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Chinese Working-Class Lives

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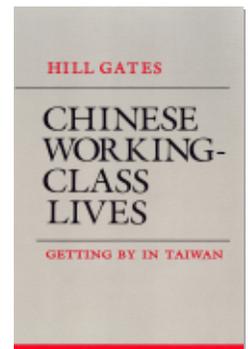
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Women and Men, Old and Young

An old gentleman well versed in religious lore once described the characters of the important local deities, the Earth God and his wife Madam Earth God, in a way that summed up much of what ordinary Taiwan people believe about masculinity and femininity. The Earth God, he told me, would like to give everyone who prays to him good fortune, for he is a benevolent being who fair-mindedly responds to the prayers and gifts of food, money, and incense made by sincere worshippers. Madam Earth God, however, blocks good fortune for some people. "If everyone got what they wanted," she argues with her husband, "who would come to worship us, carry our chairs in festival processions, and make us offerings?"

This, the old man told me, reflects Chinese men's and women's characters. Men strive for harmony, justice, and goodness, while women are "narrow-hearted" in outlook, selfish, and mercenary. Men value the spiritual, women the material. Mr. Gao might also have pointed out, though he did not, that these characterizations of the commonest of Taiwanese gods also suggest that while men are supposed to be responsible for important decisions, women have much actual control. Although women apparently have less prestige and power, they often get their way nonetheless.

Although ideas of "femininity" and "masculinity" are cultural constructs, Taiwan's working-class people believe women and men to be fundamentally very different because of differences in human biology. The biological behaviors specific to women—menstruation and childbirth—are seen as disgusting, unclean, and polluting both to the woman experiencing them and to anyone who might come in contact with the body fluids associated

with these states (Ahern 1975:194–95). In a ritual performed by an especially filial son for the funeral of his dead mother, Daoists explain menstruation by reading the following texts to the participants:

. . . a woman has within her the eighty thousand *yin* worms, which collect in her vagina. These worms have twelve heads and twelve mouths. When they feed, each sucks raw blood. Day and night they move about, wearying muscle and bone. Midway through the month, they slough unclean fluid. Each of these worms vomits pus and blood out of its mouths. Each exudes blood and pus that has a red color. These ulcerous worms: their mouths are like sharp needles, and they regularly afflict women, eating raw blood, irritating each other, ceaselessly crawling, disturbing a woman, making her body unable to calm itself. This is the result of karmic retribution, for which there is no surcease. (Seaman 1981:387)

Birth, too,

. . . is an unclean thing: a woman's body is an unclean collection of worms' pus and blood, which comes together and collects. Ten months it ripens between the two viscera, entrapped, pressed into a female prison.

. . . .

There is only the stench of shit, where the fetus develops for so long.

And this life can only enter and leave through a woman's vagina. (Seaman 1981:389)

These publicly declaimed texts “explain” and justify the distaste that men and women feel for women's genitals and the fluids they emit. This distaste is so strong that women themselves are reluctant to discuss such matters, referring, if pushed, only to the “dirtiness” their bodies produce. While birth control is widely used, the diaphragm, which requires a woman to touch her own genitals, is not available. When I described it to close friends as superior in safety to birth control pills or the intra-uterine device (I.U.D.) they looked rather ill. Men, it would appear, are made extremely uneasy by the thought of contact with female “uncleanliness.” Even intercourse is seen as polluting to men, who must abstain from it in preparation for certain ritual activities. Some gods, too, would be offended if a menstruating woman, or one who had given birth within the month, were to cross their temple's thresholds; domestic altars, with their collections of ancestor tablets and gods' images, should never face bedrooms where intercourse occurs. Mrs. Zhang, good Catholic though she is, reprimanded me sharply for hanging my just-washed underpants out of doors “where they would offend Heaven.” She always hung such items under an awning.

While female body functions and fluids are seen as signs of weakness, male ones are signs of bodily and mental strength. Male sexual potency is generally taken as a sign of good health and well-being, and its loss or diminution creates considerable anxiety, at least if we are to judge by the extremely large numbers of medicines sold to "restore vigor"; drugstores are full of them. Foods, too, are eaten carefully for the effect they are thought to have on virility. In restaurants that specialize in freshly killed snake—for an American, one of the more unusual sights of a Taiwan city—male patrons dine amidst cages filled with squirming tangles of encouragingly lively reptiles.

Biological differences are believed to be responsible for the mental and emotional differences between women and men personified in the Earth God and Madam Earth God. Men are capable of higher virtues, finer feelings, closer friendships, and more filiality than women, but women corrupt them—partly through sexual enticement. Because of their "better natures" men should hold positions of responsibility and authority in the family and the wider society, while women should accept their leadership and stay close to home. This does not mean, however, that they should be ignorant of economic matters, for "home" has important economic functions. A woman's very "narrow-heartedness" may make her a sharp bargainer, a shrewd investor, and an astute businesswoman. Such qualities are admired in women, and in many households it is actually the wife/mother to whom the working husband and children give their wages, receiving pocket money in return.

The lives of our subjects show clearly how self-reliant in money matters many working-class women are. Mrs. Zhang and Miss Ong (this chapter) largely support their husbands and children, while the independent Miss Guo both earns income and has charge of the rental houses she and her "old lover" share; Mrs. Lo was the only support of her children for years.

Three factors inform the strong differences the Chinese believe to exist between men and women: the patrilineal structure of families, a pervasively dualistic world view, and the unequal treatment women receive. In their strongly patrilineally organized families, Chinese law and custom make men the main owners and transmitters of property and the most central family members. Women, necessary to reproduction and family continuity, must be taken into the family in marriage or given out to other families. While a man may live his entire life in the family of his birth where all his loyalties are focused, a woman's emotional attachments are divided among her family of origin, her husband's family as it exists when she marries into it, and the new family of origin she will create for herself, her children, and her husband. Adopted daughters-in-law, of course, are less torn between their family of birth and their husband's family if they are reared from

infancy by their mothers-in-law, but most know their birth parents and feel ambivalent toward them (M. Wolf 1972:177). And all married women who become mothers confront the conflict between the primary loyalty their parents-in-law expect of them and the warmer affections they feel toward their children (and, possibly, their husbands). In complex families, where several married brothers share a household, conflicts often arise among the brothers' wives over treatment of their respective children, as each tries to secure the best for her own. Families are pressured to divide, often because in-marrying women cannot possibly acquire the simple, overriding loyalty to their husbands' patriline that develops more straightforwardly in men. In short, women are believed to complicate and sometimes subvert patrilineal families. When, through extremes of self-sacrificial filiality, they do not actually do so, they nevertheless remain suspect. Because the patrilineal structure treats women as outsiders, they are naturally expected to be untrustworthy, even dangerous.

Following the lead of Mary Douglas (1966:174–75; see also Ahern 1975), we can argue that in such situations, the disruptive category—women—is likely to be seen as “out of place” and dangerously “polluting” to the “regular” category—men. Those aspects of physiology most characteristic of women—menstruation and childbirth—thus come to symbolize the lurking, hidden dangers of women.

We may also locate Chinese views of women and men within the wider context of a pervasive dualistic world view. All Chinese know at least superficially of the Chinese concepts of yin and yang. The Daoist version of this tradition (see Black, 1986 for others) teaches that the cosmos exists through the interaction of two great opposing forces: yin, which appears in the moon, darkness, death, women, and other “cold” things, and yang, which stands for the sun, light, life, and men. Out of their oppositions, the real world is made. Each needs the other, but the yin and yang are also antagonistic forces. While not everything that contemporary Taiwan people encounter can be classified as yin or yang—the dualism relates mostly to the natural world—people generally *assume* that most things must be either yin or yang. Things exist in dialectical relationships to their opposites. Cultural categories for “women” and “men” are almost automatically entangled in this world view, with women and men categorized as antagonistic opposites.¹ As men were the ritual specialists and the creators of their written tradition, it is mostly men who have defined the terms of the opposition—generally in their own favor.

1. Eugene N. Anderson, Jr., in his research on food and nutrition (see Anderson 1983), has written extensively on the Chinese tendency to overgeneralize intellectual paradigms.

Finally, Chinese people also see women as dangerous and unreliable because of the inferior treatment they receive. In many societies, people who are socially oppressed and therefore resentful are feared by others and believed to be witches (Gluckman 1955:94). Chinese women are not often cast as witches, but they are believed to be a source of danger to their families, endowed with the capacity to poison men through the secret introduction of menstrual blood into food (Ahern 1975:197; Harrell 1986). People cannot, I think, oppress those near them without being aware of the hostility that oppression generates and suspecting their victims of vengeful thoughts. If Chinese men are to control Chinese women, they need beliefs that can be used to convince both women and themselves of female inferiority. Uniquely female activities are therefore obvious symbols for such supposed inferiority.

Socially oppressed people may, to a degree, accept their lot and acquiesce in their own inferiority; but at the same time they may resent such treatment. Several Chinese women have told me of early childhood experiences of receiving less food or love or attention than their brothers, and of how it hurt to realize that they were less valued simply because of their sex. A Taiwanese woman, at her engagement celebration—a formal affair, conducted by her parents, and very binding—crooks the finger onto which her mother-in-law or husband tries to force an engagement ring. This is a struggle over the young woman's submissiveness—over whether she will allow herself to be completely dominated in her new family, as befits a woman. Though Chinese women often share the view that they are deficient, compared with men, they also harbor some hostility at the limits placed on them and, as the engaged woman's little struggle indicates, sometimes resist them.

While beliefs about men and women can in part be perpetuated through folklore, rituals, customs, and laws, Chinese women and men must also learn, as children, the behaviors that their culture considers appropriate for their gender. The socialization of girls and boys into gender roles begins early, continuing as people mature through various phases of life.

Boy babies are greeted in most families with far more joy than are girls. And if a girl baby comes at the end of an unbroken line of older sisters, she will be spoken of more as a nuisance than, as boys are, "your little precious one." Boy babies are often photographed by professional photographers in a favorite pose—seated with legs wide apart, so the little boy's genitals are prominently displayed through split-crotch trousers.

The greater value placed on boy children is not concealed as the child reaches the age when it begins to understand speech. I once asked a shopkeeper-father how many children he had.

“Three. Here are Number Two and Number Three. Old Number One is at school.”

“And who are these two little girls?” (about three and five years old).

“Oh, they’re my daughters. But we Chinese consider that girls aren’t worth much, so we don’t count them.”

The little girls followed this conversation with bland faces. They had probably heard it before.

Many working-class families realize that a child who attends a preschool or kindergarten before enrolling in elementary school will find adjustment to school easier and may have a competitive advantage over other children. These cost money, however, and many families conclude that while the expense is worthwhile for a little boy, it cannot be considered for a girl. In 1974, for example, there were 60,314 boys enrolled in preschools and only 50,663 girls (DGBAS 1974:534–35). Preschool children who do not attend kindergartens play in or near home, especially if they live on a busy city street, but little girls especially are kept close by, often to help with the care of younger siblings. A five- or six-year-old with a year-old baby strapped to her back is a common sight. As they grow older, little girls help more, unless they seem to be exceptionally clever in school, in which case they are spared housework and urged to study extremely hard, as was Mrs. Lim. Boys roam farther, are more likely to have bicycles, and are rarely asked to help with housework or baby care.

Elementary school is coeducational in Taiwan, and most teachers, firm but kindly with their little charges, reinforce sex-role socialization. Children are taught a great many formal lessons that draw on relationships in idealized, elite families where Baba (father) goes out to work at the office, Mama stays home in a bungalow with a garden, keeping house, while Gege (elder brother) prepares for college and Jiejie (elder sister) arranges flowers. Songs and dances are an important part of training for social poise; children delightedly give performances in which boys are brave soldiers defending the island against Communist bandits, and girls are television stars, complete with plenty of makeup. An elementary school education of six years is all that many girls receive. While in 1974 about 98 percent of all children attended elementary school, only 76.7 percent of girl elementary-school graduates (as compared to 91.28 percent of boy graduates) went on to junior high (DGBAS 1974: Supplementary Table 6).² Many parents still argue that while a boy’s education benefits his family, a girl’s benefits only her hus-

2. More recent educational data from this source is compiled in ways that obscure the differences between girls’ and boys’ educational attainments by combining junior and senior high enrollment figures.

band's. Fewer children, especially girls, attended school under the Japanese, but their descriptions of that schooling are remarkably similar in respect to female/male socialization (see Tsurumi 1977:120–22, 219–20).

While boys have more worth and, often, enjoy greater privileges in their families, they also hold greater responsibilities. The first son, especially, grows up knowing he will have to lead his family, support his parents, and help his younger siblings get settled in life. He will inherit the primary duty of maintaining ancestral rites for a descent line that stretches back into the dim past. His family's future depends both on what he can accomplish himself and on how well he can hold them together. Until he is a mature man, however, he will have to consider his parents' wishes as to whom he should marry, what level of education to pursue, and what occupation to take up.

Since the 1950s young men have also come under the control of the state when, at eighteen, they are eligible for military service. The three years of service for draftees can be a real hardship, especially if they are sent to the heavily fortified islands of Quemoy or Matsu just off the mainland China coast, where discipline is tight, home is far away, and escape from the totally militarized environment is impossible. Even the prostitutes there, it is said, are government issue. Like young women, young men still have relatively few independent choices.

Some limitations on girls and women which at first appear to be gender-based are due instead to the strong age hierarchy in Chinese families, where generational seniority counts for a great deal. By the time women and men reach their forties, they have acquired maturity, social judgment, and control over the junior generation of young adults—their children. At the same time, the children's grandparents, now into their sixties, are beginning to turn over most family responsibilities to the parents. In the contemporary working class, older men seem eager to retire from their laborious jobs in favor of their juniors and are often willing, as well, to leave much of the family decision making to their sons. And, although Chinese like to brag about how authoritarian their fathers were, I suspect that many working-class men in the past were also glad to give up the back-breaking labor necessary to support a family as soon as their sons were old enough to replace them, even if this diluted their power in the family.

Older women, by contrast, are often far less willing to delegate real authority to daughters-in-law, holding on to the family purse sometimes well into senility. Mothers-in-law, however, can certainly transfer duties they do not care to perform to their juniors and indulge themselves a little in afternoon gambling sessions or week-long pilgrimages to distant temples with their women friends. I was often struck, especially in shopkeepers'

families, by the contrast between the sleek, plump mother-in-law, with her beauty-parlor hairdo, jade earrings, and clean attractive dress, and her harried, slatternly daughter-in-law, trying to cook, mind the shop, market for vegetables, and look after a couple of toddlers—all while burdened with a nursing child in her back sling and another baby on the way.

Young women, clearly, are in a doubly weak position at the bottom of both the age and the gender hierarchies. Taiwan's large industrialists, foreign and domestic, have capitalized extensively on the low status of young women by recruiting them as the cheapest labor. The docility and low expectations into which their families socialize women make them ideal candidates for the boring, low-paid, and even dangerous factory jobs on which Taiwan's economy has grown.

Even so, young people have more autonomy than in the past. In marked contrast with the lives of my subjects, who grew up prior to the industrial boom of the sixties, Taiwan's young people today, when they are not studying or working, have a relatively lively life. Movies are extremely popular: Taiwan has an enormous film output and imports many films from Hong Kong and the United States, as well. Theaters are always packed. Students and young workers gather in coffee shops, fruit-and-ice parlors, cheap restaurants, and the noisy, colorful night markets that offer food, drink, and the possibility of excitement until late in the evening. Since the midseventies the government has actively promoted recreational activities for young people, encouraging schools, churches, and the Nationalist Party Youth Corps to organize camping, mountain climbing, and seashore visits for their members. Senior-year school trips to the island's famous scenic places are high points in many lives. Dancing is very popular despite the fact that the Nationalists have banned it, in a haphazard sort of way, as inappropriate to the "wartime conditions" and a threat to the morals of the young. Consequently, "underground" dance studios and private dances in buildings under construction were common until restrictions loosened in the eighties. Young people, who are no longer forced into unwanted marriages and often have a little money to spend on fun, seem generally to feel rather satisfied with their freedom and opportunities. Many view American young people's sexual freedom, tendency to marry without parental consent, and political activism with the same disapproval as their elders.

Sex roles in Taiwan are profoundly paradoxical, as these life histories repeatedly hint. While society's ideals attribute power, responsibility, virtue, and strength to men and their opposites to women, in this collection of fairly typical people we see a number of strong, capable women and rather weak and limited men. Especially in the cities, in the real interactions of

family life we can perceive the workings not only of the patrilineal, patripotent ideal, but also of a contradictory pattern.

Although most families hope their sons will be strong and responsible and their daughters timid and submissive, they often appear to raise children as though they aimed for the opposite result. Boys are given little responsibility at home compared to girls in their youngest years, so that girls receive considerably more practical training in useful tasks and in taking responsibility, within the limited sphere of the family itself. In more recent times, girls are often out earning income in factories, learning at least a little about adult life "out in society," while their brothers are still schoolboys. While teenaged girls go through a period of intense shyness in front of strangers, they quickly learn businesslike and even assertive behavior when given the responsibility of a job as a salesclerk, bus-ticket taker, or waitress. Many young married women live for a time in a household headed by an older couple. If that couple is over fifty, it is very likely that its balance of power will have shifted to the older woman, especially if her husband has retired from active work. A young wife learns her new role, then, from a mother-in-law who keeps the purse and may run a business, makes the ritual offerings, and often dominates not just her but the entire family. Men, conditioned from childhood to avoid closeness with their fathers but to rely heavily on their mothers for emotional support, guidance, and practical help, come to accept their wives in a similar role.

A Japanese psychiatrist has written of his own countrymen that the child's feeling of *amae*, "sweet dependency" on the mother, is a common, normal, and even desirable emotion that is often reexperienced with power figures in adulthood (Doi 1973). A kind of privileged childishness and rejection of responsibility similar to *amae* may exist between older men and their capable wives among Taiwan people. In a good relationship, such "sweet dependency" can be very positive; in a poor one, a woman's emotional strength is easily seen as threatening and even as sinister. There are, then, two sides to sex-role relationships in Taiwan's working class: the patriarchal ideology, constantly reinforced by messages from school, the economy, and the state, and the female-dominant behaviors that are so frequently acted out in parent-child and wife-husband interactions within families themselves.

In summary, the Chinese define masculinity and femininity as attributes of biological nature, but they also make efforts to socialize the young in patterns of behavior and response considered culturally appropriate for each sex. Definitions of gender roles change as adults perceive changes in the society around them: it is now believed, for example, that girls benefit from education, which enables them to get better jobs, rather than that

their femininity will be harmed by learning, as Chinese of previous centuries have believed. But that women and men are both very different and unequal in intrinsic worth remains a constant in Chinese culture, which the increasing participation of women in the workforce has done little if anything to undermine (Diamond 1979; Kung 1983). Nonetheless, even in this patriarchal tradition, contradictions in behavior and belief point to the power that older women at least wield in their families.

The relationships between older and younger people are more consistently unequal than those between the sexes in present-day Taiwan. Here too, however, the economic changes of this century have widened the options of the young. Though young folks have more fun than they formerly did, filial obligation, *xiao*, still requires that a son—or an adopted daughter—must prepare to help support parents in their old age. Although Taiwan's recent history has brought fluctuations in the tendency for young people to exercise more control over their own lives, in practice the life choices of education, marriage, and occupation leading to the ability to do one's filial duty are increasingly made by the younger rather than the older generation.

In this sample of working-class people, we meet people of both sexes whose lives have centered around work and family. Four of the women have contributed as much as or more than their families' menfolk to the families' economic support, while the fifth (Mrs. Lim, Chapter 9) has also earned some income. All are outspoken women whose opinions carry weight at home; all have borne children and hence hold the honored position of mother. Today, all are linchpins in their households, and some are important members of much wider social networks. After a lifetime spent in low-paid, low-status, and often physically exhausting jobs, these women display the characteristics that so strongly shape Chinese working-class style: resilience, diligence, and practicality. Of the four men subjects, two have founded families, built businesses, and retired to secure old ages. The two others, largely for reasons outside their control, were less successful. Mr. Zhang's retirement future depends on his wife's earnings, and Mr. Kang (this chapter) is a "bare stick"—a man with no family, property, or prospects. Several of them seem lonely and discouraged.

Two of the men who told me their life histories are former military men who came from mainland China to Taiwan after the failure of the Nationalist cause, and two are native Taiwanese—both retired small-building contractors—who have lived all their lives within a few miles of Prosperity Settlement. But they are four very different men. Mr. Zhang (husband of the energetic cook) has rural roots in frontierlike southwestern China, which was then rather like Taiwan of the last century, while Mr. Kang, the

other Mainlander, belonged to a shopkeeping family in one of China's most modern cities. Taiwanese Mr. Kho, beneficiary of a Japanese education and a convert to a Japanese religion, would have little to say to his fellow islander, Mr. Go, who has made use of the flashier elements of local folk religion to further his second career as a political bagman; but a frank political conversation between the more sophisticated Kho and Kang would reveal many ideas in common.

The men in this study, like the women, tell us of their families and work experiences, but they also speak more directly and at greater length than the women about wider issues: the war against the Communists, Japanese colonial policy, Taiwan politics, organized religion. These are matters on which men, who properly go "out in society," may have opinions. While it is a little unseemly for women to discuss politics—religion is an acceptable topic—men enjoy demonstrating their level of education by being conversant with current events and recent history.

People judge an older man's success in life partly by the size and efficaciousness of the network of contacts he has built outside his immediate circle of kin and neighbors. A man, telling his life history, will stress these ties, while a woman may ignore her network, useful though it may be, and emphasize family matters. In forming networks, gender is important, for though even a poor man may have some associates to claim, many women lead rather socially restricted lives within their families and neighborhoods. Working as a servant or dishwasher offers few more opportunities to meet and ally oneself with others than caring for a family as a wife/daughter-in-law. Men servants, of course, work under the same limitations.

Chinese men spoke to me through a filter of dignity that forbids expression of emotion. Even more than for women, opportunities to express feelings, and hence to analyze and elaborate on them, come rarely in their lives; their histories lack almost completely any references to emotion. Behind the composed faces, however, these men suffer deeply the loss of a young son, a beloved old wife, or a native homeland, and rejoice quietly in the birth of healthy grandchildren, or Taiwan's increasing international standing.

Although Chinese culture unquestionably gives higher status to men than to women, even in the family, it is hard to discern this from these lives where brothers, sons, and husbands are frequently depicted as weak, lazy, ailing, or irresponsible. This perception is partially true: families with ineffectual menfolk are likely to remain "ordinary," even poor, because Chinese society is structured to channel advantages to men rather than to women who find themselves supporting a family. But women, even in better-off families, often view themselves as having special strength to

endure suffering, work hard, sacrifice selflessly, and make family-oriented, practical decisions (like stealing to support one's children) that a "superior" man might have too much dignity to choose.

Miss Ong and Mr. Kang, whose life histories follow, are not "typical" people, if such people indeed exist. A young married woman who supports her husband and an old man without a family to give him status and support are anomalous in Chinese society, almost the antithesis of the cultural ideals. They thus remind us of the elusive quality of such ideals and how imperfectly reality exemplifies them. As a Chinese woman should, however, Miss Ong has fulfilled her cultural destiny through un hoped-for motherhood, and like the Confucian scholar who epitomized the past ideal of manhood, Mr. Kang braces himself against his inevitable and unenviable retirement with self-cultivation and a consideration of the wider sweep of history.

Kang Weiguo: Old Bachelor Soldier

Kang Weiguo, a Mainlander in his early sixties from Shandong province, is a retired soldier and the beneficiary of a low-paid government sinecure. He is loyal, like Mr. Zhang, but he is more skeptical than the air force mechanic of the ultimate rightness of his government's decisions. Nothing he has done on Taiwan has enabled him to found a family there, so he faces a lonely and rather uncertain future in a state-run old veterans' home. He accepts with good humor the narrowness of his daily activities and the rarity of any kind of pleasure or entertainment; he remembers living under far worse conditions. A whole generation of aging retired soldiers such as Mr. Kang will fade out of Taiwan's society in a few years, leaving no living representatives of the Nationalist era in continental China to insistently remind the young that their primary task is to "retake the Mainland."

Mr. Kang chatted with me nearly every day for several months while I visited in the government-run library where he works and lives. A pleasant-faced, balding man with a bumpy, broken nose and a cheerful disposition, he is both intelligent and well-informed, spending several hours each day reading the newspapers and magazines. He has the personality that Chinese describe as "round and slippery"—always on guard against intrusion, leaving no "handle" by which his inner nature can be apprehended. While he found out a great deal about me, he initially revealed very little about himself in these conversations, which he always pleasantly and humorously steered to impersonal topics.

I was astonished, then, when one morning he began to volunteer his life

history as a contribution to my study. On three successive days, he told his tale, answered questions, and offered some of the frankest political commentary I had heard in Taiwan. Then he stopped. Having said what he had chosen to say, he returned to his pleasant, impenetrable pose. We never had another real conversation.

Many people in Taiwan hold jobs like Mr. Kang's, with its light work and ample leisure. Government bureaus, post offices, schools, railway stations, power plants, and so forth commonly employ former Mainland soldiers to sweep up a bit, to heat water for tea and to steam-warm metal lunch boxes, to fetch and distribute mail, to keep an eye open for crime or subversion, and to mention their suspicions to higher-ups. Such jobs are prized by men with no relatives and few friends in Taiwan, for they bring the dignity of association with a respected and powerful institution, as well as free shelter and a reliable, if low, wage. Better a cot in a railway station baggage room where one has a place and workmates than a solitary rented cubicle miles from work and from the chance of some daily sociability. The leisure such jobs afford is attractive as well, giving even the near-illiterate time to puzzle over the party's abundantly supplied copies of the *Central Daily News*, to gamble a little at cards, or to watch the world go by.

Many less well-off old soldiers, like those who still squat in an abandoned Japanese temple a few blocks from the library, live a quasi-military life of rustling up their own food, washing their own socks, and depending on odd jobs and what the government gives them for their livelihood. It is a way of life with all the discomforts of transient living but none of the excitement or novelty.

Mr. Kang is fortunate compared with many in this refugee fraternity. Unlike some quietly desperate men, whose simmering resentment boils over in perpetually angry voices and jumpy body movements, or whose cloak of depression is very nearly visible around them, he accepts his fate with dignity and courteous cheer. Too thoughtful to be a simple loyalist, he is also too wise to complain and too cultivated, in a way Chinese value deeply, to show feeling.

I was born in 1919 in the city of Qingdao, to a family that had land in the countryside and a peanut-oil business in town. We sold oil and other regional products on the national and international markets, so my family was an ordinary one, not poor but not really rich either.

I was the youngest of three brothers and also had two older sisters. When I was little, I studied for about two years at home, where in the evenings my brothers taught me what they knew of reading and writing from the classics. It wasn't easy to study, because then, of course, we had no electric lights,

and ordinary people couldn't even afford candles. I used to sit at the table with my two sisters, reading while they mended and made the family's clothes. Studying that way was very slow, and I didn't learn much. As often as I could, I'd run away from the books and play.

Seeing I was no student, my father started me working in the business. He thought I should learn everything from the bottom up, because he feared I would become spoiled and wasteful of money. So I worked with the other two apprentices at the lowest work—sweeping up, running errands, moving stock—while my father, elder brothers, and two uncles managed the accounting and the customers. When things went wrong, if the other apprentices got beaten, I did too. I ate with them most of the time, but I slept inside with the family, not out front in the shop with the hired workers.

I never developed much of a taste for doing business, where a shop-keeper has to haggle back and forth with buyers constantly. It's not that it's dishonest—after all, everyone has to look out for his own interests—but it's not straightforward and clear. Also, the risks of loss are great, so each member of the family who works in the business has a big responsibility to bear for the family's future prosperity. I might have learned to like business, but I don't think so. I prefer to work for our country.

When I was eighteen, my family got a wife for me. We were together for only a few years and had three children. She was a pretty, quiet girl from the countryside, and we came to be quite happy together, although in those days it was very embarrassing for young married people to show their affection. We were teased a lot at first, and even scolded for being light-minded. My mother liked my wife because she was hard-working and dutiful and caused no trouble.

I suppose after I left she married someone else, because she would have thought I was dead. The children—who knows what happened to them? It's all so long ago now that I just feel that some must have lived, some must have died. I can't possibly influence them now, so it's better not to know about them. It would be possible, perhaps, to ask someone with contacts to find them for me. I've often thought of it. Such things are easier to arrange now than in former years. Anyway, if I contacted them, it would simply cause trouble for them.

I never married over here because I am too poor and useless for a woman to want me! And, so, of course, I'm alone, getting older all by myself.

During the war I had another chance to marry, though. When I was stationed somewhere in the south, I met an old lady who treated me extremely kindly and wanted me to marry into her family as an adopted son-in-law, taking her family's name. She gave me a lot of really good things

to eat—chicken, eggs, everything—but I didn't dare marry her daughter. In the first place, they were farmers. I had never done any farm work, which is very hard work and a hard life. In the second place, the Communists at that time were only a little way to the north; I knew they'd be along soon and didn't want to be caught behind their lines. So I didn't marry that time. If I had done it, I suppose I'd be in some People's Commune now, going hungry.

The year I was eighteen—which was 1937—I entered the army. I was just an ordinary soldier, so life was hard. The food was not always adequate, especially for us hungry young soldiers. We weren't paid regularly, though I noticed the officers always had plenty of money, and the discipline was very harsh. While I was stationed in Shandong I could get home sometimes, but after a few years we were sent to the northeastern provinces—the Dongbei. There was very fierce fighting in the Dongbei—first against the Japanese, later against the Communists.

A lot of Shandong people had migrated back and forth between home and the Dongbei, so the foods and ways of life were somewhat similar, though of course the climate is very different. Our Qingdao is in a place where just 20 kilometers south it is warm enough to raise water buffalo, though up at Qingdao itself you can't, because they'd freeze. The winters are long and the summers short, so the peasants grow mostly wheat and millet. But the Dongbei is *really* cold: in the winter, your spit freezes before it hits the ground. Up there, we ate maize that was particularly good—I've never eaten such good maize anywhere else. They cracked the kernels to make gruel, and we ate that a lot, but we also ate *gaoliang*, soybeans, and millet—the coarser, mixed grains—which are very nutritious. I used to miss our good Shangdong sweet potatoes, which are especially tasty in late winter—very sweet. Sometimes the army gave us rice, and I would trade my rice ration for that good maize. It really had a fine flavor!

Up there in the Dongbei, there were some terrible battles after the Japanese surrendered and we were fighting the Communists. In one of the worst of them, we killed 300,000 Communists, and we lost only 100,000 men. It went on for days, the air was black with smoke; you couldn't see or hear for the guns, and people were dying on all sides of me—you can't imagine it. And *after* the battle, everywhere you saw the soldiers holding liquor-soaked handkerchiefs over their faces, because the smell was so dreadful. *Such* a stink—hundreds of thousands of dead men. You simply couldn't breathe in that stench.

I fought a lot in the Dongbei, often being the only survivor of a group that had been badly hit, but I was never even wounded. It was almost a miracle that I received no injury of any kind. While I was at war, I was always very

careful not to do any bad things—I didn't steal things from the people, or mess with their women, or hurt people. After a while, I began to be sort of superstitious about it, afraid that if I *did* do any of those things, Heaven would stop protecting me. I was careful, and I came through that whole dangerous time without any wounds. After the Dongbei, we went to Nanjing, Shanghai, Suzhou, back to Shanghai, and finally from there to Taiwan.

The war was so hard on the ordinary people! We went south and then north again, and on the way back, there was simply nothing left because so much had been looted or destroyed. We in the army had food, at least, and we would take things from farms to eat, killing the peasants' cows and pigs and chickens. If we ran into an enemy, well, he had a gun and I had a gun, so we were on equal terms. But the people—they just had nothing and no way to protect themselves. Soldiers would see a peasant, raise their guns, and knock him off—no one knew if it was an honest peasant, an enemy in disguise, a bandit, or what. So many people died.

Once, after the war against Japan was over, when I was near enough, I went home for a while. At that time, people would jokingly say that if the Communists caught one of our soldiers, they'd paste a stamp on him and mail him home. It was almost like that. If they caught you, they'd feed you, and ask you where your home was. Then they'd write it all down, and give you a paper telling exactly how to travel to go home. There were stopping places where you could rest and eat free. I had been told by someone I knew at home that if I went home, he absolutely guaranteed that the Communists, who controlled Qingdao at that time, would not hurt me. I thought I'd try it, so I went. After I arrived, I reported to my friend, who said all I had to do was to come to a meeting that was held for us government soldiers who had returned home. "Can I rest for a while first?" I asked. He said that I could take as long as I liked—seven or eight days—then come. At the meeting, we were all supposed to get up and *tanbai*—confess—the bad things we had done as soldiers. A lot of men talked about what they had done, but to tell you the truth, because of my superstition, I really hadn't done things like that. I stole a few chickens and some other small things, but nothing much, really. I told about those, and everyone said that was fine, now I had cleared my conscience. But soon, they asked me to go to another meeting and confess more. After that, there was a third meeting, and I began to worry about what would happen to me.

At that time, the Communists were getting things very organized. When our government conscripted troops in Shandong, it had taken only a few men from each place, but now the Communists got *all* the men between eighteen and fifty-five either to work in supply and transport units, or to go

into their army. My two elder brothers were put into supply units and must have died, because a friend who visited Qingdao recently says he was told they never came back. I went south and rejoined our army instead.

When I left, though, I didn't just leave. I had brought a pistol back home with me, which I kept hidden in the house. One night there was some trouble, so I used the pistol to threaten some people. I told them to lie down on the floor for half an hour and not get up. While they were doing that, I slipped out and got away. So now you see why I don't want to contact my family back there. With that kind of personal history, there would be trouble for them. It's better that I leave them alone.

The Communists really used terrible methods when they got in power. With people who were loyal to our government, they hoisted them up on a high pole, hanging from their hands, which were tied behind them, and asked them if, from way up there, they could see the central government coming to rescue them. Everyone screamed at them to speak. After they said something, those holding the rope let go, and the person dropped to the ground and was crushed to death. In that and other ways, they killed hundreds of thousands of people after 1949.

In 1949 my unit was in Shanghai, so I was among the troops that came here. There must have been hundreds of thousands who were left behind because they were in the wrong place or in the wrong unit. That evacuation and the early years in Taiwan were real chaos. It was a continuation of the war. For a long time—years—we were always alert to the danger of Communist invasion. I see now that they were not strong enough to come over here, as they lacked ships and airplanes, but then, the threat was a real part of life. After all, there was nowhere else for us to retreat to. And, to be honest, we would not have received much help against them from the natives of Taiwan province then. It was the same as back on the mainland, where the local peasants didn't know anything about the great events of the nation but just feared and hated us soldiers because we disturbed their lives and took what we needed to survive from them.

Now, relations between Taiwanese people and us mainland people are much better. They understand they are Chinese and should support the central government. Taiwanese people have by now grown rich because the policies of the government were correct. Then, however, things were very different. These people were still very much influenced by the Japanese. To see a rich Taiwanese speaking Japanese, wearing some of their Japanese wooden shoes, and reading Japanese books made me furious! I had fought the Japanese in the Dongbei and had seen the damage they had done in our coastal cities. This hatred was very deep in my heart.

Dealing with natives was inconvenient, too. They couldn't speak the

national language at all when our troops first came. By the time I arrived in 1949, it was not much better. Even if they could understand, they sometimes pretended not to, just for spite. Once, when I lost my way in Xinzhu City where I was stationed for a while, I had to ask more than twenty people before someone clearly told me the right road to return on. Some refused to answer, others pretended not to know.

Taiwanese people are also very sharp in their business dealings. They sold things to us at high prices, but we had to pay them—there was no one else to buy from. Sometimes soldiers got so angry that they just took things without paying. Occasionally, one had to hit people. I was careful, myself, because I still had my superstitious feeling that my safety depended on being honest.

Anyway, most of our needs were supplied by the army. We got rice, though it was that short, nasty Japanese variety they eat here. I'll never really enjoy that. For a while, we lived in temporary shelters, but then there were barracks. For years, though the money they gave us was so little that you couldn't even get drunk properly very often, I always had enough to eat and wear. As life slowly got easier, I also stopped worrying about an invasion and began to feel more at ease here.

I went into the army originally because I was drafted, but also I felt it was right. We were fighting the Japanese; the country needed me. After I got to Taiwan, I served till I was forty-two years old. By then I didn't see any reason to go on serving, since there was no more war.

I retired and found a job at this government-run library through a Shandong officer's connections. I live here, sharing a room with the other men workers, and eat here. The wages aren't high, but the work isn't hard either. I keep the rooms clean and tidy, make sure there is boiled water in the vacuum bottles, take out yesterday's newspapers and put out today's. Sometimes I wash the floors and windows. I get every other Tuesday off, but I usually spend the time here anyway. I earn NT\$6,000 (U.S.\$150) a month, which is very little, but room and board are free, so I can save most of the wage. I also get a little over NT\$1,000 (U.S.\$25) in pension money from the army to save for my old age. It was raised to that level in 1975; before that it was only a few hundred.

While I was still in the army in Taiwan the government and army encouraged us old soldiers who were illiterate to learn to read. If you have books, a dictionary, and a little help, you can learn to read yourself. After all, it's my own language. Now at work I read the papers often and discuss events with my fellow workers, which passes the time. Of course I watch television here a lot too—the news is interesting, and I like some of the children's programs, like cartoons, because they're humorous.

It's always interesting to follow the news and try to figure out what is

really going on behind the scenes. Things are not always exactly what they appear to be, you know. For example, what was the real meaning of the riot down in Gaoxiong last year?³ Were those Taiwanese politicians really secretly supported by the Communists, or did they have some other motive? Most of them are businessmen, so how can they be Communists?

We know that the Taiwanese would like to form their own party and run candidates for election to national-level offices. But we can't allow that, because they would win the elections—there are so many Taiwanese—and then, what would happen to us? A Taiwanese president would see everything in favor of his people, and our Mainlanders would be in a very weak position. We might not be welcome to stay here. At the very least, many of us who have loyally served the central government would lose our jobs, maybe our pensions.

All the same, we also know there are Communists hiding among us. Every once in a while, I hear of Communist propaganda leaflets being put secretly at night into people's mailboxes. Sometimes this happens in the most expensive suburbs where lots of wealthy retired generals and other officials live. I don't think anybody pays much attention to such stuff, but someone must be printing and distributing it. And every now and then, one of our air force officers takes a plane and defects to the mainland.

The Communists are clever. They work on people who long to return to their original homes. Recently, I read in the papers that an old Mainlander taxidriver was arrested for spreading Communist propaganda. Sometimes the police report finding caches of guns and knives. Are they for gangsters, for Communists, or for some Taiwanese secret opposition? Things are very, very complicated when you look beneath the surface. Generally, it is best not to discuss such matters.

I was very sick three years ago with a kidney ailment. They operated on me for more than eight hours, removing my kidney. I didn't come to for three days after that, but then it wasn't too bad. However they fed me intravenously for nearly a month afterward. My health has returned now, and I am still strong. Because I'm a veteran, my stay at the veteran's hospital was free. If I had family members here, they would pay half-rates at that hospital. If I weren't a veteran, I could have labor insurance at this job, which would pay some of the expense. As far as health goes, I'm taken care of.

However, when I get too old to work things will be difficult. The pension

3. A group of supporters of a recently banned Taiwanese magazine rallied in Gaoxiong City on December 10, 1979, to demand freedom of the press and human rights. Riot police surrounded them, a struggle ensued, and the protesters were jailed. The imprisonment of the most famous participant, Shi Mingde, is viewed by Amnesty International as a purely political act (Formosan Association for Human Rights 1985:39).

I'll get from the library—NT\$1,800 (U.S. \$45) a month—will be enough for food but for nothing else. I guess I may have to go to a veterans' old folks' home. I'd rather not live there—it might be possible to live nearby and go there for meals. Anyway, I'm only sixty-one years old, so I have a few more years of good health.

Life really is easier for me here in Taiwan now than my whole life before. This island is very prosperous; so many advances have been made in providing good food and a good life for people. Take apples—we used to have to import them, and they were expensive! Now we can buy a whole pile of local ones for the price of a meal. They haven't managed nearly as well on the mainland. I see the newspaper accounts, and you can tell that there are a lot of shortcomings. I will say this, though—the present bunch they've got running the mainland⁴ is a great improvement over the way they were before, under Mao Zedong. They're talking about having a proper legal system and doing business in the regular way—naturally that's an improvement. They just did whatever they wanted to in the past—not at all scientific.

Ong Siukim: A Mother after All

Ong Siukim is Taiwanese, in her mid-thirties, and remarkable. She is married but keeps her maiden name for old friends, as the more educated Chinese women often do, and she still astonishes me with her Chinese version of true grit. With a minimum of external help and some very well-timed luck she has overcome family insanity, dire poverty, and paraplegia to become a self-supporting craftswoman, a wife, and a mother, her life a Buddhist fable of undeserved punishments and unexpected rewards. Her style of speaking, and even more of writing, contributes to this religious image, for she has been deeply influenced by inspirational literature, from Buddhist sutras⁵ to Dale Carnegie.

There is nothing visibly “spiritual” about her, however. A solid-looking woman with a square, thickening face and home-cut hair, she beetles her brows to see clearly through eye-exaggerating and ill-fitting glasses. Having seen little of the world, and having had few choices because of real poverty, she dresses in oddly assorted bright colors, looking gay in her dark rooms. With her serene, meaty baby on her lap, she is a sturdy, pyramidal madonna, a tough plant surviving in a crack in the concrete.

4. Led by Deng Xiaoping.

5. Religious writings.

The apartment she came to in married life is one of hundreds in her industrial suburb, all five stories tall and crammed into every available space around a huge American-owned electronics factory. These sleazily constructed complexes house thousands of persons per acre in small dark rooms with heavily barred windows. Ground-floor apartments are colonized by tiny industries and shops; the hum of machinery and the convenience of local marketing and haircuts are built into the neighborhood. On days when the air pollution is low enough, the graves of the dead can be seen packed as densely on the brushy hills above this little valley as the living are below.

The apartment, newly furnished in inexpensive modern furniture—a plastic-upholstered sofa and chairs, a coffee table, Western beds in the bedrooms, a refrigerator—is far grander than Miss Ong's natal home, with its homemade benches, bedrooms floored in tattered tatami matting, and smoke-stained rafters. The new rooms were wallpapered by the builder in a large, olive-drab pattern, but the paper is peeling from the top, and for some weeks it hung in great festoons from the ten-foot ceiling. Zhang Wenlong, her husband, finally ripped most of it off above eye level. The kitchen—a sink with a cold tap, two gas rings on a low concrete platform, a few shelves—is a tiny alcove opposite the Western-style bathroom. Both are thoroughly grubby, a consequence of Miss Ong's busyness and physical limitations, of the unwillingness of her husband and sister to tend to such matters, and of the toleration for dirt and disorder the poor are forced to develop in their crowded and inadequately plumbed dwellings. As in any large city where housing density makes extermination impossible, vermin flourish, with roaches and rats the most conspicuous among them. The family washes its clothes in the bathtub, where a small gas-heated contraction supplies water for bathing, and hangs them on bamboo poles in the dank air-shaft courtyard.

Miss Ong's art is displayed casually in the living room, pictures lined up along the walls, as yet unhung. The bedroom she, her husband, and the baby share is bright with the colorful bedding Chinese brides require (to keep their spirits up, one suspects) and with photographs and small, treasured souvenirs of her wedding trip. Her sister's room, like any teenager's, is plastered with magazine pictures of the pale, infantile, and pampered cuties marketed as movie stars and pop singers in Taiwan. As in most cheap housing, there are no closets, so the meagerness of her possessions is apparent, though young Taiwanese women are mad for clothes, especially shoes.

All this is Miss Ong's domain, and she knows it. Her husband, well on his way to gangsterhood, has done nothing yet to match the contribution to the

household made by his wife's dowry and income. She is boss, although she tries, before company, to defer to his presumed masculine authority. The birth of her son insures her against his opportunism, for he loves both the child and the idea of his own fatherhood, though his affection for his wife is waning. Against all odds, Miss Ong has won.

Because she is confined to her home by her handicap and is younger than the other subjects, she knows less than they about Taiwan's recent social history. Until she married, she had hardly ever been out of the house in which she was born. But her experiences reveal something of the lives of people who do not even have the advantage of a fully functioning body in a society where the poor must usually labor for a living. Miss Ong's unusual marriage and motherhood underline the importance people attach to founding one's own family; her conversion to an underground religion shows the desire to explore philosophical questions which is characteristic of many Chinese with the leisure to read and think. Recent events in her family expose the workings of inheritance patterns, and her husband's activities give us a glimpse of Taiwan's underworld. Although her economic future is uncertain, her self-reliance and family ties continue to sustain her.

In my life, I have always tried to learn from good and famous people. Hellen Keller especially has been a model for me. Think what she was able to accomplish, with all her handicaps! So I have always striven to overcome my crippled condition and to achieve something in life. Reading books about great lives has been my help and inspiration.

I want to do everything for myself that I can, so that I will burden no one. Self-reliance is very important to me; I do not want to be pitied. Life offers great challenges to everyone, and great difficulties. It is by conquering these that we perfect ourselves and become strong characters.

Our family lived for many generations in Prosperity Settlement,⁶ where we had a two-story brick house. My father was a carpenter. He could build houses and carve wood beautifully, so he earned good wages. Although his only education was a few years' study in an old-fashioned Chinese school, he admired beauty. He gave us girls refined names: mine is *Elegant Lute*.

He and my mother had nine children, of which the first three were boys. My eldest brother began to help Father at an early age, so both were often living away from home for weeks on distant construction sites. When Mother had her last child, she became paralyzed from the waist down, slowly became insane, and died after a few years. Because of this, my second brother had to assume daily responsibility for the household when

6. A few doors from Mrs. Lim (Chapter 8).

he was about fourteen. He tried to care for our mother and the younger children, to keep going to school, which he really loved, and also to work and earn money for us all. After a few years he also became insane. In a period of deep depression when he threatened suicide and began to run wildly about with knives, it became necessary to lock him up. In time we sent him to a mental institution—that was about the time our mother died.

He frequently ran away, so the institution required us to send a family member to live with him and care for him. We sent my fourth brother, the one just younger than I. This bad environment affected him so strongly that he too began to act strangely and had to be institutionalized. Now they are both there, but I know nothing about them anymore.

Mother died when I was about seven years old. Shortly after that, I contracted polio, which resulted in my legs becoming paralyzed. They stayed small as I grew, so I had to pull myself around with my arms, crawling on the floor. I lived upstairs and hardly ever came down for several years. I remember it was usually dark and somewhat frightening up there. My older sister sometimes brought me her schoolbooks, which is how I began to learn to read. That was a dark time for me.

My happiest moments were at our neighborhood's celebrations of the gods' birthdays, which people sometimes call *toa paipai* (T). You have seen these. To my eyes as a little girl, they were really wonderful, although at that time, they were probably less colorful and lively than they became when people got richer. We celebrated the birthday of the Earth God and his wife who lived in our little temple in Prosperity Settlement, and sometimes other gods' birthdays, too. The gods were carried out of their temple in small sedan chairs by local young men, who had to be very clean and pure for the occasion—carried right around the whole neighborhood to inspect it. I never followed the procession but some children did—for the fun of hearing all the firecrackers people set off when the gods passed their houses.

Afterward, the gods were placed in a beautifully decorated temporary shed out-of-doors so they could attend the celebration. Other gods' images were brought by our villagers from their family altars or from nearby temples to be guests of our god. All of them, displayed in their bright colors, with flowers, candles, and the scent of incense, made a splendid sight. Or that's how I felt then.

The neighborhood leaders collected money—just a few New Taiwan dollars from each family, so that every household could afford to be represented—to hire a Taiwanese opera to entertain both the gods and their guests and the people and their guests. It played several hours each afternoon and evening for two or three days. The costumes, the singing,

and the music of the horns and gongs were a treat I really looked forward to. I learned a lot of the old stories, in which the evil were punished and the just rewarded, and laughed at the jokes the actors inserted into plays that seemed too serious.

The big event of a *toa paipai* was the feast each family gave its friends and relatives from other parts of the city. We couldn't afford it, after Mother got sick, but some families invited five or six tables of guests, with ten or twelve people eating at each table with its bright red cloth. It cost a lot, but it was almost the only time that ordinary people had really good things to eat, except for the New Year. I used to hear the guests arriving, their hosts greeting them, then toasting while everyone ate and drank. Soon a lot of the men were a little drunk, playing noisy word games and singing loudly. Then I'd hear the firecrackers and music for the opera start up, and all the guests would go to watch. Sometimes my brother carried me out on his back to watch, too. *Toa paipai* are superstitious, but I didn't know it then. I thought they were wonderful.

About 1960, when I was twelve, things became a little better for our family. There was more construction work near our home, so Father and First Older Brother were home more often and earned more money.

Then, some really good fortune came to me from a Mainlander lady who moved into the new houses that were being built in the fields around Prosperity Settlement. She learned about my condition, came to see me, and paid for me to go to a drawing school to learn to make portraits from photographs. My elder brother carried me piggyback every day to school, and afterward he brought me home. I will always be grateful to that lady, because she made me able to contribute to our family's needs. She has moved to Hong Kong, but I still hear from her sometimes. After I learned how to do portraits, Father rebuilt the front of our house so I could have a workshop where people could easily come and buy. My bedroom, which I shared with my sisters, was right behind it, so I could easily go out to work or in to rest, without having to ask to be carried. It was much nicer for me then, as I could see the passers-by and talk to our neighbors. I began to read more to improve myself, and I began to understand the spiritual side of life.

The reason for copying photographs is that people like to have a large portrait of a relative who has died to use in the funeral ceremonies or to hang on the wall, but they may have only a small snapshot of the person. I learned to copy these on a bigger scale, by making many little dots of ink on the paper. It is a fairly good business—I used to charge two or three hundred New Taiwan dollars each (U.S.\$5 to \$7.50), and now it's up to NT\$1,800 (U.S.\$45). I can do one in two or three days.

I did my very best at this work and got quite a few customers. A few years ago, out of gratitude that I had the opportunity to work and not just be worthless, I did a portrait of our old president, Jiang Jieshi. When I put it in the front of the shop to attract customers, a newspaper reporter saw it and did a story on me in the *United Daily News*. There was a photograph, too, of me and the president's portrait. I still have it with my other valuable possessions. When I was not busy, I did other portraits, especially of movie stars and famous personages. I've made some attempts at more artistic pictures too, which I make by copying from magazines. I like beautiful scenes of the ocean, of gardens, and of mountains.

Someone put us in contact with a charitable organization in 1974, and I was able to obtain a wheelchair. That was about the time the American television program "Ironside," about a policeman in a wheelchair, was very popular. "Ironside" showed that people like me can accomplish great things in spite of our handicaps. It was not easy for me to use the wheelchair, because there are so many steps and uneven places on the streets, but on a few occasions, a relative or friend took me out for a ride. I remember how happy I was when you took me to the University grounds to see the azaleas in blossom!

As I became known and began to earn more, my family could depend on the income I earned. My eldest brother stopped working with Father and began to drive a taxi. When he married, he and his wife moved into a rented apartment next door, and Sister-in-Law set up a barbershop there. We "divided the stove,"⁷ with them becoming financially separate from our household, setting up an independent household registration with the police, and keeping more to themselves.

Over the years, Father had become very silent. When Mother died, he took all of the gods on our family altar, some of which he had carved himself, and burned them. He never carved things after that, though he was a fine craftsman, but just got quieter and quieter.

Our two eldest brothers and fourth brother were gone from our house. The third, after his military service, tried to start an electric-fan repair shop on one side of my workshop, but he never made much money. He did get married, though, so I had a sister-in-law at home and, after a while, two little nephews. We were able to marry my elder sister out in a quiet way, and one of my younger sisters drifted away to live somewhere else. She had a baby about ten years ago who has no father. That left seven of us still living together when our father died in 1979.

That was the year the Taipei City government started to widen Roosevelt

7. That is, legally divided the brother's household from the father's.

Road again. The change required that we lose half of our property and tear down our house. Everything was very confused about our land, which was not a neat rectangle in shape but rather an irregular chunk. There is no way to build a new, modern building following those crooked lot lines. Besides, even with the compensation, we didn't have the money to rebuild. So we sold the whole property, took the compensation, and divided the money.

First Older Brother received one-third, because even though he had separated from our household, he had helped us sometimes and he is still the eldest, with sons of his own.⁸ My third brother got one-third, which he used to buy a new apartment for his family and his wife's mother. And I received one-third, because I had helped the family financially for many years.

My share was NT\$100,000 (U.S.\$2,500). I borrowed another NT\$30,000 (U.S.\$750) from my eldest brother's family and bought this apartment downstairs from Third Brother's. I have to continue to pay NT\$1,800 (U.S.\$45) a month until I make up the remaining NT\$300,000 (U.S.\$7,500) that is owing. My youngest sister lives with us to help me with shopping. Her job is very low-paying, so I don't take her money. She often eats outside.

Before Father died, another piece of good fortune occurred for me when I met my husband. Because he lived nearby and often walked past my shop, we began to have conversations. He has many dreams for his future, which he told me. I felt I could tell him my ideas, what I had learned from books. We became friends, but I never thought of marriage, because in our Chinese society, crippled people, whose children might also be imperfect, almost never marry.

My husband was born a Taiwanese but was adopted at an early age by a Mainland soldier who had no family in Taiwan. He grew up speaking the national language and had to learn Taiwanese from me. At twenty-five, he is six years younger than I am. My husband has very big ideas, but he did not like to study books. Although his adoptive father wanted him to attend university, he could not pass the entrance examinations. After completing his military service, he again tried to pass and failed three years in a row. It was during those years of rootless study that we met and began to feel love for each other.

Our wedding was a very quiet one, because I did not want to be too conspicuous, and because his family thought our marriage unsuitable. But

8. First Older Brother had not received the usual first son's share of the family property when the two households "divided the stove," because they owned nothing of value but the house itself at that time.

Wenlong and I did have a honeymoon, like other couples. What an experience! We did more traveling than I have ever done before, with me on the back of his motorcycle. He took me to see all the famous sights of Taipei City and even to the Mountain People's village at Wulai. We could not, of course, go to climb Mount A Li or visit the southern cities, but we had a wonderful time seeing the sights and eating at restaurants.

Our marriage was made possible when my family sold our property. There were advantages for both of us in marrying. My husband is very interested in our country's youth and thinks that he should help them prepare for the future by studying martial arts and making strong ties and connections among them. Sometimes he works at petty trading, and he was a night watchman for a while, but mostly he spends time with his friends. It is hard to get a good job that suits his ideas about himself.

There are many young men out of work in this neighborhood who do not have very much to do. Some of them find a woman who has a job in a factory, or some unpleasant kind of job,⁹ and live on the money their girlfriends provide. The women are being used, really, but they are afraid their boyfriends will leave them, especially if they have children. In time, perhaps, these wild youths will settle down to take care of their families.

So I think this neighborhood is less desirable than my old home, Prosperity Settlement. There, there was community spirit, people held the local temple festivals, and very little crime occurred. Here, I hear of knife fights, even at the high school behind our apartment. My husband came home cut up from a bottle fight last week, and he is always going off to stick-and-chain fight competitions with his gang of friends.

Sometimes I really miss Prosperity Settlement, because it was more neighborly and I could see some things of the world passing by on the main road. Here in this enclosed back street, I rarely see visitors. Roosevelt Road was better for business, too, but of course that is why the property was so valuable there. There is no easy way for new customers to find me here. I need at least five or six portraits a month to support us.

But all in all, I am really fortunate to have my own home, something I never dreamed of when I was younger. This apartment has a bedroom for my sister and one for us, with a large living room all wallpapered, and a modern kitchen and bathroom. Because we are inside an air shaft, it is quite clean and quiet compared to Roosevelt Road, even though there is a large factory in the next street. The neighbor's children come by sometimes, so I can always send one of them for my relatives upstairs, who even have a telephone now.

9. That is, prostitution.

The other good fortune I have had, of course, is this baby of ours. When I married, I didn't know if I would have a baby or not, or if I had one, if it would be crippled like me. I didn't know anything about birth prevention, but what could I do about it anyway? I left everything to my husband, and he left everything to fate! After a few months, I began to think I might be pregnant, because my periods stopped. I began to be very afraid, so afraid that I couldn't sleep or think, too afraid to tell anyone. What would happen to me, to my body, if everything wasn't normal? And what about the baby? Would it be healthy?

When I was in my seventh month, my husband took me on the motorcycle to see a doctor. He examined me, tested my blood and urine, and told me the baby seemed normal. I would have to have an operation to birth the child, however. So I was more afraid than ever! It was then that I really started to chant sutras regularly, to protect myself and the baby, and to give me peace of mind.

When I began labor, my husband and sister took me to the doctor's little obstetrical hospital with room for three or four women to give birth. It's very common even for normal births to be in the hospital in Taiwan, because giving birth is a very dirty business, and no one wants that in the house if they can afford a hospital. In my case, of course, I had to go because of my need for the Caesarean section. I don't remember much about any of it; I was just too frightened, but I remember when they told me my son was healthy.

I came home from the hospital after a week. Here I was, with a baby, and too sore to move. My sister-in-law from upstairs came and helped, and of course, so did my sister and husband. My husband was really happy to have a child of his own. He is a very good father.

His family, who had opposed our marriage at first, changed their feelings toward us when they saw I had a healthy baby. My father-in-law had recently married, and my mother-in-law also came and helped me with the baby while I recovered. They have now adopted a Vietnamese orphan boy—basically very kindhearted people.

When you have a baby, you are supposed to follow a lot of rules in the first month for the health of the mother and baby. For example, you shouldn't wash much, and only in very hot water. After I had my baby, I often felt dirty and wanted to wash. Besides, it was midsummer and *very* hot. When I tried to follow the rules, I found that different people told me different things—Mother-in-law's and Sister-in-law's ideas were not at all the same. I suppose that what we did was all right, though, because the baby is fat and lively.

Now I have begun to wonder what I should do about birth prevention. I don't want to have another baby right away, not until my husband gets a job at least. What I've been doing is pretending that I'm asleep when he comes to bed. He seems to be staying out late at nights more now. There are many women who don't care what they do. I've heard that birth-prevention pills can prevent women from ever getting pregnant again, so I don't want that. I would like to have one more child, but not just now. I'm really not sure what to do about this problem.

One thing that has helped me keep a more peaceful heart through these difficulties has been my conversion to a new faith. Our family ceased to worship the gods after mother died, nor did we make much effort to remember our ancestors, with no adult woman in the house to prepare the offerings. We were too poor and disorganized. When things were very bad for our family, though, Mr. Kho¹⁰ came to teach us about a new way of worshiping the Buddha. This religion has no offerings or superstitious beliefs or big festivals. In fact, it is only a private religion, performed in the home, not in temples. It began in Japan, so our government does not permit it to be a public religion, but it is only for good. It helps people to think pure, good thoughts, have peaceful hearts, and be kind to others.

The worship is simple. Mr. Kho used to come to our house in Prosperity Settlement and talk to us about forgetting the sad and difficult parts of our lives, focusing only on good and on the Buddha. He taught us to chant a sutra that calms the heart and brings us closer to God. I used to chant the sutra often, and it always helped. When I was pregnant, I chanted it hundreds of times a day! When we chant, we place our hands in a special position, wrap the rosary beads around them, and chant a sutra for each bead.

At the old house, I just chanted anywhere. When I got this house and new furniture, I bought a shrine with the names of Buddha written on a paper inside. Over it, I've hung a picture of the religion's main temple in Japan, on Mount Fuji. We put white candles up. I have a book with many different sutras in it, and I try to read them all over at least once a day, though I've done it less often since the baby became so active.

It was Mr. Kho who suggested that my family move here and buy apartments in his building. I like living near him. He often drops over to see me, to teach me. He is a saintly man who has helped many unfortunate people by introducing them to this religion. I think it is because I slowly came to this religion that I was able to marry, buy my own house, and have

10. Mr. Kho's life is related in the next chapter.

Chinese Working-Class Lives

my baby. Even a person with nothing, with handicaps, can have a good life if she works to be a good person and has faith. I have troubles, but I am also blessed.

Postscript, 1985

Miss Ong's picture business did so badly in the new apartment that she began to think there was something seriously wrong with her fate; she decided to take both mystical and practical action to change it. After studying books about the effects on one's fortune of one's name, she found a more auspicious one for herself, and adopted it. Then, her husband sought out a safe and relatively weatherproof location where many prospective customers could see her wares. He found the perfect spot in the lighted, tiled pedestrian underpass leading across a main road to a large, flourishing temple. His connections secured her a place to spread a mat and sign among the sellers of fruit, flowers, incense and spirit money, lottery ticket vendors and other fortune-tellers that crowd this profitable venue. She and her lively little boy set out every day behind Wenlong on the motorcycle to take picture orders and tell fortunes on the basis of the Chinese characters of the customers' names. Now her skillful hands and flowery language earn them a decent living from pious passers-by.