**Multiple Interpretations of “National Culture” and the Implications for International Business: The Case of Taiwan**

**Abstract**

This paper considers the implications for international business of cases whereby a country may have two, or more, conflicting interpretations of its “national culture”. A case study of the different ways in which Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates of the *benshengren* and *waishengren* social categories use their status as “Taiwanese” to do business in London suggests that the varying interpretations which people of the same national origin and ethnic group have of their “national culture”, as a symbol of identity, affects the social resources they can use. The paper concludes by considering new directions for studying national culture in international business, and for re-evaluating earlier research.

**Keywords**: International HRM, Culture, Identity, Ethnicity, Networks, Expatriates

**Multiple Interpretations of “National Culture” and the Implications for International Business: The Case of Taiwan**

**Introduction**

 The numerous studies critiquing the focus on national culture in cross-cultural management research generally argue that to do so is reductive (Sasaki and Yoshikawa, 2014; Tung & Verbeke, 2010), and that we must also consider the effect of local (Sasaki & Yoshikawa, 2014) regional (Li, Tan, Cai, Zhu, & Wang, 2013), organisational (Reus, 2012) and other cultures, or else that we need to consider factors, such as emotions or socio-political context, which may mitigate or change national culture under certain circumstances (Gamble, 2006; Reus, 2012). However, there have been few, if any, studies which consider another potential problem for the focus on national culture as a single, unified entity: the fact that national culture is itself an emically-defined symbol of identity, and consequently multiple groups within a given nation may have differing, equally valid, interpretations of its national culture, with consequent implications for cross-cultural management. The relevance of this situation to international business studies, and the problematic lack of research considering it, has become more evident through the recent rise of polarising social movements, for instance the election of Donald Trump in the US and “Brexit” in the UK (Devinney & Hartwell, 2020).

Using a case study of Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates in London (UK), conducted with methods and analytical tools drawn from social anthropology, this paper explores the implications of the tacit social divide in Taiwanese society between *benshengren* (the descendants of Chinese settlers who arrived before the 1949 Communist takeover of the mainland) and *waishengren* (Chinese settlers who arrived after 1949 and their descendants); the fact that Taiwanese politics have until very recently been dominated by the *waishengren*-associated Kuomintang (KMT) party means that an ideological divide appears to persist despite the passage of time, the intermarriage of group members, and so forth. The two groups interpret Taiwanese national culture in slightly different ways, and, for Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates, these differences influence their networking opportunities, and consequently how they are able to conduct international business (IB). I conclude that such differences in interpreting national culture are not errors to be controlled for, nor extremes to be subsumed into the definition of a single overarching national culture, but a crucial factor in the development of international business networks. I develop this by suggesting ways in which differences in national culture can be better integrated into existing research frameworks.

 This paper constitutes a response to Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson (2016)’s critique of IB literature on culture since 2006. In particular, they note that much of it still tends to equate “country” with “culture,” and, secondly, that there has thus far been little research on internal variations within cultures. I would add to this, however, that there is far less research on emic (internally defined) interpretations of national culture, from the point of view of the managers, with most studies—even those who do take a more nuanced view of “culture”-- being filtered through medium of survey instruments and providing little information on how managers themselves actually define their national culture (see Frenkel, 2017). In other words, IB researchers are failing to question whether what they mean by “national culture” is the same as that of their research subjects, and, furthermore, to consider what sort of impact variations in the interpretation of national culture might have on business itself. Finally, it is important to consider these variations in the context of expatriation, as it shows how such emic distinctions can continue to have significance when doing business overseas.

I will also explore ways in which IB can usefully draw on other disciplines, such as history and political science, to develop approaches to culture which provide an accurate and relevant idea of the role of national culture, even if it is one which appears “messy” and “unscientific” at first glance (see Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004), without “reinventing the wheel” as it were. Furthermore, a study based on businesspeople from developing countries raises the issue that national culture models developed by European and North American researchers may not be fit for purpose when considering the developing and/or postcolonial world (see Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010, McEwan, 2008, Fowler, Gajewska-DeMatteos & Chapman, 2018).

The research questions this paper will address, therefore, are *1) How is national culture, as a symbol of identity, interpreted by Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates?* and *2) What effect does the existence of two or more interpretations of a national culture have on the IB activities of expatriates from the country in question?* The concept of viewing national culture as a symbol of identity (following along Sperber’s [1974] concept of identity as expressed through objects, practices, texts, events and legends which are collectively held by a particular group] will be explained in more detail in the literature review which follows this paragraph. The paper will then continue with a discussion of methodology, a data presentation section ordered by the research questions which the data addresses, a discussion and reformulation of the research questions in light of the evidence, and a conclusion.

**Literature review**

*Approaches to "national culture" in cross-cultural management: The problem identified*

Historically, the norm in cross-cultural management studies has been to focus on the national level as the “unit of analysis” of culture, a trend largely originating with Hofstede (1980, 2001, 2017), but carried on by numerous other scholars (key examples include Kogut & Singh, 1988; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998; Javidan & House, 2002; House et al., 2006; see Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson, 2006, 2016; Taras, Steel & Kirkman, 2011 for wider overviews). While there are many reasons to focus on the national level for reasons such as shared educational, political and legal institution, and common identities (Kirkman et al. 2016), over the past decade, however, many researchers have, if not outright critiqued the limitations of this approach (McSweeney, 2002, 2013; McSweeney, Brown & Illiopoulo, 2016; Kirkman et al., 2016). Others, while acknowledging the importance of nations, have at the very least indicated that the reality of culture is far more complex (Brannen, 2004; Fitzsimmons, 2013) and that to focus on the national level alone, without considering other cultural factors, is artificially reductive (Sasaki & Yoshikawa, 2014). The problems with the national focus have even been acknowledged by Hofstede, who has defended his approach by saying “they are usually the only kind of units available for comparison and better than nothing” (2002: 1356).

 Many recent works have, therefore, considered modifications and moderations of the national focus. Generally speaking, do so by either considering situations in which local or regional cultures override national “norms” (Li et al., 2013); looking at the ways in which national culture, as it manifests in individuals or organisations, can be affected by things like emotions or the undertaking of a merger (Reus, 2012, Slangen, 2006; Dikova & Sahib, 2013); considering the ways in which national culture may change over time (Taras et al,. 2011) or be interpreted according to particular social contexts (Gamble, 2006); or, finally, considering the complicating effects of globalisation, for instance the fact that international managers live and work in more than one nation (Mao & Shen, 2015), and that even those managers who do not are exposed to globalising discourses through the media, travel, study abroad and so forth (Beaverstock, 2011). Others have taken a more interpretative approach, treating national culture as a discourse which can, for instance, form part of expatriates’ identities (Mao & Shen, 2015, Delmestri, 2006), or which can define “distance” between nations (Chapman, Gajewska-DeMattos, Clegg, & Buckley 2008).

 One issue which has been sometimes observed is that members of the same “national culture” may have quite different interpretations of it. However, much of the literature on the subject tends to focus on those with obvious geographical distinctions (see Tung & Verbeke, 2010), or where there are obvious differences of culture, such as in South Africa or Canada. However, subtler and less visible differences are not so often considered. Steel and Taras (2010), for instance, noted that cultural values within a nation varied according to a number of socioeconomic factors, such as age, gender and education. There is also a growing body of literature on multicultural and bicultural individuals, and the complications these pose for unified presentations of national culture (see Fitzsimmons, 2013; Brannen and Thomas, 2010; Kirkman et al. 2016). Finally, recent political events have clearly shown the ways in which this can affect IB: the social divisions revealed by the Brexit referendum in the UK could not have been identified either by a Hofstedian approach purporting a unified national culture, nor by a modified one focusing on regions and local cultures (Koch, 2017; Devinney & Hartwell, 2020).

Furthermore, the potential consequences of this for our understanding of IB are seldom followed up. For instance, while House et al. (2006) acknowledge that it influenced their results that their White South African sample were from the Anglo, rather than the Boer, community, they do so only briefly, and in the concluding section of the work. The differences in upbringing and background between Anglo and Boer cultures is likely to create differences in viewpoint, even in individuals of the same gender, class, age cohort, and national identity, which will affect opportunities for business, ability to network and share knowledge, and strategies for cross-cultural management (and this is before we even begin to consider the complexity of national identity for Black South Africans).

Overtly multilingual and multicultural countries, such as Belgium, Switzerland and Canada, are also inconsistently dealt with in the national-culture literature. *Culture’s Consequences*’ first edition ignores the effect this type of diversity might have (Hofstede, 1980), and the 2001 edition contains a brief note on three such countries only (Hofstede, 2001). Even within that, nuances may go unnoticed by outsiders; for instance, the Quebecois perspective is frequently taken as normative for French Canadians, eliding the differences between the Quebecois French and French-speaking populations in other provinces (see Denis, 2001) or the fact that Quebec’s ethnic minority populations may not share the norms of Quebecois of European extraction (Piche, 2002; Turgeon and Bilodeau, 2014). Focusing on a single “national culture”, or even, in rare cases, two or three cultures in a “multicultural nation”, thus ignores, or elides, the fact that these seemingly unitary cultures may be differently interpreted by different groups, and not always the most obvious ones to outsiders.

Furthermore, although such observations have caused Kirkman et al. to urge researchers to look for other “containers” than the country level (2016: 19), one might argue that it is also worth asking why the interest in the national level persists. Although issues of methodological ambivalence have been raised in terms of survey-based research (Smelser, 1997), not all studies which focus on the national are survey based; House et al., for instance, supplement their surveys with interviews and other, more qualitative forms of data (2006). The possibility must be raised that the national level persists because, in one sense or another, it has some form of meaning not just for researchers, but for their subjects.

*National culture as symbol of identity: Approaches from other disciplines*

In other disciplines, however, “national culture” is approached in a way which may shed some light on the problems the concept faces in IB. The IB literature focuses on “culture”, including national culture, as a definable object (or, in Hofstede’s [1980: 25] pervasive if not strictly accurate term, a “programming”) which exists and which people born into, or living within, a particular nation “have”. However, anthropologists, sociologists and geographers instead consider expressing allegiance to a particular nation as a symbol of identity (see Arnold, 1991; Eriksen, 1993). Belonging in any group, whether local, national or otherwise, is expressed through collectively held symbols (see Cohen 1985, 1994). These can be difficult to predict, and may include such things as food, successful corporations, mythological or semi-mythological figures, language/dialect, territory, and/or shared myths of origin (Moore, 2005). Such symbols are often complicated and problematic, and can have wider implications than simply generating a sense of collective feeling: the well-documented Canadian adoption of Sir John Franklin’s doomed Arctic expedition of 1845 as a symbol of national identity, for instance, not only reflects shared anxieties about the environment and ambivalences about the country’s origins as a British colony on indigenous land (Atwood, 1994), but also a legal and political assertion of Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic (Têtu, Lassere, Pelletier & Dawson, 2019).

Castells, in his monograph on globalization, *The Power of Identity* (1997 [2004]), explores how, in the increasingly deterritorialised world of global business, the concept of the national becomes detached from the geographical boundaries of the nation and becomes instead an identity associated with certain behaviours and practices (1996; 1997 [2004]). Moore (2005) develops this by considering how German businesspeople living overseas use symbols of “German culture” as a way of defining and presenting their identity. Furthermore, since “culture” in this sense is not only made up of symbols, but is itself a symbol, it is subject to interpretation: the concept of what is “German culture” has changed over the decades (Watson 1995). Consequently, while IB researchers may be using the concept of “national culture” in a certain way, the businesspeople who are the subject of their research, may be interpreting it in quite another way.

In this paper, therefore, “national culture” will be approached from an emic perspective: first, looking at how a particular population, sharing a “national culture”, define this “national culture” through the use of particular symbols (e.g. historical figures, food, forms of high and popular art) and, second, how different groups in this population interpret what it means to “belong” to it—taking national culture as itself an overarching symbol of identity, as expressed in Figure 1. While Figure 1 can in no way convey the complexity of identity development, roughly speaking, particular objects, stories, practices etc. become associated to a greater or lesser extent with membership in a particular nation, and is invoked as part of the practice of identifying in this way: individuals may not accept or identify with the symbol particularly, but the association is acknowledged. A German need not, to take one symbol associated with the country, be particularly punctual, but they will nonetheless acknowledge the association (for instance saying, “I’m always late; I am a bad German”) (Moore, 2005).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The problem with the above IB studies, both those taking “national culture” as a kind of object (overlooking the complexity and multivalency of national culture as a symbol of identity), and those insisting the national focus is reductive (overlooking the fact that for many informants, national origin is a source of identity), can be mitigated by considering national culture as a symbol of identity, defined by other symbols which are considered by informants to constitute this “culture”.

This approach is not a rejection of the more positivist view of culture as object, but complementary to it, in that it expands and develops it, explaining and allowing room for the changes and differences noted by Kirkman et al. (2016), while also explaining why the name affixed to the “culture” remains the same over time and in different contexts (“Taiwan”, for instance, or “Germany”, or “The UK”), even when the way in which the culture is described or interpreted may differ. Businesspeople do speak of having a particular culture as if it were an object, and yet it is clearly an object whose properties are subject to negotiation and change in the way that physical objects are not, and an object whose possession allows one a common point with others who also possess it (Moore, 2005). Here, rather than assume that “national culture” is an object which can be externally measured, it will instead be treated as a “virtual object”, as it were: a symbol of a collective identity common to a group of people, but with the understanding that there may be, indeed will be, constant discourses around the symbol within the group (Brannen and Salk 2000).

Methodological and epistemological approaches which focus on the search for the traits of a particular “national culture” are, inevitably, going to treat such differences as variations to be controlled for and corrected. Similarly, approaches which treat national culture as a quality or an object are going to ignore the symbolic value of the concept for individuals. In order to determine how these variations affect international business theory and practice, it is worth considering a case where, within a group identifying with a particular “national culture”, there are distinct and competing interpretations of how it is defined.

*The case of Taiwan: A nation divided*

 Taiwan is a particularly useful example to consider here, because, while its portrayal in the business studies literature normally suggests a single, unified national culture, it is in fact socially divided in precisely this fashion. A typical portrayal of Taiwan in the IB literature can be found in Jaw, Wang and Chen (2006), who discuss knowledge flows, human capital and performance using Taiwanese firms as a case study, but assume that the concept of being “Taiwanese”, which would undoubtedly have an influence on all three of these phenomena, is undifferentiated and uncontested. There are a number of papers which discuss the fact that Taiwanese firms do a substantial amount of business with mainland China (e.g. Deng, Huang, Carraher & Duan, 2009), but in no case is the origin of these ties considered (even though it might affect how easy or difficult Taiwanese expatriates find doing business on the mainland). Chou and Kirkby’s (1998) account of the internationalisation of Taiwan’s electronics sector note that this took place in part because of competition between the USA and Japan, both of which were looking for cheap offshore factory locations, but do not consider the political and colonial connections between Taiwan and these countries, and how these might affect the choice of location.

 Research on Taiwan conducted in anthropology, sociology and political science, however, indicates that Taiwan may not be a unified society. Of particular significance is the difference between two groups, known locally as *benshengren* and *waishengren* (e.g. Appleton, 1970; Liu & Hung, 2002; Bedford & Hwang, 2006; Harrison, 2007; Hall, 2013; Chen, 2012 and Muyard, 2012). While both are ethnically Chinese (as opposed to Taiwan’s native population) the *benshengren* are the descendants of Chinese who settled on the island prior to WWII, while the *waishengren* are the people, and their descendants, who arrived in 1949 following the defeat of the Kuomintang (Chinese nationalists, the name roughly translatable as “Republican Party” and usually abbreviated to KMT) on the mainland (Brown, 2002; Harrison, 2007). Although the literature confirms that a divide between the groups persists into the twenty-first century (see Bedford & Hwang, 2006), this may seem surprising given that almost six decades have passed since the arrival of the *waishengren*, and given the inevitable intermarriage and social mixing which have come to pass in the meantime. The factors encouraging it may be that the KMT, upon arrival, seized power on the island, declared a state of emergency and established single-party rule until 1991 (and, although democratic elections were allowed after that point, the party continued to dominate Taiwanese politics until relatively recently, with the rival Democratic Progressive Party only coming to power in 2000 as a minority government, and only obtaining a majority in 2016), and that government and civil institutions continue to be numerically dominated by people from *waishengren* families, leading to an institutional environment which has encouraged the persistence of the divide (Harrison, 2007; Bedford & Hwang, 2006).

While both groups self-identify as “Taiwanese”, therefore, (e.g. Chow, 2012; Schubert, 2004), and regard themselves as part of the Taiwanese nation, the *waishengren*, formed out of the establishment of the Republic of China on Taiwan, tend to define Taiwanese national culture as a “free Chinese” culture, portraying it as being like that of the mainland but “uncontaminated” by Communism, whereas for *benshengren*, of more distant colonial origins, Taiwanese national culture is defined as that of a Southeast Asian nation, colonised at various times by Europeans, Chinese and Japanese. They generally tend to refer to it instead as “pan-Asian” or, at least, to assert that they are culturally distinct from the mainland in a similar way to Malay Chinese rather than to more recent Chinese emigrants (see Brown, 2001, Hall, 2013, Liu & Hung, 2002). It is, finally, problematic to assert the primacy of one interpretation of national culture over the other in this case, as, although the *waishengren* may be politically and socially dominant, the *benshengren* are more numerous.

Furthermore, the issue of how “Taiwanese national culture” is interpreted, and the distinction between the two groups, is far from neutral. Liu and Hung (2002) state that the *benshengren* initially felt that they were treated as second-class citizens by the *waishengren* after the latter’s arrival (570), and resented the fact that their government was then taken over by the KMT, who promptly declared martial law, and established the One China Policy, defined by Liu and Hung as follows: “(1) Taiwanese are Chinese. (2) Taiwan is a part of China. (3) The government of the ROC on Taiwan has to maintain a political system which can represent the whole of China” (570). Resentment at this introduction of rule by outsiders led to nostalgia for Japanese colonial rule on the part of the *benshengren* (Brown, 2001: 154), and a consequent rejection of the definition of Taiwan as “Free China”. Significantly, the KMT as a party continues to focus on reunification with China, while the alternative party, the Democratic Progressive Party or DPP, is more inclined to focus on a more general role for Taiwan within Southeast Asia (Bedford & Hwang, 2006; Liu & Hung, 2002).

Despite the ostensibly neutral presentation of Taiwanese national culture in the papers discussed above, the conflict over who gets to define Taiwanese national culture, and as what, has had an effect on academic research. Murray and Hong (1991) make the point that during the period of single-party rule, the KMT restricted access to researchers who did not favour their point of view that Taiwan is not an independent nation but is instead Chinese. They argue that this was abetted by, first of all, a tendency on the part of Western Sinologists to romanticise Taiwan as a kind of unspoiled repository of pre-Communist Chinese culture, and, second, a reluctance on the part of American governments to acknowledge a legitimate “Chinese” identity on the Communist mainland. However, as a result, the *waishengren* interpretation of Taiwanese culture is frequently taken as normative, despite the *benshengren* interpretation also having a claim to legitimacy. Taiwan thus has two competing interpretations of “national culture”, the one Chinese, the other pan-Asian, affected, among other things, by political relations between *benshengren* and *waishengren*, or at any rate by people identifying with one or the other group.

 The existence of multiple interpretations of Taiwanese national culture would have certain implications for the ability of individuals to conduct international business. For instance, whether one views Taiwanese culture as “Chinese” and seeks a rapprochement with the mainland would make a key difference to one's ability to do business with mainland Chinese; likewise, the USA’s periodic support for the KMT regime as a “free China”, are likely to offer other opportunities for Taiwanese wanting to do business in the USA (see Yu & Bairner, 2008), or to act as middleman between American and Chinese companies, which would mean that *waishengren* would be better placed to take advantage of such opportunities. The *benshengren*’s generally favourable view of the Japanese occupation, by contrast, and the ability of older *benshengren* to speak the language, could provide an asset in doing business with Japanese companies which the *waishengren* do not possess (Brown, 2001). Nonetheless, the assumption of an undifferentiated national culture in Taiwan, and the reliance on statistical instruments in which national culture is treated as undifferentiated, has meant that these implications remain largely unexplored in international business studies. This paper will thus not only contribute to the literature on the impact of national culture on business, but will explore an understudied issue regarding Taiwanese business, domestically and overseas, and one which could be expanded to many other countries with hidden divisions over the interpretation of “national culture”.

**Methodology**

 This paper is based primarily on data gathered in London between 2009 and 2011. The methodology broadly followed the approach outlined in Moore (2011) for using a mixed-method ethnographic study to gather rich and complex data about culture. The study was aimed at answering the question of *How do Taiwanese skilled labour migrants use their identities, ethnic and otherwise, to build knowledge networks overseas?* The research questions of this paper, *How is national culture, as a symbol of identity, interpreted by Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates?* and *What effect does the existence of two or more interpretations of a national culture have on the IB activities of expatriates from the country in question?* emerged early in the fieldwork process; the first, from the fact that responses in interviews frequently diverged from the usage of “Taiwanese national culture” in the IB literature, and, second, that it also became apparent that, while the same symbols were used to describe it, there were at least two diverging interpretations of Taiwanese national culture described by respondents.

The project involved participant-observation at Taiwanese community networking events, a qualitative online survey of 26 individuals, in-depth interviews with a further 26 individuals in London (with no overlap between the samples), netnographic (see Kozinets, 2009) participation in social media groups, and participant-observation and interviewing in Taipei. This helped provide data on how national culture was interpreted by individual Taiwanese expatriates, and on these expatriates used their self-presentation as “Taiwanese” in their IB activities.

 The geographical focus of the study was London, which is a “global city” and a hub of international business (see Leyshon & Thrift, 1997; Sassen, 2001). While population statistics were unavailable for Taiwanese people living in London specifically, the British Office of National Statistics gives a 2014 figure of 37,000 people living in the UK who were born in Taiwan, as compared to 196,000 born in mainland China ([www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk/)). The Taiwanese figure may in fact be slightly higher, as it does not take into account the fact that Taiwanese people born prior to 1949 may have been officially registered as born in China. The fact that most available statistics on the Taiwanese diaspora conflate it with the Chinese diaspora makes it difficult to evaluate how London compares to other cities in this regard. Participants estimated the total population of Taiwanese in London as between one and three thousand. The community had a loose geographical focus on London Chinatown, and a loose social focus on the Taipei Representative Office, the main consular organisation in the UK, although how much of a focus these were is dependent on age and political affiliation. It is also worth noting that at the time the data was obtained, the KMT were the party in power.

 The survey was conducted prior to the main project, using SurveyMonkey and e-mailing the link to a number of different mailing lists dedicated to Chinese professionals in the UK. The survey content was largely quantitative questions about the migration experience and the interpretation of their ethnic identities (for instance: length of time in the UK, citizenship, education level, how individuals personally identify), with a few qualitative questions to clarify the results (for instance explaining their answer to the question of how they personally identify). The intention was to use the results as a supplement or baseline to the qualitative results; however, too few respondents completed the questionnaire for it to be a reliable guide to the community and its general attitudes. However, the results, particularly to the qualitative questions, did inform the development of interview questionnaires and the direction of the ethnographic sections of the project.

*Interviews*

 Formal interviews were conducted with 26 individuals (see Table 1 for details). Of these, all were involved with one or more networking organisations aimed either at the Taiwanese community specifically or the Chinese diaspora more generally, such as a student organisation or chamber of commerce. All were either professionals, retired professionals, or postgraduate students aiming at a professional career. Most were self-initiated expatriates (see Zhang & Rientes, 2017); one had been a "trailing spouse" who had since developed her own local business activities (see Moore, 2007); two were formerly expatriates with multinational corporations who had now settled in the UK. Hence I will here differentiate my subjects, as expatriates, from a wider diaspora including unskilled migrants, students, and the children of expatriates and migrants. 18 participants self-identified in the interview context as “Taiwanese”, although what this meant to them was explored in more detail in the interviews, and some would also self-identify as "Chinese" at times. The rest self-identified primarily as diaspora Chinese; most of this latter group were associated with or representatives of diaspora Chinese organisations in London which were potentially or actually used by Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates. The interviews quoted below are all from the 18 subjects who self-identified primarily as Taiwanese, though data from the other interviews has informed the study. All were ethnically Han Chinese (the dominant ethnic group throughout both Taiwan and mainland China) bar one Hakka (a migrant ethnic minority subject to historic discrimination; see Erbaugh, 1992, Leong, 1997). The value of interviewing self-initiated expatriates was that it meant I could look at how “being Taiwanese” was defined and interpreted in an international setting, and at people explicitly doing business overseas. The names given in Table 1 are pseudonyms, chosen to represent fairly closely the interviewee’s preferred name (Chinese or English) and how they preferred to be addressed by me (first name or title/surname):

 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

 Initial contact was made with the community through a Taiwanese colleague; after that, the “snowball method” was used to obtain the sample, as the study’s overall aim involved investigating the use of Taiwanese identity to construct social networks (as noted, the subject of the current paper emerged later in the research as the differences within the community became apparent, and the relevance of “national culture” as a symbol of identity became clearer). Some subjects were interviewed twice, if the initial interview did not provide enough information and/or if new avenues for exploration were opened up (as per the fact that the second research question only emerged after initial interviews were analysed). Most also provided me with information through informal conversations at networking events or through e-mail and other electronic exchanges. Two interviews were conducted with two informants rather than just one (as indicated in Table One); this was initially for the convenience of the interviewees, but the dynamics of conducting a multi-person interview could also provide new information as the subjects responded to, and elaborated on, each other's statements. Informal conversations were also held with about 10 additional participants at various networking events which covered similar ground to the formal interviews; as these were informal and opportunistic, full data on these participants was not gathered, and the data, while valuable, needs to be considered in light of this.

Interviews were conducted mainly in English, with some use of Mandarin for clarification or where English did not lend itself to explaining the concept under discussion. They were transcribed by a professional transcriber, with corrections by the researcher. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees quoted in this paper, and some identifying details have been slightly changed.

*Participant observation*

 Participant-observation was conducted at networking and social events for the Chinese and Taiwanese communities in and around London and the UK, including the biannual Taiwanese Food Festival, meetings of the European Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce and TAITRA (the Taiwanese international trade association), a Lunar New Year festival and at language schools and language learning groups, in order to observe how the relationships which pervade IB were set up and conducted. In taking notes, I largely followed Brannen’s “FSM” protocol, looking for things that were *familiar, strange* or that I wanted to learn *more* about (Brannen, Moore and Mughan, 2013). This process took place over three years off and on, leading to, while not exactly a longitudinal study (as not all the same individuals were re-interviewed or re-encountered) a longitudinal perspective which allows for richer, more extensive data (see Hassett & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013). This method provided information on how people present, and engage in discourses over how to present, Taiwanese national culture. Observation also provided a wealth of data on aspects of Taiwanese culture which were not explicitly mentioned in interviews (e.g. the identification of Taiwanese culture with certain foods and culinary practices, the uses of certain characters and romanisation systems, with certain professions and with certain approaches to business). As this paper takes the approach of considering national culture from an emic perspective, immersing the researcher in the relevant cultural milieu as much as possible is essential.

*Online networking*

 Data was also obtained through online participant-observation, or ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2009). This is because, as Kang (2017) argues, online media play such a significant role in the professional, political and personal lives of expatriates, how they express their identities, and how they maintain contact between their country of origin and country of settlement that it is an act of negligence to ignore the online dimension (see also Dekker & Engberson, 2014). This was achieved through joining online communities, forums and Facebook groups aimed at the Taiwanese community, with the full knowledge and permission of the organisers. These activities allowed me to observe the ways in which such groups are used to build connections, advertise events, recruit volunteers for activities and express particular social identities, in a setting which allows cross-border interaction, as well as supplementing the tacit and discursive data obtained during conventional participant-observation through, for instance, observing which articles are shared by whom on Facebook and the ways in which discussions play out in online forums. Since online activities are an increasingly essential part of the way in which people live their lives and express and define identities, participating in such communities provided insights into how national culture is interpreted in a setting which transcends borders (see Castells, 1997 [2004]).

 Online networking was also used for a more practical methodological purpose: to identify potential interviewees, to initiate contact with them, and to maintain contact after the initial interview or interviews were over.

*Taipei fieldwork*

 After the initial project was concluded, the opportunity arose to conduct background research during a visiting fellowship at National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taipei. Formal unstructured interviews were conducted with 10 individuals, nine of them NCCU alumni whose current or former employment involved a cross-border element, and one a personal contact of one of the participants in the London study, in order to obtain material on the Taiwanese social and cultural background, and on the reasons behind the symbols used to express “national culture”. As these interviews constituted background material, they are not quoted here, and the interviewees are not listed in Table 1. An informal unstructured interview was held with an individual from the London study who also operated in Taiwan. All self-identified as Taiwanese, though again all debated the meaning of the concept, and also could identify as Chinese in some contexts; all were ethnically Han apart from one Hakka. Again, interviews were largely conducted in English, though two interviewees requested a translator be present, who assisted when the interview subjects felt that they could best express the concept to which they were referring in Mandarin. This research is mentioned as relevant here because it provided insights into the discourses of identity which were emerging from Taiwan itself to inform my interviewees’ self-presentation, and background information to allow the understanding of what Taiwanese national culture means in an expatriate context.

*Analysis*

 The resulting data was analysed by reading the interview transcripts, participant observation reports and survey closely, then highlighting relevant extracts in different colours, each colour assigned to a different broad first-order category (see Brannen, Moore & Mughan, 2013). For instance, blue represents “symbols of Taiwaneseness”, red
“relationships with Taiwanese business partners, yellow represents “relationships with non-Taiwanese business partners”, green “globalisation” and violet “localism”. These first-order categories were then broken down into second-order categories; so, for instance, data under “relationships with non-Taiwanese business partners” might then be further categorised as to whether the partner is British, continental European, mainland Chinese, Southeast Asian, diaspora Chinese, American or Japanese.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

 Excerpts were chosen either to represent a general opinion, or when a particular observation was unusual or insightful in some way. The analyst also reflected on their own participation in the research and analysis process, with a view to remaining aware of the role their own identity played. Reliability and validity were ensured through comparing the data obtained through different methods, and through discussing the analysis with study participants.

**Data presentation**

*How is national culture, as a symbol of identity, interpreted by Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates?*

 All interviewees spoke in terms of there being a “Taiwanese national culture”, which they described as flexible and global, but nonetheless focused specifically on one geographical location. Although this “culture” followed the lines discussed above, a discursive identity rather than a possessible set of attributes, they spoke in terms of “culture” rather than “identity”, hence my use of the term here. All my respondents tended to define "Taiwanese national culture" through a shared set of symbols (see Sperber, 1974, Castells, 1997 [2004]), such as Taiwanese food, certain holidays and shared cultural practices, and membership in diaspora associations. One entrepreneur in my sample did business almost exclusively within the Taiwanese community in the UK, and, during participant observation at community events, I encountered others (food importers, travel agencies, and so forth) for whom this community was their sole, or primary, market. This seemed to hold true regardless of *benshengren* or *waishengren* affiliation. The symbol of a Taiwanese national culture as a focus for identification was important to Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates in London, shaping how they lived, who they made friends or business connections with, and what their opportunities were; furthermore, it was defined using the same symbols.

However, underneath this seeming unity, Taiwanese national culture was differently interpreted by people of *benshengren* or *waishengren* background. Crucially, with regard to the discussion in the literature review about the continued relevance of these categories, my informants expressed a sense that a binary division persisted in Taiwanese society, even in cases where the informant’s background was mixed or atypical (for instance, one informant whose family left the mainland in 1949 but were not affiliated with, or particularly sympathetic to, the KMT). Rather than combining the two or rejecting both, they would tend to identify in terms of one or the other group.

This affiliation affected how they described being Taiwanese: “Wendy”, for instance, came from a *benshengren* family, and described Taiwan as distinct from mainland China, as here, when she talks about her membership in student societies:

And I think a situation for Taiwanese societies, usually we don’t but it’s automatic, we divide ourselves from Taiwan to [mainland] China, yeah, so it’s automatic, the feeling. But we still have some Taiwanese along with [mainland] Chinese friends, but just the feeling is still like it’s a friend and Taiwanese society is more like family. (Wendy, early 20s, NGO worker)

This can be contrasted with this description of the relationship between Taiwan and the mainland made by Rupert, a *waishengren*. Where Wendy differentiates Taiwanese and mainland friends and sees “Taiwanese society” as more friendly, Rupert describes the two countries as having no differentiation bar the Taiwanese political system, which he regards as better than the mainland’s:

You’re talking about the rise of China in the past and how does it affect us?... We are all ethnic Chinese, we all came from China originally, different provinces of China, we speak the same language, we speak Chinese. So we got ourselves as Chinese. But not as citizen of People’s Republic of China….. You know, as far as we are concerned, even though we only had twenty odd countries recognising us diplomatically, we are still, you know... Though we have been defeated in mainland China, we have always survived in the island of Taiwan. You know, believing in freedom and democracy, and the western ideas, which is different from the government in China ruled by the Communist (Rupert, 70s, retired accountant).

Other interviewees who were *waishengren* also did not describe mainland China as distinct from Taiwan in any way other than politically:

Our country and that China now is separate, one is a mainland China, one is a free China, it’s Taiwan is… yeah, we hope one day that these two parts will be reunited, that’s what we are doing now. (Hua, 70s, Mandarin teacher)

Taiwan, here, is defined implicitly according to the “free China” discourse. Rupert, who had been born on the mainland and had fled to Singapore after the Communist rise to power, had taken Taiwanese nationality as a political statement, saying “because I show my allegiance to the Republic of China, I actually took out a Taiwanese passport and gave up my Singapore passport.” Another common theme among *waishengren* was to say that “Taiwan didn’t leave the mainland, the mainland left Taiwan”. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes, describing an encounter at a gathering where most participants were *waishengren*, shows both that this phrase was so commonly used among the *waishengren* as to be normative, and that it was also an idea which was not necessarily normative among other groups:

I… mention [my participation in] the Young Chinese Professionals in Scotland online network, and [my interviewee] looks a bit glum and says that the big question in Taiwan is whether Taiwan is part of China or something else. I say I thought “the mainland left Taiwan”, using the phrase [KMT members] use, and he says he could talk about it a long time, but will leave it till later. (Fieldnote, May 2010)

*Benshengren* interviewees tended to talk in terms of connections to Japan, or to the wider Chinese diaspora, rather than to the mainland. One talked about how her father had used his Japanese language skills to do overseas business in the electronics industry, for instance, and another, asked about why the Taiwanese were so positive towards the Japanese, responded straight away that it was because they had brought in hospitals and schools (although she did not say so, the implication was also present that the mainlanders had not done so). *Waishengren* often focused on everyday practices and objects that were held in common with the mainland (the Chinese food tradition, Daoist/Buddhist religious practices), and *benshengren* with those which were adopted from other cultures more generally (for instance Japanese foods such as *mochi*). Although Taiwanese national culture is significant to both groups, one group defines it as Chinese, the other as part of a wider Asian social world. We shall now consider the impact of this on conducting international business.

*What effect does the existence of two or more interpretations of a national culture have on the IB activities of expatriates from the country in question?*

*1. Doing business with Taiwanese* Unsurprisingly, Taiwanese expatriates in London used shared national ties to seek business opportunities with fellow Taiwanese. Nationally based groups such as the various Taiwanese Chambers of Commerce, the Taiwanese student and alumni organisations, and so forth, allowed people to construct mutually beneficial networks, and to seek advice, partners and mentors, through shared nationality:

*Michael*: More and more young Taiwanese want to create their own business and to have their own business. When you start up the new business there will be quite difficult to get into the new market so if you can leverage in this kind of social networking probably for you to start up in a new company you’re probably new to the content, you need an advisor, but in the Junior Chapter probably we have some specialised, they are quite professional in such kind legal, in such kind for property, such kind for accountant, so we can leverage each other to coordinate it....

*Interviewer:* So it’s partly about communication and partly about giving your own people a hand?

*Michael:* Yeah, I think just do them a favour (Michael, 30s, lawyer).

The specific phrasing of Michael’s last comment indicates that this is a reference to *guanxi,* a type of reciprocal exchange of favours conducted primarily among Chinese people (Alston 1989)]. While doing participant observation at the Taiwanese Food Festival, I spoke with one recruitment consultant who had set up a stall aimed at attracting young managers interested in working in Asia. I also observed that key community business figures attended the Festival, as well as other community events such as the Lunar New Year festival and a ceremony to honour Sun Yat Sen (held under the plaque commemorating his stay in London) which I attended. Identifying as Taiwanese could therefore, not surprisingly, lead to furthering one’s career within the UK, in Taiwan, and in other countries.

 However, differences in the interpretation of Taiwanese national culture affected people's ability to access networking associations and other organisations set up to help Taiwanese people to do business abroad. Some organisations were set up or sponsored by the Taipei Representative Office, and thus officially affiliated with the Taiwanese government, and could be assumed to follow the government's particular stance on Taiwaneseness, which, as noted above, varies depending on whether or not the KMT was in power. At the time of the study, therefore, such organisations tended to be dominated by *waishengren*, if only in that their interpretation of Taiwanese national culture was normative. Other organisations without official government affiliation also took the *waishengren* interpretation as normative because of having been set up by *waishengren*, or because they had been set up as part of dictatorship-era KMT initiatives to encourage recognition of Taiwan as “free China”, and to develop closer ties with the mainland with a view to changing its political regimes. Meanwhile, *benshengren* tended to express a preference for organisations focused on the Chinese diaspora more generally, defining Chineseness not as a matter of national origin but as a global ethnicity. Online, one’s position on this could be expressed by, for instance, posting a news article which held one or the other interpretation of Taiwanese culture in a Taiwanese forum, or supporting or debating the article’s views; this could also lead to the construction of friendships, instrumental or otherwise, with people of similar views. Conflicting interpretations of national culture could thus affect a Taiwanese businessperson's choice of which organisations to join, or in which organisations they might successfully progress, and the agenda and focus of these organisations would thus affect business opportunities available to the members; as indicated by the composition of the KMT-based organisations in my study, people of *waishengren* affiliation, for instance, would be best able to make the connections available in the *waishengren* organisations.

*2. Doing business with non-Taiwanese*

 Another significant point is that the different interpretations of national culture meant that it could be used to build ties with people of other nationalities. For instance, although many informants (whatever their personal affiliation as *benshengren* or *waishengren*) expressed a degree of ambivalence towards mainland China, they would also use the shared connection of being part of the global Chinese diaspora to build positive business connections there.

Even they now go to [mainland] China where a lot of them spend the investment there, especially after Tiananmen Square. All the Western country they move out and they take the advantage in moving but at that time some of the people, they say that China is no good so the [KMT] Government forbids it, but the private sector, they still go there. So first go, first win. The other ones just follow the Government, the restriction law, then they [the businesses] go maybe I think in the past two or three years, couple of years, then the Government lift the ban officially, allow the people to invest in China, that’s the whole situation. Now we call Taiwanese are those who move out to overseas from Taiwan. No more include the people overseas Chinese, they move from mainland China to other parts of the world, then maybe the responsibility of mainland China. (Mr Lee, 40s, civil servant)

Although, as noted, this was far from unproblematic for many:

At the moment Taiwan relies on [mainland] China too much. Yeah, like, I would never put all my business on the Chinese, China market, yeah so that’s the problem.... Taiwan can do more with European or American or British [businesses], or anyone else, yeah. It’s really, it’s nothing wrong to do business with China, but just really as I say, yeah, all of their eggs in one basket, that’s no good (Maria, 50s, entrepreneur).

Some of the people who I spoke with when conducting participant-observation at the Taiwanese food festivals, also, came from other parts of the Chinese diaspora, such as Malaysia and Hong Kong, finding common cultural points with which to network with Taiwanese people, and Wendy, a young *benshengren*, observed that she often found it easier to make friends with diaspora Chinese than mainlanders:

Based on my experience and also my friends’ experience, it’s difficult to be friends with Chinese students without talking politics. But when we talk about politics, it’s the time to start to argue, but we don’t want to argue, but it’s difficult to avoid arguing if we talk about politics, so for this reason, we might feel more comfortable to be friends with even people from Hong Kong or Malaysia (Wendy, early 20s, NGO worker).

Interpreting Taiwanese national culture in certain ways could thus be used to build connections as part of seeking out business opportunities with Chinese people who were not also Taiwanese: however, whether these contacts were on the mainland or in the diaspora could be affected by whether one was *waishengren* or *benshengren*.

 Furthermore, interpreting Taiwanese national culture not as Chinese, but as pan-Asian, could lead in other directions. For instance, Taiwan's earlier colonial ties to Japan could also encourage more long-term economic networking. This excerpt, for instance, indicates that colonial ties to Japan have a current, if diminishing, impact on the tourist industry, suggesting that cultural and social ties with *benshengren* are still influential:

Maybe since this year, I think, it will increase very fast, the tourism. Before last year, Japan is number one Taiwanese tourist. But this year, Chinese already are come one million, already one million travel to Taiwan. And we can look forward to the future, Chinese more and more. Of course, Japanese also will increase but they’ll increase very low, Chinese increase very fast. (Dougal, 40s, civil servant)

While diversifying business to other countries is simply good business sense, the choice of countries to diversify to is not uninteresting. The fact that Taiwan could be construed not as part of China, but as a Chinese-dominated Southeast Asian nation, also meant that Taiwanese businesses sought opportunities in other small Asian economies. Referring to Taiwanese business abroad, a representative at the Economic Section of the Taipei Representative office talked about how Taiwanese connections in other Asian countries could be used in the same way as ties to the mainland were used to do business there—and also referred to using diasporic ties to do so, in much the same way as *waishengren* family ties were also, according to more than one *waishengren* informant, frequently leveraged to do business with the mainland:

Taiwanese invest[ment] in Vietnam is No. 1, also that in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and you can use the Taiwanese community in those Asian countr[ies] to explore those markets, I think it’s very good. (Stephen, 40s, civil servant)

At least one Taiwanese business networking association would do joint events with similar associations focused on Korea or Japan, citing a common cause as being Asian countries with a strong economic presence in London. However, associations belonging to other such countries, for instance Vietnam and Malaysia, were not part of the joint events, suggesting historic ties to Taiwan might also play a role in determining who to let in to the network.

Furthermore, opportunities in Japan were more likely to be open to *benshengren* than to *waishengren* (as in the case of the informant’s father with the electronics business, above, who was able to use his language skills to build connections with Japanese partners) and those in Southeast Asia depended on whether one identifies Taiwan as a part of China or as part of Southeast Asia—which, while it would not exclude *waishengren*, would suggest that those with more of a focus on Southeast Asia would seek opportunities there. The different interpretations of Taiwanese national culture affected the places in which individuals and companies chose to do business.

 Taiwanese national culture could also be used to build social networks with European potential partners. However, the vital factor in this instance was not necessarily how the Taiwanese themselves interpreted Taiwanese national culture, but how Europeans did:

The reason is because our product, our economy situation, we have to make [a] difference because Chinese, right now, their image is not good. So that’s why we, Taiwan, have a good image. But we think, we believe Taiwan have this good image because of such kind of a situation, it also good for [mainland] China, for Chinese because that give them a goal to approach because they also have same brother or same Asian people, same people, okay. But Taiwan have a good image, is also good for Chinese situation although they are too big. But they are tough situation, they can approach with Taiwan... *[Interviewer: So they can use Taiwan’s better reputation on the international scale as a kind of way of getting themselves accepted and working with Taiwanese partners is one way of kind of looking more respectable?]*Yes. Yeah. Because Taiwan, we hope to use this market as our background. (Dougal, 40s, civil servant)

In this case, then, Dougal indicates that Europeans do business with Taiwan not so much in and of itself, but as a gateway to doing business with mainland China. The fact that Europeans tend to perceive Taiwan in this way probably owes much to KMT efforts between the 1950s and 1980s to promote their particular interpretation of Taiwaneseness as detailed above.

One common trope from people following the *waishengren* interpretation, in interviews, was to emphasise similarities between Taiwanese and British social and political institutions, evidently again trading on the depiction of Taiwan as "a free China" outlined initially by the KMT and recurring in the quotes from Rupert and Hua, above. However, the pan-Asian discourse of Taiwanese national culture was less often used to build common cause with the British, suggesting that, as above, the KMT interpretation tended to be more normative among outsiders. *Waishengren* interpretations of Taiwanese culture could therefore be used to build bridges with European partners, colleagues and investors; *benshengren* interpretations are either ignored, or other means of building connections are found.

 The case of Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates in London thus shows that, while “national culture” existed as a source of identification at the group level, there were less visible divisions over the interpretation of it. More than that, however, these divisions are likely to affect the holders' business opportunities overseas, the decisions they make, and the partner they choose, in subtle but noticeable ways, and to have an unacknowledged impact on the ways in which non-Taiwanese interact with non-Taiwanese businesspeople. Some implications for researchers and managers will now be considered.

**Discussion**

*Theoretical implications*

 The material outlined above, firstly, indicates that the concept of national culture, however much it may be critiqued in IB studies, is significant to businesspeople as a symbol of their identity. All my interviewees were Taiwanese of Chinese ancestral origin (all but one from the Han ethnic group), who described themselves as Taiwanese, using much the same symbols to do so. Furthermore, other groups perceived the Taiwanese as existing as a national group with whom they could do business. This is also supported by the fact that, even in qualitative and/or micropolitical studies of the sort aimed at understanding the complexities and intricacies of culture, such as Sharpe (2006) or Brannen (2004), the concept of a nation existing and having a particular culture is taken as much for granted as in more quantitative, broad-ranging studies. The Taiwanese case can thus, in some ways, be seen as vindicating the classic nation-focused perspective of traditional IB studies (such as Hofstede, 1980, 2001, 2014; House et al., 2006).

 At the same time as supporting the continued focus on the national, paradoxically, the study simultaneously vindicates the positions of McSweeney (2002), Dörrenbächer and Geppert (2006), and others (Sasaki & Yoshikawa, 2014; Tung & Verbeke, 2010), who have argued that to focus merely on a single “national culture” is artificially reductive and damaging to scholarship. This is because, although individuals in the study spoke of having the same national culture, even used the same symbols to define it, they had quite different ideas about what this means. The concepts of culture, nation, ancestry and political affiliation mingled in complex ways which could not be explained by a simple focus on a “national culture”. As well as being supported by recent cases such as the Brexit movement, with both Leave and Remain factions laying claim to the same national culture and yet being difficult to define by such metrics as geography and class (Koch, 2017; Devinney & Hartwell, 2020), this finding also supports Boyacigiller, Kleinberg, Phillips & Sackmann’s (2009) point that the neglect of such differences is a detriment to cross-cultural management studies, as to simply assume that all my interviewees meant the same thing when they said they were “Taiwanese” would be to overlook a vast array of significant nuances. At the same time as it acknowledges the importance of the national level, this study simultaneously argues that this is a complex form of identification which may be more fragmented than it otherwise appears.

 Furthermore, the complexity and contradictions of national culture are, as per Tung and Verbeke (2010), not an “error” to be controlled for or excluded from the data, but are in fact the very aspect of identity which allows it to be used to construct complex cross-border networks. The complicated interpretations of Taiwanese national culture allowed for complex network ties: the idea that Taiwan is “free China” not only allowed my interviewees to network with other “Chinese” businesspeople, whether on the mainland or in the diaspora, but to construct alliances with Europeans seeking to enter the Chinese market. Meanwhile, the definition of Taiwan as “pan-Asian” allowed the construction of networks in the region—as well as, again, developing links between Europe and a variety of Asian countries using Taiwan as an intermediary. As with the studies of Delmestri (2006), Gamble (2006) and Das, Dharwadkar, and Brandes (2008), the Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates acknowledge the complexities of national culture, and, furthermore, actively use this complexity to further their career ambitions. This paper thus supports, and elaborates on, Kirkman et al’s call to broaden and interrogate the concept of culture (2016). The response to Research Question 1 might well, therefore, be formulated as:

*National culture is experienced as a complex, multiply interpretable identity, which affects the way businesspeople live and do business in complex ways.*

And the response to Research Question Two can be phrased as:

*Differences in the interpretation of national culture affect the social networking activities of expatriates, giving people of the same national origins access to different social resources both in the home and host countries.*

Finally, we can reinterpret Figure 1 in the following way:

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

While the symbols which are associated with a particular national culture remain the same, the culture is itself the same as in the previous diagram, and the ways in which individuals express their identities are the same, the interpretations are different; Taiwanese cuisine, for instance, can reflect a Chinese identity (part of the wider repertoire of Chinese culinary culture) or a pan-Asian one (reflecting its eclectic connections to Japan and North America as well as the mainland). The change thus illustrates how differences in interpretation reflect hidden distinctions within a given national culture.

 This paper, furthermore, goes beyond both the nation-focused and the nation-critical studies discussed earlier to suggest ways in which the relevance of the national level can be acknowledged without sacrificing complexity. This study indicates that, firstly, earlier literature in IB studies which takes the national perspective need to be reevaluated in light of the idea that the national cultures they deal with may conceal differences of interpretation, influencing the results of earlier studies. Furthermore, the complexities and contradictions within national cultures need to be studied as a source of international business connections, and their significance to business, positive and negative, more thoroughly understood, if we are to deal with the consequences of such issues as Brexit and the rise of nationalism in the USA.

 A contribution of this study is, therefore, providing evidence that, while “national culture” is indeed very important to international business, it is less as a set of traits possessed by managers from a given nation, and more as an active discourse which shapes and affects how people from that nation do business in different ways. Furthermore, differences in how national culture is constructed, interpreted and experienced are not outlying factors to be controlled for, but, instead, the very things that provide different business opportunities in the diaspora.

*Methodological and analytical implications*

 This study also suggests that we need to encourage greater consideration of the connections between research and practice. Buckley and Chapman, in a 1997 paper, noted that IB scholarship does not take place in a vacuum, as managers study IB, and read IB scholarship in its academic form or else diluted in the form of popular management works. They argue that we need to pay greater attention to our role in developing managerial culture. This theme has been taken up by other researchers (e.g. Tipton, 2008; Hanson, 2008; Tsui 2016) but, unfortunately, has failed to have much impact on mainstream research. In this case, articles which, as Murray and Hong (1991) noted, were willing to promote the KMT perspective on Taiwanese culture, either because of issues of funding and access, or because of romanticised Western visions of "Chinese" culture, have promoted the idea of a Chinese Taiwanese national culture which is reflected in the business literature (e.g. Jaw et al., 2006), but which does not reflect the experience of the majority of Taiwanese, even today. More reflexive scholarship, which operates without a priori assumptions about national culture or regional traits, is thus called for in IB studies, as is greater care about whether or not we are unwittingly propagating a particular political agenda (see Cooke, 2003, 2004; Westwood, 2006).

 Of particular significance to IB researchers is the fact that it was very difficult, unless one knew about the political and social situation regarding Taiwanese national culture, to determine its contested nature. All my interviewees talked about doing business with China, global identities, Taiwan's position as a small but developing Asian nation beginning to have a dominant European presence, the perception of Taiwan overseas, and the other elements noted above. The symbols used to define national cultures were common to both *waishengren* and *benshengren*; the differences emerge in their interpretations of these. There were clear distinctions in terms of attitude towards doing business with different countries, the opportunities open to them, and their view of what it is to be "Taiwanese". It is perhaps not accidental that studies critiquing the national culture focus seem to emerge at a period when there is a revival of interest in ethnographic methods in cross-cultural management (see Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009; Moore, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Cabantous, 2015), with what Ybema et al. refer to as “context-sensitive and actor-centred analysis” (2009: 7). Concepts of this level of complexity thus emerge best when studied in ways involving thick data and emic perspectives, as demonstrated also in studies such as Gajewska-DeMattos, Chapman and Clegg (2004) Chapman et al. (2008), Jarzabkowski et al. (2015), Delmestri (2006), Barinaga (2007), Gamble (2006), Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) and others. I would therefore suggest a further conclusion deriving from the research questions and the data presented:

*Positivistic and/or deliberately simplified studies of national culture can increase their relevance to practice by drawing insights from research done in other, culture- and identity-focused disciplines.*

This conclusion also serves as a direction for further research on this topic.

 Methodologically, then, this study indicates that IB research suffers from presuming the existence of objective categories, from not acknowledging the feedback loop between researcher and researched, and from not considering research done in other disciplines. A more reflexive and contextualised approach already exists within critical management studies, and it would be helpful to scholarship were it to be more widely taken up.

*Managerial relevance*

There are also a number of managerial implications which can be drawn from the Taiwanese example. The failure to consider differences in national culture may well cause problems for cross-cultural management. An unexpected difference in the interpretation of national culture might cause merger partners to behave in ways unpredicted by the literature on national culture, for instance. It could also lead to missed opportunities through the failure to grasp the complexities of a potential market, through assuming that the hegemonic culture's preferences reflect the whole of society, or to failure to construct networks with crucial individuals who may not form part of the hegemonic group. Equally, assumptions may be made which are not viable in practice; a European manager might assume, for instance, that their Taiwanese business partner will find it easy to work with a subsidiary on mainland China, when in fact their strengths may lie in their connections with other Asian countries and the wider Chinese diaspora. The existence of different interpretations of national culture, and the need to both acknowledge the significance of the concept while recognise its complex interpretations, is thus not only of theoretical interest to researchers, but ought to be of practical concern for managers looking to conduct joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, and other partnerships with a business from another nation.

*Limitations of the present study*

 The proposals of this study are subject to certain caveats, beyond the obvious issue that space does not permit more than a superficial exploration of such a complex and ambivalent concept as “culture”. It must be emphasised the case of Taiwan is to be taken here as exemplary rather than typical; while other national cultures, such as American or British, are also differentiated beyond obvious regional differences, it is also certain that the nature, and importance, of these differences is also variable. The study is also limited by numbers and by focusing on a single city and diaspora community. Finally, as briefly noted above, although a divide persists between *waishengren* and *benshengren*, it is a complex one, and space limitations mean it cannot be fully explored within the confines of this paper. The Taiwanese case is intended here as a launching-point for further research, rather than as definitive proof of a particular phenomenon.

 An argument can also be made that a qualitative, in-depth study of a particular national group is engaging in quite a different project to the more quantitative, survey-based approach of the classic works on national culture (Boyacigiller et al., 2009). I would, however, argue that, much as Chapman et al. (2008)'s qualitative study of the concept of "cultural distance" as experienced by individual businesspeople indicated that there were dimensions of the concept which affected cross-cultural management in ways not considered in the literature, this study expands upon and develops more functionalist works to usefully explore the complexities hinted at by quantitative results.

*Directions for future research*

The results of this study suggest new directions for research. The first concerns the reinterpretation of earlier, dimension-based, culture studies not as empirical data, but as an exercise in defining and reinforcing managerial categories of what it means to “be from” a particular nation (see Buckley & Chapman, 1997): the present paper reinterprets earlier, dimension-based studies as being part of a project of identity definition, whereby people define their identities through expressing symbols such as having a particular “national culture”, and suggests that it is possible to develop these studies by drawing on research in other disciplines and considering their results in this light. Furthermore, it suggests that rather than focusing on "units of analysis" and attempting to artificially isolate "culture" in order to study it these "units" and "cultures" should be studied as emic categories, of relevance to business but existing as a means of organising the business world, developing networks and constructing alliances, rather than as objects to be analysed.

 Secondly, it suggests that future studies, quantitative or qualitative, should include insights and components from other disciplines as relevant, such as anthropology, political science, linguistics or history; as relevant research has been done in other disciplines, cross-cultural management scholars can benefit from the work of others. Finally, this paper serves as an indication of how reflexivity can be adopted as standard in IB research, reflecting on the process of data gathering and interpretation not as somehow existing in a vacuum apart from business practice, but as being in a positive-feedback loop with the activities of managers in the international sphere.

**Conclusions**

The case of Taiwanese self-initiated expatriates in London validates the focus on national culture in cross-cultural management, while at the same time supporting the critical perspectives of McSweeney (2002, 2013) and the more complex work done by Delmestri (2006), Barinaga (2007), Beaverstock (2011) and many others. While the participants in the study described themselves as Taiwanese, and agreed that being Taiwanese mattered to their ability to do business across borders, nonetheless there were significant and meaningful differences in the ways in which they interpreted, and practised, "being Taiwanese". These differences affected who they did business with, which business organisations they joined, what opportunities they were most likely to prefer, and which they were more likely to avoid—things which, although they may seem minor, nonetheless influenced how international business might be conducted. Different interpretations of “national culture”, therefore, affected the expatriate experience for the Taiwanese.

This study suggests, firstly, that, rather than being irregularities to be ignored in favour of developing a single model of a “national culture” for each nation, the contradictions and complexities of national cultures are crucial to their important role in cross-cultural management. It also indicates that researchers must maintain a greater awareness of our own role in defining and interpreting national identities, and our connections with outside political and social discourses. Finally, this case suggests that, and develops ways in which, researchers should acknowledge and embrace the concept of national culture, but as a symbolic expression of identity rather than an objective category, and should reinterpret earlier studies in this light.

**Acknowledgements**

Grateful acknowledgement is given to Ms Vicky Lee for language and translation assistance, the faculty and staff of NCCU for the opportunity to study in Taipei, and various organisations, including the Taipei Representative Office in London, the European Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce, and TAITRA, for allowing access. Funding for this project was made possible by the Nuffield Foundation (SGS/37319).

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**Table 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Gender** | **Ethnic self-identification** | **Age** | **Employment** | **Source of contact** |
| Rupert (interviewed once on own and once with Dougal) | M | Taiwanese | 70s | Accountant (ret) | World Taiwanese Chambers of Commerce |
| Wendy | F | Taiwanese | 20s | NGO employee | Taiwanese Students Association |
| Michael | M | Taiwanese | 30s | Lawyer | WTCC |
| Steven | M | Taiwanese | 40s | Civil servant | WTCC/Taipei representative office |
| Dougal (interviewed once on own and once with Rupert) | M | Taiwanese | 40s | Civil servant | TAITRA |
| Penelope | F | Taiwanese | 70 | Teacher (ret) | Buddhist temple/Food Festival |
| Paul | M | Taiwanese | 50 | Deputy managing director (electronics company) | University |
| Lali | F | Taiwanese | 40s | Entrepreneur | Food Festival |
| Trevor | M | Taiwanese | 50s | Company director | WTCC |
| Hua | F | Taiwanese | 70s | Teacher | WTCC |
| Maria | F | Taiwanese | 50s | Entrepreneur/travel agent | WTCC |
| James (interviewed with John) | M | Taiwanese | 20s | Postgraduate student | Oxford Taiwanese Society |
| John (interviewed with James) | M | Taiwanese | 20s | Postgraduate student | Oxford Taiwanese Society |
| Daniel | M | Taiwanese | 20s | Medical student | Taiwanese Student Association |
| Mr Lee | M | Taiwanese | 40s | Civil servant | Representative office |
| Mr Hsiao  | M | Taiwanese | 60s | Civil servant | Representative office |
| Carla | F | Taiwanese | 50s | Civil Servant | Representative office |
| Ruth | F  | British (ethnically Chinese) | 20s | Student | University |
| Stan | M | British (ethnically Chinese) | 20s/30s | Councillor | University |
| Franklin | M | Chinese | 50s | Community centre director | Camden Chinese Community Centre |
| Cassandra | F | Australian (ethnically Chinese) | 20s | Lawyer (trainee) | University |
| Simon | M | Chinese | 20s | Community group leader/ online manager | University |
| Carrie | F | Chinese | 20s | Community group leader | University |
| Caroline | F | Chinese | 40s | University lecturer | University |
| Blake | M | Hakka Taiwanese |  | IT manager | WTCC |
| Glinda | F | Taiwanese | 40s | University lecturer | University |

**Table 2**

**Sample Classification Scheme**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **First Order** | **Colour** | **Second Order** |
| Symbols of Taiwaneseness | Blue | Food, politics, colonialism, capitalism, language, folk art, Japan |
| Relationship with Taiwanese Business Partners | Red | KMT, TAITRA, Chambers of Commerce, university/college, family, guanxi network, other |
| Relationship with Non-Taiwanese Business Partners | Orange | Britain, mainland Chinese, other diaspora Chinese, Southeast Asian nations, mainland Europe, USA, Japan |
| Globalisation | Green | Internet, diaspora, social networking, games, aids to migration, studying abroad |
| Localism | Purple | Barriers to migration, racism/prejudice, UK culture |

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

