent on the part of the research participants. By conducting fieldwork and participant observation online, these virtual communities provided opportunities to access different social groups of Taiwanese people in Belgium. During the process of conducting the netnography, after receiving authorization from the online information providers, the relevant information was downloaded, along with screenshots. In addition to conducting fieldwork online, active users in the virtual communities were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews on the online platforms after a detailed explanation of the research aim and the subject of the study were given and written consent was received. Subsequently, appointments were made with each participant for further online and offline interviews ([Kozinets, 2002, 2012](#)).

Both purposive and snowball sampling methods were applied in this study for the recruitment of research participants. In total, 14 Taiwanese WHMs participated in the research. The age of the informants was between 23 and 30, and 12 of them (85%) were female. Most research participants worked in pan-Chinese or related ethnic business sectors. Eight participants worked as part-time attendants at restaurants in Belgium that were mainly operated by mainland-Chinese employers; a few of them worked for Taiwanese

restaurateurs; one participant worked at the Delhaize supermarket as a salesperson; two participants worked as salespeople at duty-free shops in Brussels where customers are mainly Chinese or Asian tourists; two participants worked as sushi chefs at a Japanese-style restaurant and a bubble tea shop in Brussels, both of which were operated by mainland-Chinese immigrants; the remaining participant worked at a chocolate shop in Brussels as a part-time assistant. Most research participants worked as part-time employees, with some combining several part-time jobs to support their living and traveling expenses in Belgium and Europe. Different online platforms, including Facebook, Skype, LINE, and WeChat, were used during the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and after obtaining each informant's approval, the first author used a pen coder to record the interview. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English for further analysis. In terms of data analysis, the constant comparative method was used, which generated findings and themes after a series of analyzing and coding procedures was completed. All textual data was read in detail, then the three steps of coding methods (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) were adopted to generate research themes and findings. All the research participants' information presented in this paper is anonymized so as to protect participants' privacy rights ([Alhojailan, 2012](#); [Maguire & Delahunt, 2017](#); [McGrath et al., 2018](#)).

By employing the coding methods outlined above, three main findings and research themes connected to Taiwanese WHMs work life and ethnic identity negotiation experiences in Belgium emerged.

## Findings and Analysis

### TAIWANESE WHMS' WORK AND LIVE EXPERIENCES DURING THE PROGRAM

Taiwanese WHMs, similar to their Western counterparts, value the experience of travel and exploring foreign cultures, and consider working overseas an opportunity to better grasp their future goals and foster the quest for the meaning of life. The Taiwanese WHMs in this study focused more on the importance of earning money during the process. Donna, a 26-year-old female who was interviewed in 2018, shared her story, including her motivation to leave Taiwan, why she decided to participate in the working holiday program, and her experiences of working at several part-time jobs while in Belgium. She said:

*Before I came to Belgium, I had already worked as a hair designer in a hair salon in Taiwan for about six years. However, you know, I did have to work, on average, between 10 and 12 hours per day, but I barely got about NT\$30,000 to NT\$35,000 (€800 to €1,000) each month ... You know, this was not a high salary level since I had to spend the majority of my time working ... So, after six years of working, I felt tired of work and life in Taiwan, and I wanted to try something new ... and at the time, many of my Taiwanese friends encouraged me to be a working holiday maker overseas. They told me that ... working overseas can make you grow [and] feel free, [and that you can] experience different cultures and lifestyles and, most importantly, earn much more money than in Taiwan ... You know, their narratives and experiences really did attract me ... and, as I like Europe's history and cultures, that was why I came here [Belgium].*

An economic consideration is possibly one of the main reasons encouraging Taiwanese youths to leave Taiwan and work overseas. According to 2016 statistics, in the hairdressing industry in Taiwan, the average monthly salary was approximately NT\$27,219 per month (€800 to €900), representing merely half of the national average salary of NT\$48,490 (€1,600 to €1,700). Moreover, employees in the hairdressing industry have to work an average of 200 hours per month, which is 1.14 times higher than the national average of 175 working hours per month ([Taiwan Labor Front, 2016](#)). The figures given above corroborate this research participant's views that the hairdressing industry in Taiwan is a high-working-hour and low-payment economic sector. In fact, low salaries do not only exist in the hairdressing industry. In 2019, the

average monthly salary of Taiwanese youths was NT\$31,603 (roughly €900 to €1,000), which made 31.2% of Taiwanese youths want to change jobs to earn more money ([Ministry of Labor, 2020](#)). This confirms that Taiwanese youths apply for WHMs programs not only to experience different and 'exotic' cultures, lifestyles, and travel, but also to earn more money. It also explains why many Taiwanese WHMs come from lower- and middle-working classes rather than economically advantaged families ([Chang, 2014](#)).

However, the pre-departure image of their overseas lives does not always concur with their lived experiences, as many of them struggled to find full-time or official employment in the mainstream labor market. This may be an outcome of the working holiday visa's time limitation and participants limited proficiency in speaking Belgium's most widely spoken local languages, Dutch and French. At the time of the interview in 2018, Lan, a 28-year-old female had just obtained her master's degree, with a major in Art History, from a university in the United States. She explained the difficulties she faced in finding official and full-time employment in Belgium despite her English language skills and her master's degree:

*You know, it was really difficult to find a full-time job here [in Belgium] ... After I got my master's degree, I thought it would be wonderful for me to work in Europe since the art industry here is quite popular and famous. So, I applied to the working holiday program and came to Belgium ... However, I immediately found that employers here do not like to hire people like me who are only allowed to work and stay in Belgium for a maximum of a year ... I sent more than 10 job applications to local companies in the art industry; however, I got no responses ... It really made me feel frustrated ..., and after waiting for months, since I really needed money to support my cost of living and [my] expenses here, I had no choice but to give up on finding an official position and tried to get several part-time jobs at the same time to earn money.*

This research participant's job-searching experiences are not an outlier, as the same issue was experienced by many research participants. The unfamiliarity of the status of WHMs in Belgium might explain the reluctance of employers to recruit WHMs. In 2017, only 190 non-European Union WHMs worked in Belgium ([OECD, 2019](#)). In addition, the one-year limitation of the working holiday visa might also narrow the chances of finding a full-time job in the mainstream labor market. Furthermore, language presents another obstacle, as Taiwanese WHMs do not master the local languages of Dutch, French, or German. In sum, unfamiliarity with the WHMs' status, the short-term visa, and language issues present significant obstacles for these young people in finding full-time employment ([Dustmann, 1999](#); [Robertson, 2016](#)). As a coping strategy, they seek work opportunities in the pan-Chinese ethnic business sector, particularly in the catering industry. The pan-Chinese immigrant communities are relatively few in number compared with two other ethnic minority groups, Moroccans and Turks, which each total over half a million people. In contrast, the pan-Chinese immigrant communities (in this study, the pan-Chinese immigrant communities include mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, and Taiwanese) in Belgium contain less than 50,000 people; among them, 45,000 from mainland China and 400 from Taiwan. Although the number of pan-Chinese immigrant communities in Belgium is small, the pan-Chinese catering industry has a 100-year history, as the first Chinese restaurant in Belgium was established in 1920 by early Chinese immigrants from south-eastern provinces of mainland China who re-settled in Antwerp. Subsequently, the pan-Chinese immigrant communities expanded, mainly after the 1980s, as the mainland-Chinese government implemented a series of economic reforms and open-door policies that allowed its citizens to emigrate overseas. Since then, an increasing number of mainland-Chinese people have chosen to emigrate to Belgium to search for a better life ([Pang, 2002, 2008](#)). Interestingly, approximately 80% of the immigrants from mainland China are found in the catering industry and operate restaurants for a living ([Song, 2011](#)). According to a calculation conducted by Pang ([2002](#)), there are more than 1,000 Chinese restaurants across Belgium. Consequently, as Taiwanese WHMs share cultural, ethnic, and language-use similarities with immigrants from mainland China, it is easier for Taiwanese WHMs to find work opportunities in the pan-Chinese-dominated catering industry ([Smith & Elliott, 2002](#)).

After struggling to find employment elsewhere, many of the research participants shared similar experiences of finding a job position in the Chinese catering industry or other small and medium ethnic business sectors. BaiBai, a 29-year-old male, shared his job-searching experiences and how he obtained work as a sushi chef at a Japanese-style restaurant operated by immigrants from mainland China.

*You know, it is really difficult for people like me [temporary WHMs] to find an official and full-time job here [in Belgium] ... However, as I really needed money at that time, I tried to find a job and a chance to work in the catering industry as I knew there were a lot of restaurants operated by the Chinese here. It is much easier for me to find a job and work at a restaurant operated by Chinese [people] since we speak the same language ... At that time, I used both Facebook and WeChat social media platforms to search for jobs ... You know, some people will post hiring advertisements on there, and at that time, I saw that a Chinese employer was seeking to hire a sushi chef to work in his Japanese-style restaurant in Brussels ... Then I got the chance of an interview, so that's why I'm here ... it is really much easier to find a position when the employers come from mainland China or have a Chinese ethnic background.*

Similar experiences were shared by other research participants. Weiting, a 24-year-old female, shared her experiences of finding employment in a duty-free shop in Brussels that was operated by mainland-Chinese people.

*You know, many Taiwanese WHMs, especially female, are working in the duty-free shops located in the center of Brussels that are operated by mainland-Chinese employers ... since the shop's main customers are Chinese tourists, the shop does need to hire employees who can speak Chinese ... and they are always hiring because the majority of staff at the shop are similar to me [temporary migrant workers] ... Staff here usually change ..., which means the employers always need to find new people ..., and it was really easy for me to get this job since the employers only did a 20-minute-long job interview, then I got the job.*

Notably, the research participants' occupations in Belgium were mainly at pan-Chinese ethnic and related small and medium business sectors, albeit in casual, precarious, or part-time positions. Although the Taiwanese WHMs shared similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds with their mainland-Chinese employers and coworkers, these intimacies had both positive and negative effects on the Taiwanese WHMs. The positive effects are evidenced by the cultural closeness and shared language between Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese people, allowing the Taiwanese WHMs to obtain employment more easily. Many research participants mentioned the importance of these similarities in their job-searching experiences. Several of them indicated this:

*it is too difficult to find a job when the majority of your employers and customers speak Dutch or French and I can only speak Chinese and English ... Thus, it is easier to find a job in Chinese-related industries, like restaurants, massage shops, nail shops, grocery stores, duty-free shops, and so on, since many of those shops and businesses are owned and operated by Chinese immigrants, and we have no problem communicating as we all speak the Chinese language (KaiKai, a 26-year-old female).*

*Before I worked as a sushi chef, I tried many times to search for work in companies or businesses operated by locals or Belgians ... However, I have to say, it is too difficult to find a job for people like me since I can only speak Chinese and English, but employees are required to communicate with customers mainly in Dutch or French ... In contrast, finding a job working at a business operated by other Chinese people is easier, so that's why I chose to work here [a Japanese-style restaurant operated by a mainland-Chinese employer] (BaiBai, a 29-year-old male).*

Another participant, Vencia, a 29-year-old female, compared her job-searching experiences in Belgium with her working holiday experiences in Australia.

*I think the job search and work experiences here [in Belgium] and in Australia are quite different ... In Australia, the working holiday program is just like in an industry ... There are plenty of WHMs in Australia [and they] work for both local and international employers ... Unlike in Belgium, in Australia, people can easily find jobs and work for local employers (like local farms) ranging across different industries ... However, here [in Belgium], the situation is different. First of all, the number of WHMs is not so many compared with Australia, and second, as we face difficulties finding jobs in the Belgian mainstream job market and work for local or Belgian employees because of the language barrier, the majority of Taiwanese working holiday youths in Belgium have no choice but to work for Chinese or related businesses.*

The quotations above indicate the significant differences between being a WHM in Belgium and in Australia. The language barriers and the 'invisible social position' of WHMs reduces the possibility of them finding work and integrating in the Belgian host society. In Australia, however, these limitations are not present because the number of WHMs is much higher and they are considered a vital and supplementary labor force in Australia's mainstream labor market and especially in the agricultural sector in rural Australia. Thus, WHMs find employment in the mainstream labor market more easily in Australia than in Belgium. Moreover, the narratives shown above demonstrate significant differences of WHMs' job-searching experiences between English-speaking countries (especially in Australia) and Belgium ([Brennan, 2014](#)).

However, the negative effects of sharing ethnic and cultural backgrounds with their mainland-Chinese employers and coworkers are mentioned by research participants in terms of working conditions and ethnic stereotyping. Research participant Alex, a 28-year-old male, shared his experiences of exploitation by his mainland-Chinese employers while working at a Chinese restaurant. Alex said:

*They [mainland-Chinese employers] totally know that people like me [WHMs] really want to earn money to stay here and travel overseas ... So, they ask me to do a lot of work ... sometimes they even asked me to come in earlier than other full-time employees to help them to open the doors and do the preparation work ... However, even though I have already done a lot of work, they do not give me the money that I deserve as they want to evade tax payments ... You know, the situation of tax evasion is quite common in the Chinese catering industry.*

The first author then further asked Alex why his mainland-Chinese employers like to do so, and Alex explained his point of view from a cultural perspective:

*In addition to the fact that I need money ... I thought, why they dare to treat me unfairly is because they know that, culturally and ethnically speaking, people from Confucian societies, like me, are less likely to complain compared with Westerners, even [when] we are treated unequally or unfairly ... so that is why they dare to treat me or us [other Taiwanese working holiday youths] like this ... However, I have to say that I really do want to complain, but [the reasons] I did not do so ... [are that] first of all, I thought I would only stay at their restaurant for maximum of a year, then I would go back to Taiwan, [and] I did not [want] to make the situation become embarrassing ... so I tolerated it, but this did not mean that I really accepted it ..., and I have to say that maybe it is a negative part of working in a Chinese or related industry, since most of the mainland-Chinese employers share similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds with Taiwanese WHMs, and they would use the similarities to take advantage of us.*

Taiwanese WHMs face the dilemma of most migrants, namely whether or not to accept injustice. Out of pragmatic considerations, they do not resist since they need the money, and the work is short term. In trying to understand and contextualize the uneven relations in workplaces, they rationalize the negative experiences through Confucian values. However, the accumulation of these negative labor relations and exploitation experiences cause Taiwanese WHMs to re-think and re-negotiate their perceptions of ethnic relations and cultural differences while boundaries between themselves and their mainland-Chinese counterparts become

increasingly prominent. Therefore, these pan-Chinese ethnic businesses and workplaces unintentionally become vital sites for negotiating different ethnonational identities and identifications between Taiwanese WHMs and their mainland-Chinese counterparts, reflecting the geopolitical identity politics between mainland China and Taiwan ([Li, 2017](#)).

### ETHNONATIONAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN THE CATERING INDUSTRY

In the past two decades, Taiwanese people have experienced significant changes in their ethnonational identities and the way they identify themselves and consider their relationships with mainland-Chinese people both culturally and ethnically. The development of ethnonational identities in Taiwan is increasingly moving away from a (pan-)Chinese ethnic identity and identification with mainland China. The National Chengchi University conducted a longitudinal survey ([2020](#)) over the past two decades with regard to identity and identification issues in Taiwan. The first survey results, announced in 1992, indicated that only 17.6% people in Taiwan identified themselves as Taiwanese, while 25.5% of people identified themselves as Chinese and 46.4% of people considered themselves both Chinese and Taiwanese. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, the Chinese ethnic identity label was acceptable to most Taiwanese people. When Taiwanese society started to experience rapid developments in both political democratization and identity localization in the late 1990s, the abovementioned percentages started to change significantly. In 2009, 51.4% of Taiwanese people regarded themselves as Taiwanese, only 4.4% regarded themselves as Chinese, and the remaining 39.8% of people in Taiwan identified themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese. Moreover, in the latest survey, announced in June 2020, Taiwanese identity achieved a peak of 67%, while Chinese identity decreased to 2.4%, and dual Taiwanese and Chinese identity decreased to 27.5%. Recently, the term ‘naturally independent generation’ (tiān rán dú, 天然獨) has become popular in both Taiwanese public discourses and academic debates. It refers to the phenomenon that the young Taiwanese generation (those born after the 1990s) overwhelmingly regard themselves as Taiwanese and refuse to use the Chinese identity label to describe themselves. In addition, they do not consider China as Taiwan’s ‘brother’ or ‘family’, but rather as something that is ‘other’. In addition, another survey, conducted in 2019, further revealed that 82.4% of the young Taiwanese generation (aged below 30) considered themselves Taiwanese, and that the Chinese identity label only attracted 12.4% of Taiwanese youths’ acceptance ([Cabestan, 2017](#); [Fifield, 2019](#); [Zhong, 2016](#)).

Some scholars believe that Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese ethnonational identities are in conflict with different perceptions of ethnonational identity and ethnic affiliation between Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese people. This not only affects the quality of the interaction between them, but also influences how they see each other culturally and ethnically ([Liu & Li, 2016](#); [Zhong, 2016](#)). These identity and identification issues are also at play in our study when Taiwanese WHMs work for mainland-Chinese bosses.

Markers of difference for Taiwanese WHMs center around language—more specifically, different accents and vocabulary. For example, BaiBai shared:

*I can easily distinguish [between] who is Taiwanese and who is mainland Chinese since we do have pretty different accents even though both of us are speaking Mandarin Chinese ... The mainland-Chinese [speakers] have harder tongues, but we Taiwanese have softer tongues when speaking.*

Moreover, when first interviewed in 2019, Wei, a 27-year-old male working at Chinese restaurant, shared his interaction experiences with mainland-Chinese colleagues at the workplace, saying:

*You know, how my mainland-Chinese coworkers found out I came from Taiwan ... that was based on my Chinese speaking accent ... I remembered very clearly that when I first [spoke] to my Chinese colleagues,*

*they were surprised and said, 'Your Chinese is so ... soft and tender' ..., and they said this three times that day.*

Although Mandarin Chinese is spoken in both Taiwan and mainland China, the different accents held by Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese people have become crucial cultural and ethnic markers of difference (Liao, 2008). When it comes to discussing the issues of ethnonational identity and ethnicity affiliations, most Taiwanese WHMs understand the sensitivity of these issues and often tend to 'downplay' identity and identification topics in order to avoid conflicts. Wei shared his experiences as follows:

*You know, many mainland-Chinese [people] are interested in chatting or discussing issues of ethnonational identity with us [Taiwanese] ... they regard us as Chinese ... However, we do not, we (especially [the] young generation) see [ourselves] as Taiwanese ... Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese [people] do have pretty different ethnonational identity perceptions, therefore, it is easy to find conflict with them when talking about these issues ... so I do not like to talk about these things with them since the main reason for me coming here was to earn money and enjoy the life here ... It is not necessary to end relationships with them because of these unsolvable problems ... Therefore, when they try to talk about these topics with me, I reply in funny ways ... For example, I will say, 'I'm a money person; the main goal for me is to make money' ... Or sometimes I will say, 'I'm an earth person (地球人)' so as to avoid talking about these embarrassing issues.*

Several other research participants apply similar downplaying strategies to Wei's while discussing these sensitive issues with their mainland-Chinese coworkers in the workplace. In this regard, avoidance is a useful method to prevent further polarization and escalation of conflict while interacting with their mainland-Chinese employers and coworkers (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Moreover, different political ideologies held by Taiwanese WHMs and their mainland-Chinese employers and coworkers regularly become important ways to distinguish between each other. Hsien, a 29-year-old male, worked at an Asian grocery store operated by a mainland-Chinese employer, and he shared how different political ideologies make him feel different to his mainland-Chinese counterparts:

*I admit that we [Taiwanese] do really share many similarities in cultures, histories, and ethnicities with mainland-Chinese [people] since both Taiwan and mainland China are significantly influenced by the traditional Chinese and Confucian cultures and we speak the same language ... Yes, in those ways, we are similar ... However, when we talk about political ideologies, for example, freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on ..., then I find that we [Taiwanese] do really have different perceptions and mentalities toward these issues compared with them [mainland-Chinese people] ... But I will not say [that] we [Taiwanese] are right and they are wrong ... because I know we do really have very different lives and growing-up experiences, since the political systems in Taiwan and mainland China are still quite different.*

Based on the above, the different language accents and political ideologies held by Taiwanese and mainland-Chinese people are vital references for Taiwanese WHMs to reflect on their own ethnonational identity and distinguish themselves from their mainland-Chinese counterparts, although they admit that there are shared commonalities. Moreover, Hsien does not judge the different political systems. Interestingly, many research participants held similar views and experiences to those of Hsien, demonstrating that Belgian Taiwanese WHMs' international mobility and interpersonal interaction experiences with their mainland-Chinese colleagues at workplaces not only make those Taiwanese youths realize the differences between themselves and mainland-Chinese youths, but also further make them strengthen their initial Taiwanese ethno-national identity. Consequently, the interaction experiences between those Taiwanese working holiday youths and their mainland-Chinese coworkers do not cause ethnic boundary crossing or blurring, but boundary consolidating (Li, 2016; Light et al., 1993).

## LIMITED SOCIAL LIFE IN THE HOST SOCIETY

The present study finds that most of the research participants indicated that working and living overseas enabled them to become more open-minded to and tolerant of cultural and ethnic differences. One participant, BaiBai, compared the level of cultural and ethnic diversities between Taiwan and Belgium and shared his views of their meanings while working and living in Belgium. He said:

*I think here [in Belgium] is quite different from Taiwan ... You know, in Taiwan, our culture is significantly influenced by the traditional Chinese and Confucian cultures (中華文化), and the majority group in Taiwan is constituted by the Han people (漢人) ... and of course, in Taiwan, we do have some other minorities since Taiwan has 16 different aboriginal group of peoples, and also has about one million immigrants from Southeast Asia. However, their cultures are not as popular and dominant as the Han culture and group ... so, in Taiwan, the cultural atmosphere for me is greater homogeneity ... However, here [in Belgium], it is quite different. On the street, you can encounter people from different countries and with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds ... The diversity in Belgium is quite impressive.*

He added:

*I think my staying and working experiences in Belgium have changed me a lot. I have become more open-minded in exploring, trying, and accepting different cultures, perspectives, and so on ... For example, in Taiwan, people regard tattoos and street graffiti as bad or criminal ... However, after I came here and lived in Belgium ..., I gradually knew that these sub-cultures have their own meanings and cultural backgrounds ... We can't see them on the surface; we have to learn about them from their contexts and deeper ways ... I think due to the fact that Belgium is a multicultural country and its capital, Brussels, is also [an] international city ... Thus, living and working here really [allowed] me [to] have more opportunities to meet with different people from all around the world, and to access and experience different cultures that I did not know before ... In this sense, I think staying and working here has really made me grow [and] become an open-minded person, and [has] also eliminate[d] some of the cultural stereotypes that I had before.*

In addition to BaiBai, many other Taiwanese working holiday youths shared similar narratives; for them, their overseas working and living experiences have also given them more opportunities to experience other cultures and encounter people from different places and cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the superdiverse host society. Thus, for these research participants, working and living in Belgium did really change their cultural mindset and make them become more open-minded and more willing to accept cultural and ethnic differences. Therefore, BaiBai and other research participants' working and living experiences have helped them to gain intercultural competences and foster cosmopolitan identities ([Kawashima, 2010](#)).

Despite the issues between the Taiwanese and Chinese, the research participants mainly interacted socially with the Chinese. A 25-year-old female research participant worked at a bubble tea shop in Brussels, operated by a mainland-Chinese employer, with most of her coworkers being from mainland China as well. She shared friendships with her mainland-Chinese counterparts and other Taiwanese friends. She said:

*You know, my colleagues were mainly from mainland China, so in my work life, I interacted with them a lot ... However, in my private life and after work, I did have some Taiwanese working holiday friends who I knew and met on Facebook ... I did not experience serious conflict with them ... We were quite peaceful when we got together ... However, the problem was that it is quite difficult to maintain and cultivate such friendships since people come here with different purposes and [their stays are] mostly temporary; thus, people come and go, and it is difficult to say I had good friends here ... It is quite uncertain.*

Some research participants' interactions with local Belgians brought to the foreground the intercultural differences between the Taiwanese and the locals. Viviana tried to make friend with locals, but during the interactions, Viviana further realized that she is quite different from her Belgian friends.

*Yes, I did try to make friends with local Belgians; through introductions from my Taiwanese or mainland-Chinese friends, and using the Tinder app, I did successfully make and meet up with some Belgian friends ... We were okay hanging out together ... However, in the process, I still realized that we do really have quite different cultural thoughts and issues ... Because of this, sometimes I felt embarrassed when interacting with them since we did not have common topics to chat about ... Therefore, sometimes, I felt like 'I'm an outsider'; I could just laugh like a fool since I really did not understand what they were talking about ... Maybe we hung out several times, but the relationships did not last long.*

Making friends during the short span of one year is difficult, fleeting, and uncertain. These types of friendships are neither easily maintained nor cultivated. Most research participants had limited Belgian friends, and the majority of the friends they did have were from mainland China or Taiwan. Even when opportunities arise, as in the case of Viviana, it is hard to bridge the perceived intercultural divide as manifested in different lifestyles, small-talk topics, every day leisure practices, and so on ([Yang & Wen, 2016](#)).

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined Belgian Taiwanese WHMs' work and life experiences and the related issues of ethnic identity negotiations while working and living abroad. In addition to the lure of experiencing 'exotic' lifestyles and cultures and having more opportunities to travel, the low salary level of the young generation in Taiwan is one of the main factors that pushed them to work overseas. Since earning money is one of the main goals of these working holiday youths, it was found that most of their time is spent working, and thus their overseas experience diverges greatly from that of their Western counterparts, who prioritize the experience of foreign cultures over earning money. Because working and earning money constitutes a major part of their overseas stay, after arriving in the host society in Belgium, Taiwanese WHM spend considerable time searching for jobs. However, the unfamiliarity of the WHM visa among local employers, the one-year working visa, and language issues form the major hurdles in finding an official full-time job in the mainstream labor market.

Given these limitations, Taiwanese WHMs often find themselves working in the ethnic business sectors mainly operated and constituted by the mainland Chinese, specifically in the catering industry. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of their superiors and coworkers are mainland Chinese, transforming the workplaces into a site where ethnic identity, identifications, and negotiations are taking place between mainland-Chinese and Taiwanese people. Their workplaces might give rise to potential friction given the divergent cultural and ethno-national perceptions of themselves and each other, most notably among the younger Taiwanese generation. To avoid awkward situations and conflicts, a downplaying strategy is often adopted as an identity negotiation strategy. Although the Taiwanese working holiday youths in this study drew clear boundaries between themselves and their mainland-Chinese counterparts through the markers of different Chinese language accents and political ideologies, they refrained from making judgments and discussions. As an unintended outcome, many of the Taiwanese working holiday youths' working experiences strengthened their own identity rather than closing the cultural or ethnic gap between them and their mainland-Chinese counterparts. In addition, the Taiwanese WHMs only have limited social interactions with Belgians as they do not work in the mainstream labor market. Even when they have the chance to interact with locals, different lifestyles, chatting topics, and cultural backgrounds prevent the formation of acquaintances and friendships. Interestingly, although they are minimally involved in

socialization with locals and feel an inability to develop strong ties and robust networks, they demonstrate a strong aspiration to become more open-minded and to have developed intercultural competences by living in the multicultural and international environments of Brussels and other cities.

A theoretical contribution that this study could make is that the research findings in the study further transcend the methodological nationalism criticized by Glick Schiller and others ([Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002](#); [Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003](#)). The findings demonstrate a mix of transnational disposition as well as negotiating a place in a pan-Chinese ethnic labor market. Their transnational disposition entails that the WHMs see themselves as global migrants rather than insisting on rooting their identity affiliation merely within a specific national border, even though most of them work in an ethnic market and do only have limited local networks while working and living in Belgium due to language barriers and other limitations. So, these Taiwanese WHM are not privileged cosmopolitans empowered with different capitals—financial, social, and cultural capitals—nor do they claim to belong to the precariat or working poor ([Weenink, 2008](#)). By participating in a working holiday program, a scheme that particularly encourages mobility in young people, Taiwanese WHMs can construct new personal identities and (inter-)subjective meanings with regard to their international movement and overseas working and living experiences.

This study has focused on Taiwanese WHMs' experiences beyond English-speaking countries, specifically in Belgium. We delved into their work and personal lives, ethnic identities, and identification negotiation experiences while they work and live overseas. In so doing, we gained some glimpses into their life world. The study did not include the voices of their peers working in and outside the Chinese business sector, nor those of their employers, so these glimpses cannot be validated. However, further research into the motivations and perceptions of WHMs, especially those going to countries where they do not share language or culture, could shed light on those inter-governmental initiatives which open up a new form of mobility to youth across the globe who would not otherwise have the possibility to explore, travel, and work overseas.

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