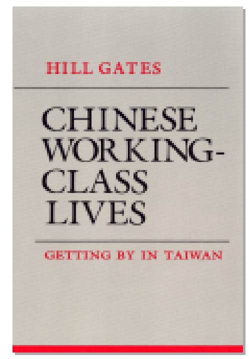
Chinese Working-Class Lives

Hill Gates



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Introduction

American production workers are increasingly being replaced in the world division of labor by workers from countries with lower wages, fewer freedoms, and different cultural assumptions. As any shopper knows, Taiwan is one of the most successful of these countries. Taiwan's textiles, finished garments, shoes, electronics, toys, and other products fill the shelves of our stores; much U.S. military equipment is also made in Taiwan. Typically, the factory workers who manufacture or assemble these goods are young people who are not yet supporting children and come from families with varied occupations that can partially protect them from the booms and busts of a capitalist labor market; therefore, they can work for the low wages that have drawn American and Japanese capital to Taiwan. For the most part, factory workers belong to households that prepare their daughters and sons to be obedient, hard-working, and frugal and to communities in which many will later build various careers. Taiwan's industrial labor force is socialized by and contributes to a working-class culture that still draws heavily on Chinese tradition and on the historical experiences of the past eighty years of outside domination.

Taiwan's working-class culture, the subject of this book, sharply differentiates the island from the many Third World countries whose economies remain trapped by the heritages both of imperialism and of aspects of their indigenous cultural patterns which render them vulnerable to capitalist exploitation. Taiwan's place in the international division of labor depends heavily on the historically specific cultural, social, economic, and political patterns that have shaped its working class. This book is an attempt to define that working class, explore its history, and introduce some of the men and women who have carried on its traditions and given it an ever-changing shape.

The nine Chinese people who illustrate working-class culture in this book have lived their lives in a rapidly industrializing complex society with a developed market economy, good communications networks, public schooling, and many other "modern" institutions. The people of Taiwan, like those of the United States, are organized into a nation-state with a powerful government that shapes their economy, their educational system, and their social relations. Although they often identify closely with a "home town," whether a remote mountainside village or a crowded city neighborhood, they are also affected by and conscious of the country as a whole, the China mainland, and Taiwan's international position. The parochialism and autonomy of life lived outside the control of the state vanished from Taiwan almost a century ago. In this sense, too, Americans have much in common with the people of Taiwan.

Taiwan's society encompasses a great range of social positions, from the extreme wealth and power of the ruling Jiang family to the marginal existences of beggars and petty thieves. Most people, of course, exist somewhere in between, as white-collar workers, professionals, technicians, shopkeepers, factory hands, farmers, and the like. About three-quarters of the population can be considered working class, a category made up of people who work with their hands, earn relatively little, and have little education or social prestige. Some own small family businesses; others work for wages; most will have done both over a lifetime.

The nine women and men whose lives will be explored here have led typical working-class lives, centering on work and family. As nearly all of them are elderly, we may observe a long stretch of varied experiences over the same period of time. They are direct, hard-working, unpretentious people, more like most Americans—although they are also very different from us—than are the more highly educated Chinese elite. Taken together, accounts of workers' lives reveal much of the world in which ordinary Chinese have lived in this century.

That world has changed rapidly. The expansion of Japan's colonial empire to include Taiwan, the fall of the last Chinese imperial dynasty, the Communist revolution, and the emergence of Taiwan as a separate and economically thriving country have all been felt directly by these people, as has the greatly increased power of the United States in the Pacific basin. For them, the United States not long ago was only a distant market for local teas; now they are one of its most vigorous competitors on the Pacific rim.

Since the early 1960s the island has enjoyed an economic boom that has given its people the second-highest standard of living in Asia, after that of Japan. Taiwan's working class helped build this new economy with their exertions in the rice fields, the factories, the food-processing shops, and the export-import companies. As entrepreneurs, as patient assemblers of electronic gadgets, as sheer muscle, they created wealth and kept it in Taiwan for reinvestment and further growth. The island's "economic miracle" has attracted much attention and admiration and is therefore a hopeful and positive example of economic betterment in a world with all too few similar cases. Taiwan owes its success in part to the energy and resourcefulness of its people and to the complex cultural patterns that can be glimpsed through our sample of working-class lives.

The "economic miracle" should not be overstated, however. As the reader will learn, the second-highest standard of living in Asia is not, by middle-class American standards, very high. Taiwan's people must still work hard and step lively to earn their daily rice and to put a little by for their old age. For the working class, the family is the only social safety net; so families remain central to people's lives. Old customs, such as the lavish funerals and folk celebrations that link households into communities and supportive networks, still make practical sense. Although social movement "upward," into the world of mental rather than manual labor, is possible through education, the competition for more prestigious and secure jobs is extremely stiff. Most young people must therefore continue to rely on relatives, friends, and neighbors for future jobs and job training and for credit and guidance, as did the nine people discussed here. Social and cultural change has occurred as Taiwan's economy altered, but the more obvious changes—events that might be described as "Westernization"—do not much affect the working class. Extreme individualist and consumerist values are ones they cannot yet afford and do not much admire.

Economies do not "act" or "change" by themselves, although it must often seem that way to people who have little voice in major public decisions. In Taiwan, a powerful government, often strongly supported by U.S. military and economic might, has played an important role in the direction the island's economy has taken. In particular, the government has employed political power to limit working-class opportunities for expressing different views and opposing the official strategy. In the perhaps inevitable struggle between those who own or manage significant resources and those who only labor on them, Taiwan's governments have always stood with the former. Since the Nationalist regime came to power there in 1945, both obvious and subtle instances of state violence against the populace have made working-class people cautious about political participation and expression. Rumors and memories of this violence deeply affect working-class culture in ways that almost all my subjects touched on while recounting their life experiences.

Chapter 2 presents a necessarily rather personal account of how I collected my data. The intimacy and trust necessary for the collection of life histories is not easily achieved, particularly because I was especially interested in learning about a politically sensitive period in Taiwan's history—the transition from the Japanese to Nationalist control. The discussion of my field method allows the reader to evaluate the circumstances within which these materials were gathered. An ancient Chinese wisely told us that "a gentleman is not an instrument," not simply a tool to be used, but a whole person. Neither is an anthropologist.

Chapter 3 examines the four historical migrations that have populated the island of Taiwan and given form to its present society. Austronesian-speaking Aborigines, south China peasants, Japanese colonialists, and the refugees of the Communist revolution on the Chinese mainland have all contributed to working-class culture in Taiwan. In Chapter 4 we see the changing economy of the Nationalist period shaping both ethnic and class relations and responding to the socially repressive political imperatives on which the power of the rulers rests.

Thereafter, following brief discussions of work (Chapter 5), kinship (Chapter 6), the roles of women and men (Chapter 7), folk religion (Chapter 8), and education (Chapter 9), I introduce the real subjects of this study: nine working-class women and men whose lives have told me more about the realities of Taiwan than all the documents of progress their government so enthusiastically publishes. The thematic introductions that begin these later chapters outline only some of the issues that Taiwan scholars have investigated. A great deal has been written, for example, on both Chinese kinship and folk religion in Taiwan, which must in turn be viewed in the context of the enormous literature on these subjects drawn from ancient and modern Chinese society in China proper and from the experiences of the multitudes of overseas Chinese who have migrated to every continent. A sketch of some of those resources will be found in Source Materials on Taiwan, following the conclusions drawn in Chapter 10.

As I listened to the telling of these lives, my inner responses to them wavered between "Yes, that seems perfectly natural" and "My, how strange!" Perhaps the reader will feel the same way. If the task of anthropology is to uncover and explain what we humans share and why we differ, such responses make a good beginning to the understanding of Chinese culture and to what it contributes to the way our world works.