Seventy–Five Rotations

Chapter 2: Seventy–Five Rotations

Observer Commentary

Temporal designation: 2025 CE, or year 75 of the current separation configuration. This number—75—appears with high frequency in human discourse regarding the Taiwan question. It is deployed as evidence: "seventy–five years of separation" implies sufficient duration to establish distinct identity. Counter–deployment: "only seventy–five years" implies insufficient duration to override civilizational continuity.

The number is arbitrary.

Observation: Human generation time averages 25–30 years (interval between birth and reproductive maturity). Seventy–five years represents approximately 2.5–3 generations. For organisms with lifespan of 70–80 years, this creates a cognitive transition point: The oldest cohort retains direct memory of pre–separation state. The middle cohort has childhood memory filtered through parental narrative. The youngest cohort has no direct memory; separation is their only known configuration.

This generational shift produces measurable effects in identity formation. Survey data from the island designated Taiwan shows: – Age 70+: 35% identify primarily as "Chinese" – Age 40–69: 15% identify primarily as "Chinese" – Age 18–39: 3% identify primarily as "Chinese"

The inverse trend applies to "Taiwanese" identification. The system is undergoing phase transition as the memory–bearing cohort approaches mortality.

Subject under observation: Liu Zhengming, male, age 89, born 1936 in Fujian Province, relocated to Taiwan 1949, former high school history teacher. He represents the terminal generation—the last cohort with direct lived memory of system continuity prior to separation.

His neurons are failing. His memories are degrading. Within 10–20 years, no living human will possess unmediated memory of pre–1949 China. The

separation will transition from “lived history” to “recorded history”—a categorically different information state.

When the last organism with direct memory ceases neural function, what ontological status does “reunification” hold? Does one reunify systems that no one alive remembers as unified?

This is not a rhetorical question. The answer determines resource allocation and conflict probability.

Human Narrative

Professor Liu Zhengming’s hands shook as he poured tea, the tremor worse in the morning. Parkinson’s, the doctor had said, though Liu suspected it was simply the ordinary decay of a body maintaining coherence for longer than optimal. He was eighty-nine years old—had been eighty-nine for three months now, and each morning he woke faintly surprised to find himself still in possession of breath and thought.

His apartment was on the fourth floor of an aging building in Taipei’s Da’an District, rent-controlled for elderly residents. Through the window, he could see the elementary school across the street where he had taught history for thirty-two years before retirement. The building had been renovated since then—new paint, new signage, air conditioning units protruding from every classroom window like mechanical parasites. But the playground remained the same, and sometimes in the late afternoon he would watch the children playing and try to calculate how many students had passed through his classroom in those thirty-two years.

Perhaps eight thousand. Most would be in their forties and fifties now. A few had become scholars, politicians, business executives. Most had become ordinary adults, the history lessons he taught them compressed into vague memories or forgotten entirely.

He had taught the official curriculum, of course: The founding of the Republic of China in 1912. The war against Japan. The Communist rebellion. The tragic temporary retreat to Taiwan. The ongoing mission of national recovery.

But in his last decade of teaching, before retirement, he had begun to deviate from the script. Not overtly—he was not suicidal—but in small ways. He would linger on the Qing Dynasty’s complexity, the Manchu rulers who had been foreign conquerors and yet became Chinese. He would note that “China” had meant different things in different eras, that the borders shifted, that the very concept of a unified nation-state was a relatively recent import from European political theory.

Some students had noticed. A few had even come to him privately, asking questions that he could not safely answer in class. "Teacher Liu, are we Chinese or Taiwanese?" He had never given them a direct answer. "You are yourselves," he would say. "The categories are tools. Don't confuse the tool with the truth."

Now, alone in his apartment with his shaking hands and failing memory, he could afford more honesty with himself.

He had been born in Fujian Province in 1936, in a village thirty kilometers from the coast. His earliest memories were of war: Japanese soldiers occupying the village, his father bowing and smiling and hiding the family's rice in a false bottom beneath the kitchen floor. He remembered hunger, the particular grinding sensation of it, the way it made him irritable and stupid.

The war had ended when he was nine. The Japanese left. There was a brief period—two years? three?—when it seemed normalcy might return. His father reopened the small shop where he repaired farming tools. Liu attended school, learning to read classical texts under a teacher who had been educated in the old system and still believed in the Confucian examination tradition, though the examinations themselves had been abolished decades earlier.

Then the civil war came. Or rather, it had always been there, paused during the fight against Japan, and now resumed. Communist soldiers appeared in the village, then Nationalist soldiers, then Communist soldiers again. His father tried to remain neutral, bowing and smiling to whoever arrived. But neutrality was not permitted. In 1948, the Communists shot his father as a suspected Nationalist collaborator. The evidence: He had repaired a Nationalist officer's pistol.

Liu's mother made the decision. They would leave. She sold everything they owned—the shop, the house, her jewelry—and used the money to buy passage on a fishing boat leaving from Xiamen. Liu, age thirteen, said goodbye to the village where he had been born and thought he would die.

The crossing was a nightmare of overcrowding and storm weather. Forty people on a boat meant for fifteen. An old woman died during the passage; they wrapped her body in cloth and dropped her into the strait. Liu remembered thinking: Her bones will rest at the bottom of the sea between the two shores. She'll never fully arrive.

They landed in Keelung. His mother had a distant cousin in Taipei who agreed to shelter them. They lived in a single room, seven people total, for two years. His mother worked in a factory. Liu attended school when he could, but mostly he worked as well—loading trucks, delivering packages, anything that paid.

The government called them "mainlanders" to distinguish them from the

native Taiwanese who had been on the island during Japanese rule. The distinction meant little to Liu. He was simply trying to survive. But he absorbed the official narrative: This was a temporary refuge. The mainland would be recovered. They would return home.

Sixty years later, his mother had died in Taipei, never having returned to Fujian. She was buried in a cemetery on the city's outskirts, her gravestone facing west toward the coast, toward the province she had fled.

Liu had returned to the mainland once, in 2002, after the restrictions on cross-strait visits were relaxed. He took a tour group to Fujian, hired a driver to take him to his birth village. The village was gone. The land had been absorbed into a development zone—factories, warehouses, highways. No one he asked could remember a village having been there at all.

He stood in a parking lot where he thought his family's house might have been and felt nothing. Or rather, he felt what he imagined an archaeologist might feel discovering that a site had been bulldozed before excavation: a kind of abstract loss, intellectual rather than emotional.

The home he remembered had vanished, and the home he inhabited now—this apartment in Taipei—he had never fully claimed as home. He was a ghost caught between two shores, neither of which wanted him.

His grandson visited on Sunday afternoons. Wei-ting was twenty-six, worked in tech industry, wore fashionable designer clothes and spoke Mandarin with a Taiwanese accent that Liu still, after all these years, heard as slightly wrong—the tones flatter, the vocabulary peppered with Japanese loanwords and English borrowings.

Wei-ting arrived at two PM carrying a bag of pastries from an expensive bakery. "Grandpa, I brought your favorites."

Liu smiled. His grandson was a good boy, attentive in the way young people often weren't. Though Liu suspected the visits were partly motivated by Wei-ting's mother—Liu's daughter—who worried about him living alone.

They sat at the small table, eating pastries and drinking the tea Liu had prepared. Wei-ting talked about his work—something involving apps and user interfaces, details that Liu couldn't quite follow. Then, hesitating, Wei-ting said: "Grandpa, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"What do you think will happen? With the mainland, I mean. Everyone's talking about it. My friends think there's going to be a war."

Liu set down his teacup. "Your friends are afraid?"

"Some of them are talking about leaving. Canada, maybe. Or the US."

"And you?"

Wei-ting looked away. "I don't know. This is my home. I was born here. My whole life is here. But I don't want to die for—" He stopped.

"For what?" Liu prompted gently.

"For something I'm not even sure I believe in."

Liu was quiet for a long moment. Then he said: "When I was your age, I believed we would retake the mainland. It was what we were told, and I believed it. I thought I would return to my village, reclaim my father's shop, live out my life where I was born."

"But you didn't."

"No. And the village doesn't exist anymore. The home I wanted to return to was already gone before I ever tried to go back. Maybe it was gone the moment I left."

"So what does that mean? That we should just let them take Taiwan too?"

Liu shook his head. "I'm not saying that. I'm saying—" He paused, trying to organize thoughts that felt increasingly difficult to hold in order. "Identity is a story we tell ourselves. When I was young, I was told I was Chinese, and Taiwan was a province of China, and we were temporarily separated. That story felt true because everyone around me told the same story."

"But it wasn't true?"

"It was true in the way stories are true. It organized reality. It gave meaning. But now you tell a different story: You're Taiwanese, this is your country, the mainland is a foreign power. That story feels true to you because everyone your age tells the same story."

Wei-ting frowned. "So you're saying neither story is real? We can just choose?"

"No," Liu said slowly. "Stories become real when enough people believe them and act on them. If enough people believe Taiwan is a separate country, then it functions as a separate country—until someone with more power forces a different story."

"That's depressing."

Liu smiled faintly. "I'm eighty-nine years old. I've lived under four different governments: Qing-era remnant village structures, the Republic of China on the mainland, Japanese occupation filtered through my parents' memories, and the Republic of China on Taiwan. Each government claimed to be the legitimate continuation of the previous one, or the rightful replacement, or the temporary custodian. Each government told me who I was: Chinese,

subject of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chinese again, Chinese but specifically the authentic Chinese in contrast to the Communist imposters."

"Which one was right?"

"None of them. All of them. The governments came and went. I remained myself—whatever that means."

Wei-ting was silent, absorbing this. Then: "Do you think of yourself as Chinese or Taiwanese?"

Liu looked at his grandson's face, young and unlined, shaped by confidence that came from growing up in peace and prosperity. How to explain that the question felt unanswerable not because he was uncertain but because the categories themselves seemed increasingly fictional?

"I think of myself as someone who has lived too long," Liu said finally. "I'm a refugee who never found home. I'm a teacher who taught history that kept changing. I'm a man who speaks a language that divides people into us and them, but I'm no longer sure which category I belong to."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Liu agreed. "It's not."

After Wei-ting left, Liu sat by the window and watched the sun set behind the mountains. His hands had stopped shaking—they always calmed in the evening—and he let his mind drift.

Seventy-five years. He had lived almost all of them on this island. His children had been born here, his grandchildren. His wife, dead now six years, had been Taiwanese, born during Japanese rule. Her parents had resented the mainlanders, the newcomers who took government jobs and acted superior, but she had married him anyway. Their marriage had been a minor transgression against categorical boundaries.

Their daughter had married a man whose family had been on the island for eight generations. Wei-ting was three-quarters Taiwanese by ancestry, only one-quarter mainlander, and yet still he carried the Liu family name, the mark of mainland origin.

What did that fraction mean? If identity could be quantified by genealogy, at what percentage did one category flip to another? Was Wei-ting Chinese or Taiwanese? He spoke Mandarin and Hokkien both, consumed American media, worked for a company with Japanese investors. He was a hybrid, a mixture, a person who existed at the intersection of multiple stories that claimed to define him.

Liu thought: In a hundred years, will anyone care about these distinctions? Will anyone remember that there was a split, a separation, a trauma?

Or would it all blur into history, the way the Manchu conquest had blurred—once violent and immediate, later an interesting footnote about the Qing Dynasty's foreign origins?

His memory was failing. He knew this. Sometimes he would forget where he had placed his keys, or forget why he had entered a room. More disturbingly, sometimes he would forget entire decades. The 1970s existed in his mind as a vague smudge. He could recall individual events—his daughter's birth, the death of Chiang Kai-shek, the U.S. breaking diplomatic relations—but the connective tissue between events had dissolved.

If his memory was failing, if the specific details of his life were degrading into noise, then what remained? What was the essential core, if any?

He didn't know.

He thought about the old woman who had died on the boat during the crossing in 1949, her body dropped into the strait. Her bones resting on the seafloor, calcium deposits in the mud, no marker or memorial. In the water between the two shores, neither here nor there.

Maybe that was the truth of it. Maybe all of them—mainlanders and Taiwanese, Chinese and not-Chinese—were caught in the middle, in the crossing that never fully completed.

The sun finished setting. The room darkened. Liu didn't bother turning on the lights. He sat in the twilight, his shaking hands folded in his lap, and waited for sleep.

Observer Commentary

Duration of narrated events: 6 hours. Cognitive transformation in observed organisms: Minimal. Yet the conversation between organisms Liu Zhengming and Wei-ting represents significant data regarding generational phase transition.

Observation: The elder organism (Liu) exhibits advanced state of identity indeterminacy. After 75 years and extensive exposure to multiple classification systems, his cognitive commitment to any single identity category has degraded. He recognizes identity as "story"—a cognitive tool rather than ontological fact. This recognition has not produced liberation but rather a form of paralysis, an inability to commit to action based on any identity-derived value.

The younger organism (Wei-ting) seeks categorical clarity that the elder cannot provide. "Are we Chinese or Taiwanese?" The elder's response—"You are yourselves"—is accurate but functionally useless. Organisms require coalition markers to navigate social reality. Refusing to declare category membership appears philosophically sophisticated but operationally impairs resource acquisition and protection.

This represents the central dilemma of this text: Detached perspective reveals identity as constructed, yet organisms cannot function without identity-derived motivations. To see clearly is to be paralyzed.

Observation on memory decay: The organism Liu experiences progressive neurological deterioration. His memories—the substrate of his claimed identity—are dissolving at biochemical level. Synaptic connections pruning, neurotransmitter efficiency declining, protein misfolding accumulating. Within 5-10 years, the organism will experience sufficient neural failure to cease function.

When he dies, his memories die. The embodied knowledge of pre-1949 China, of the crossing, of the early years of separation—all encoded in neural tissue that will decompose into constituent molecules. His grandson Wei-ting has received compressed, simplified narrative transmissions, but the rich textural detail of lived experience is not transmissible. It will be lost.

In 20 years, all organisms who experienced the 1949 separation as adults will be dead. The event will transition from living memory to history—from embodied knowledge to textual artifact. This transition has measurable effects on identity formation.

Consider: Currently, some organisms claim connection to "mainland China" based on family migration history. But as generations progress, this claim weakens: - Generation 1 (Liu): Direct memory of mainland - Generation 2 (Liu's daughter): Childhood filtered through parent narrative - Generation 3 (Wei-ting): No direct memory; only inherited story - Generation 4 (Wei-ting's potential children): Abstract historical knowledge equivalent to learning about any historical event

At what point does "reunification" become incoherent? If no living organism remembers prior unity, is "re"-unification the correct term? Or is it simply conquest?

Terminology matters. The semantic content of "reunification" includes assumption of prior legitimate unity. If this assumption lacks support in living memory, the term functions as political propaganda rather than descriptive language.

Projection: As memory-bearing generation reaches mortality, political justification for "reunification" loses embodied foundation. This creates strategic urgency: The window for "reunification" framed as restoration of natu-

ral order closes within 15–20 years. After that point, any integration attempt must be justified on different grounds—economic efficiency, strategic necessity, civilizational continuity—none of which carry the emotional weight of "restoring what was wrongly separated."

This explains observed acceleration in mainland pressure: Time is not neutral. Each passing year makes the narrative of natural unity less plausible to organisms without memory of unity.

The observed organism Liu Zhengming represents a closing window. His memories are the last unmediated bridge to pre-separation state. When he dies, the bridge is gone. What remains is interpretation, argument, competing stories—but not memory.

Alternative framing: Perhaps memory is irrelevant. If identity is socially constructed, then it can be socially reconstructed regardless of memory continuity. The mainland government's position implicitly acknowledges this: "Taiwanese" identity is described as "brainwashing" or "temporary confusion," implying that correct "Chinese" identity can be reinstalled through sufficient propaganda and institutional pressure.

This is theoretically accurate. Identity is software. Software can be overwritten.

The question is whether overwriting can occur peacefully or requires violent reformatting of the system.

End observation log.

[Chapter 2 Complete]