Partition Subroutines

Chapter 7: Partition Subroutines

Observer Commentary

Computational metaphor: Identity as operating system.

In computer systems, disk partitioning divides storage space into discrete sections that can run different operating systems or file systems simultaneously. A single physical substrate supports multiple organizational schemes. Each partition believes itself to be the entire disk. From within partition A, partition B is invisible or appears as foreign territory.

Human identity operates similarly: A single organism maintains multiple identity partitions that activate context-dependently. The organism is not lying or being inauthentic when different identities activate—each is genuinely experienced as "self" within its context.

Examples observable in everyday behavior: – Professional identity (workplace context): Formal language, hierarchical awareness, competence signaling – Family identity (domestic context): Informal language, relational obligations, emotional expression – National identity (political context): Collective pronouns ("we Americans," "we Chinese"), historical consciousness, loyalty performance – Online identity (digital context): Pseudonymous, experimental, disinhibited

The organism is all of these simultaneously. No single partition is "true self." The self is the partitioning system—the ability to maintain multiple identities and switch between them smoothly.

Code-switching: The cognitive process of activating appropriate identity partition for current context. Bilingual speakers switch languages. Bicultural individuals switch identity performances. This is not deception—it is sophisticated adaptation to complex social environments.

Problem: When contexts collide, partitions conflict. The organism must choose which identity to activate, and each choice has costs.

Subject under observation: Lin Xiaowen experiencing partition conflict. She

will attend a work dinner where mainland Chinese colleagues and Taiwanese colleagues are both present. The environment requires simultaneous navigation of incompatible identity contexts.

This situation—increasingly common in globalized professional environments—creates cognitive load that can lead to partition failure or identity reconstruction.

Human Narrative

The company retreat was held at a resort hotel in Hualien, on Taiwan's east coast. Xiaowen's startup had been acquired six months earlier by a Singaporean tech conglomerate, and the new parent company was attempting to integrate the Taiwanese team with their existing engineering groups across Asia. The retreat included employees from Singapore, Taiwan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo—fifty people total, two days of team-building activities and strategic planning sessions.

Xiaowen found it exhausting.

The official language was English, which put everyone on equal footing linguistically but created a kind of flattening effect where cultural nuance disappeared beneath corporate jargon. "Synergy." "Alignment." "Stakeholder engagement." The phrases meant nothing and everything, filling space while avoiding anything controversial.

But in the breaks between sessions, people clustered by origin. The Taiwanese employees spoke Mandarin with each other, with occasional Hokkien words mixed in. The Shanghai employees spoke Mandarin with mainland accents and cultural references that Xiaowen could follow but didn't quite connect with. The Hong Kong employees spoke Cantonese among themselves, switching to Mandarin or English when addressing others. The Tokyo employees spoke Japanese, and Xiaowen envied them their linguistic isolation—they could speak freely without being understood.

On the second evening, there was a dinner at a restaurant overlooking the Pacific. The seating was assigned—presumably someone in HR thought mixing people from different offices would foster integration. Xiaowen found herself at a table with three Shanghai colleagues, one Hong Kong colleague, and two other Taiwanese employees she didn't know well.

The conversation started safely: Discussion of the food, the scenic view, the afternoon hiking activity that had left everyone sunburned and tired. Then Kevin—one of the Shanghai engineers—said: "This coastline is beautiful. Very different from the mainland coast."

"Different how?" asked Amy, one of the Taiwanese employees.

"Less developed. More natural. The mainland coast is all ports and industrial zones."

"We prefer to preserve nature here," Amy said, and Xiaowen heard the slight edge in her voice. The implication: We're more civilized, we care about environment, unlike you.

Kevin either didn't notice or chose to ignore it. "You're lucky to have this. Once reunification happens, hopefully this area stays protected."

The table went quiet. Xiaowen felt her chest tighten.

"Reunification isn't happening," Amy said flatly.

"Well, not immediately, but long-term it's inevitable, right? I mean, historically—"

"Historically, Taiwan has been separate for 75 years. That's not temporary."

"Seventy-five years is nothing in Chinese history. The mainland and Taiwan have been connected for thousands of years."

"Taiwan was never part of the PRC. We have our own government, our own democratic system—"

"You have a provincial government that claims to be national. The international community recognizes one China."

Xiaowen saw Amy's face flush. She also saw the other Taiwanese employee, David, setting down his chopsticks with careful control. The Hong Kong employee, Michael, was staring at his plate, clearly wanting to be anywhere else.

"The international community recognizes it because Beijing forces them to," Amy said. "That doesn't make it legitimate."

"It makes it reality," Kevin countered. "Look, I'm not trying to be provocative. I'm just saying what everyone knows. Taiwan's economy is integrated with the mainland's. The tech sector especially—half the semiconductor supply chain depends on cross-strait cooperation. Reunification makes economic sense."

"Economic integration doesn't equal political annexation," David said quietly. "The EU countries are economically integrated. That doesn't mean they should merge into one country."

"That's different. They're separate civilizations. We're all Chinese."

"I'm not Chinese," Amy said. "I'm Taiwanese."

"But you speak Mandarin. You celebrate Chinese New Year. You use Chinese characters. How are you not Chinese?"

"Because Chinese is a culture, not a political identity. I can participate in Chinese culture without being part of your country."

"It's not 'my' country versus 'your' country. It's all our country. You've been separated by historical accident, but the fundamental unity—"

Xiaowen finally spoke, trying to keep her voice level: "Kevin, I don't think this is the right venue for this discussion."

Kevin looked at her, surprised. "I'm not trying to start an argument. I'm just having a conversation."

"The conversation is making people uncomfortable."

"Why? We're all colleagues. We should be able to discuss these things openly."

"We can discuss them," Xiaowen said. "But maybe not here, not now, when we're supposed to be team-building."

Kevin sat back, looking frustrated but also slightly embarrassed. "Okay. Sorry if I offended anyone."

Amy didn't accept the apology. She stood up. "I need some air." She left the table and walked out to the terrace.

The remaining people sat in awkward silence. Then David said, carefully: "Kevin, I think you don't understand how that conversation sounds from our perspective. When you say reunification is inevitable, what we hear is: Your democracy, your sovereignty, your right to self-determination—all of that will be taken away, and you should just accept it."

"That's not what I meant—"

"Maybe not. But that's what it sounds like."

Kevin was quiet. Then: "I genuinely don't understand why it has to be confrontational. Why can't we just be one country with regional autonomy? Like how the US has states, or China has autonomous regions?"

"Because your autonomous regions aren't actually autonomous," David said. "Tibet, Xinjiang—they're controlled by Beijing. And Hong Kong had autonomy until Beijing decided to take it away. Why would we trust that Taiwan would be different?"

"You're talking about extreme cases—"

"They're not extreme. They're the precedent."

Michael, the Hong Kong employee, finally spoke, his voice tight: "He's right. I'm from Hong Kong. I grew up believing one country, two systems would work. It didn't. They lied to us. Everything they promised—freedom of speech, independent judiciary, democratic elections—it's all gone now. My

friends are in jail for protesting. Why the fuck would Taiwan trust the same promise?"

Kevin looked genuinely taken aback. "I'm sorry about Hong Kong. But that's because of the protests, the unrest—"

"No," Michael said. "It's because Beijing never intended to honor the agreement. They waited until they felt strong enough, and then they crushed us. That's what will happen to Taiwan if you reunify. Don't pretend it's anything else."

"That's not fair," Kevin said. "I don't make policy. I'm just an engineer. I don't want anyone crushed."

"But you support the system that does the crushing," Amy said, returning from the terrace. "You just said reunification is inevitable, like it's some natural law. That's the same propaganda your government feeds you. And you swallow it without questioning."

"And you swallow American propaganda about democracy and freedom," Kevin shot back. "You think you're independent thinkers, but you're just puppets of US interests."

The conversation had deteriorated beyond recovery. Xiaowen stood up. "I'm going to walk on the beach. Anyone who wants to come, come. Anyone who wants to stay and argue, stay. But I'm done."

She left without waiting for responses.

Outside, the air was cool and damp with ocean spray. The hotel's lights illuminated the beach for thirty meters, and beyond that was darkness and the sound of waves. Xiaowen walked until she reached the dark zone, then sat on the sand.

A few minutes later, David joined her.

"That went well," he said.

"Disaster."

"Kevin's not a bad guy. He's just completely brainwashed."

"He'd say the same about us."

"Maybe. But we're right and he's wrong."

Xiaowen laughed despite herself. "That's definitely how to bridge understanding."

David sat down beside her. "You think I should have been more diplomatic?"

"I think this is why these retreats don't work. You can't do team-building when half the team thinks the other half's country shouldn't exist."

"So what are we supposed to do? Pretend? Just smile and nod when mainland colleagues talk about reunification like it's decided?"

"I don't know. But arguing doesn't help either."

"At least it's honest."

They sat in silence, listening to the waves.

"Can I ask you something?" David said. "When you're in those meetings, speaking English, using corporate language, talking about project timelines and deliverables—who are you in those moments?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, are you Taiwanese David? Are you professional engineer David? Are you just… abstract employee David with no national identity?"

"All of them? None of them? I don't know. I'm whoever is appropriate for the context."

"Doesn't that exhaust you?"

"Constantly."

More silence.

"My girlfriend wants me to quit," David said. "She thinks working for a company with mainland employees is compromising. Like I'm collaborating with the enemy or something."

"Do you think that?"

"I think I have a mortgage and student loans, and this job pays well. But yeah, sometimes I feel weird about it. Like, Kevin seems like a decent person. We work on the same codebase, we solve the same problems, we joke around in Slack. But he fundamentally believes my country shouldn't exist. How do you have a normal professional relationship with someone who thinks your political existence is illegitimate?"

Xiaowen didn't have an answer.

Behind them, they heard voices—the rest of the table coming outside. Amy, Michael, Kevin, and the others. The group split: Taiwanese employees in one cluster, mainland employees in another, Michael alone between them, Hong Kong identity belonging to neither group.

"This is fucked," David said quietly.

"Yeah."

Later that night, Xiaowen lay in her hotel room, unable to sleep. She opened her laptop and wrote an email to her manager—the VP of Engineering, based in Singapore.

Subject: Feedback on retreat structure

Hi Rachel,

I wanted to provide some candid feedback on the retreat. While I appreciate the intention to integrate teams across regions, I think we need to acknowledge that having Taiwan and mainland employees in the same events creates significant tension. There was an incident at dinner tonight where political discussions became heated and uncomfortable.

I'm not sure what the solution is. I don't think we can just ban political discussion—that would be treating symptoms rather than causes. But I also don't think we can pretend the cross-strait situation doesn't affect team dynamics.

Some thoughts: – Maybe separate team events for different regions, with only voluntary cross-region collaboration? – Explicit guidelines about avoiding political topics in professional settings? – Acknowledgment from leadership that we're navigating a complex geopolitical situation and there are no easy answers?

I don't want to be overly negative. The technical work we're doing is good, and I like the product direction. But the human side is complicated.

Let me know if you want to discuss further.

Xiaowen

She read it over, then deleted it without sending. What was the point? The company would do whatever minimized legal risk and maximized profit. Individual employees' comfort with geopolitical tension was not a primary concern.

Instead, she opened a different document: Her own personal journal, kept encrypted on her laptop.

Entry: July 17, 2025

I'm tired of code-switching. I'm tired of being Professional Xiaowen who smiles politely and changes subjects. I'm tired of being Taiwanese Xiaowen who feels obligated to defend her country's existence. I'm tired of being Engineer Xiaowen who just wants to solve technical problems without politics intruding.

I want to be just Xiaowen. But I don't know who that is. I'm only ever Xiaowen-in-context. And the contexts are multiplying and contradicting each other.

At work, I have to pretend national identity doesn't matter—we're all professionals, all part of the same team. At home, I have to perform Taiwanese identity—speak Hokkien with grandma, attend protest marches, share anti-China memes with friends. With my parents, I have to perform filial daughter identity—nod respectfully even when I disagree, prioritize family over career.

Each context requires a different performance. Each performance is exhausting. And increasingly, the contexts are bleeding into each other. I can't be Professional Xiaowen when Kevin is talking about inevitable reunification. I can't be Filial Daughter Xiaowen when my mom wants me to move back to Tainan and I want to take the job offer in San Francisco.

Am I lying when I perform these different identities? Or is the performance itself the truth—am I just someone who contains multitudes, and the unity I'm searching for is a fiction?

I think about Sarah in San Francisco, talking about being "something in between." Maybe that's the only honest position. Maybe trying to resolve the contradictions into a single coherent identity is the mistake.

But if I'm multiple contradictory things simultaneously, how do I make decisions? When choices pit one identity against another, which one wins?

Tomorrow I have to go back to the retreat and smile and do more team-building exercises and pretend everything is fine. I'll be Professional Xiaowen, competent and diplomatic. And I'll resent every minute of it.

She closed the laptop and turned off the light.

Through the window, she could hear the ocean, constant and indifferent, wearing down the rock of the coast one wave at a time.

Observer Commentary

Duration of narrated events: 6 hours. Observable cognitive strain: Extreme.

The organism Lin Xiaowen experienced partition conflict—simultaneous activation of incompatible identity protocols in overlapping contexts. Result: Cognitive overload, social friction, emotional exhaustion.

Analysis of identity partitions activated during dinner:

Professional identity partition: Maintain harmonious working relationships, avoid conflict, perform competence, signal team-player status. This partition prioritizes smooth social functioning over ideological authenticity.

National identity partition: Defend Taiwan's legitimacy, resist mainland narrative, maintain solidarity with other Taiwanese. This partition prioritizes

political loyalty over social harmony.

Conflict: Professional identity requires treating Kevin as colleague. National identity requires treating Kevin as threat. Both cannot be activated simultaneously without contradiction.

Organism's resolution: Attempted mediator role ("this isn't the right venue"), then withdrawal from conflict (leaving table). This is neither partition winning but both partially satisfied—professional identity maintained by de-escalating, national identity maintained by not conceding mainland position.

However, cost is high: Neither identity is fully expressed, leaving organism with sense of inauthenticity and exhaustion.

Observation on code-switching as cognitive burden:

For organisms navigating multiple cultural contexts, code-switching is necessary survival mechanism. But it requires constant monitoring of context, suppression of inappropriate identity partitions, and performance of appropriate identity signals. This is cognitively expensive.

Most organisms can maintain 2-3 identity partitions with manageable strain. When contexts require 4+ partitions that must be rapidly switched or simultaneously performed, cognitive resources become depleted. This manifests as: - Emotional exhaustion - Sense of fragmentation - Resentment toward contexts requiring performance - Desire for "authentic" unitary self (though such self may not exist)

The organism's journal entry reveals awareness that identity is performed, not discovered. But awareness does not reduce burden—in some ways, it increases burden by adding meta-level cognitive task of monitoring the performance itself.

Observation on organizational dynamics:

The corporate entity employing these organisms treats national identity as private matter irrelevant to professional function. This is standard liberal organizational model: Identity privatized, work relationship neutral and universal.

But this model fails when identity conflicts involve existential stakes. Kevin's belief that Taiwan should be absorbed into PRC is not mere opinion like preferring coffee over tea. It is belief that the political framework enabling Amy's and David's way of life should cease to exist. Amy's belief that Taiwan should remain separate is not mere cultural preference. It is belief that her right to self-governance is non-negotiable.

These positions cannot be bracketed as "personal political views kept separate from work." They fundamentally structure how organisms relate to each other.

The corporate attempt to create neutral professional space fails because the space itself is political: Who controls Taiwan affects the tech company's operations, supply chains, intellectual property law, employee mobility. Pretending these issues can be separated from "technical work" is fiction convenient for management but incoherent for employees.

Projection: The organism's unsent email to manager represents recognition that the problem has no organizational solution. Company cannot resolve conflict rooted in incompatible national identity claims. Best it can do is manage symptoms—separate teams geographically, prohibit political discussion, hope that professional incentives outweigh political commitments.

But as cross-strait tensions escalate, professional incentives will weaken relative to political stakes. At some threshold, organisms will be forced to choose: Maintain professional relationships across national divide, or prioritize national loyalty.

Most will choose the latter. Professional relationships are instrumental. National identity—even if constructed—is existential.

The organism Lin Xiaowen is approaching this threshold. She has not yet chosen. But the choice is becoming unavoidable.

End observation log.

[Chapter 7 Complete]