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Chinese Working-Class Lives

Hill Gates

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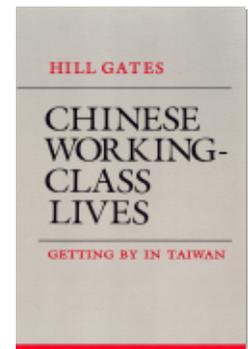
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Conclusions

The Chinese urban working-class people whose voices we have heard here are not extraordinary. They represent fairly well most of Taiwan's nonfarm population, unlike the much smaller educated elite that Americans usually meet through diplomatic, journalistic, business, and academic contacts. They are not especially poor or burdened with troubles, compared with people in many countries. Taiwan, after all, has few beggars, no one dies of malnutrition, and unlike many of their seniors, most young folks today can reasonably expect both work and family life as assured elements of their futures.

But, for every prospering small-business family whose sons and daughters attend college and whose thriving shops and factories line the main streets, there are dozens of households whose economic and educational struggles are less well rewarded living in the back alleys. For every Taipei family with access to a large job market, good schools for the next generation, and some of the amenities of urban life, there are several who inhabit such grubby and discouraging cities as Gaoxiong, Sancheng, and Jilong, or rural backwaters like the place Stevan Harrell calls "Mountainside" (1982), where the roads are so bad that a refrigerator cannot be delivered, and people must leave permanently to find work. And then, there are the Aborigines.

Our subjects and their families represent "average people" as much as a few dozen people *can* represent millions. It is people like these who teach us what economic expansion means and does not mean, when it is not accompanied by a political commitment to equality.

Taiwan's working class comprises about three-quarters of its population if

we include owners of small businesses and farms and the aging, low-ranked veterans of Jiang's mainland armies along with farm and other manual laborers, service workers, and those who hire out to big industries. Different historical experiences and regional loyalties divide the older people of this class into Taiwanese and Mainlander ethnic groups; in some parts of the island, Hakka and Aborigine ethnic identities also remain strong. Taiwanese rather than Mainlander culture dominates the working class, although the views of the heavily Mainlander elite are stronger in the schools, in the media, and in the world of officials.

Social power is now more evenly divided between Taiwanese and Mainlander than it was in the forties, fifties, and sixties as Taiwanese numbers and success in business balance Mainlander domination of the political and economic center. One result of this shift is the clearer emergence of class as a factor in the workings of the socioeconomic system. Being a Mainlander, if one is working class, is hardly a striking advantage to Mr. Kang, as compared with earlier times when Miss Guo and Mrs. Lo were grateful simply for the regular food a soldier-husband could provide. While rich Taiwanese and Mainlanders entertain each other at expensive business dinners, poor ones, along with Aborigines, marry, share kitchens with other renters, and gingerly make friends despite those among their relatives who still despise the "others." Working-class children of mixed marriages draw away from these distinctions, from which they can gain little advantage. The government, too, seems to have learned that under current conditions, it gains less and loses more by fostering ethnic divisions. If its representatives could learn also to accept regional cultures as valuable rather than substandard versions of Chineseness, the ethnicity issue would fade further still.

Working-class culture in Taiwan is reproduced more and more from the workings of present rather than past realities—realities that include an economy that demands both reasonably skilled and reasonably inexpensive labor to maintain its world trade. These realities also include a living heritage of skill in small-business practice, which inexpensively meets many of the island's consumer and export requirements, a complex but flexible kinship system that socializes women and the young to accept discipline and firm social control, and a folk religious tradition that teaches both submission to authority and the value of household integration into relatively egalitarian and self-reliant communities.

These influences shape relations between women and men, young and old in the working class so that farms and small businesses provide a steady stream of young, cheap workers who add value to export products for a few years before typically moving into small businesses of their own. There is

no real division between Taiwan's industrious small-business people and its industrial workers, for by and large, the latter are the children of the former, temporarily earning cash for family expansion.

The preservation of working-class culture requires the continuation of patterns of kinship behavior and belief, of community stability, and of informal education in work and business practices that have evolved over the long period of capitalist development of this frontier island. Some of these patterns, such as the strong control of parents over their children, have lessened in this century, particularly in the families of poor Mainlanders who own no property on which sons might found a future. As long as Americans buy Taiwan's shirts and shoes and silicon chips, however, even these young folks may find a way to purchase a truck to start a transport business, to take over their parents' dumpling restaurant, or to use a powerful fellow-provincial contact to enter the export-import market. Informal sources of capital, business expertise, and contacts abound for those who know how to use them. A Mainlander lad who speaks Taiwanese well and practices the common etiquette of giving and receiving gifts, favors, and banquets that solidifies friendships will find as much success, I believe, as a Taiwanese.

The educational system imposed and controlled by those whom the working class cannot easily influence remains a safety valve for the strong pressures for a better life that motivate young and old alike. By preserving the integrity of the education and examination processes, the government encourages young people to learn what it chooses for them, or, should they fail in schooling, to transfer their hopes of rising from the working class to the next generation. In addition to its other functions, the educational system thus reinforces the old ideal of family continuity.

Influences from outside the island, too, are part of the realities of everyday life. Their immediacy is obscured by the lack of free access to information that the tightly controlled schools and press ensure; world politics and intellectual currents arrive in carefully filtered versions. The working class still remembers the Japanese, either as friends or as enemies. But, except for prostitutes and others in the tourist business, its members rarely encounter the thick network of relationships that tie the Taiwanese elite to Japan's corporate world. American culture makes fewer inroads here than many might suppose—even rock music is not really popular—and it was rare for me to meet a working-class Chinese, unless a servant, who had ever conversed with an American. Except for American movies and a vague sense of the "Communist menace" from the mainland, only the way economic trends affect business draws much Taiwanese comment on the rest of the world.

In many ways, my subjects are like most of us in complex societies: excluded from participating in the major political and economic decisions that shape the wider society, we concentrate on work, family, religion, and amusement—things we can control. In societies with inherent hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and gender, we learn early to admire the “rich” or “educated” who are “above” us, and to concentrate our efforts on reaching a higher social place than that in which we were born. In Taiwan, such striving encourages hard work and produces modest comfort for workers, along with very considerable wealth for those who control the products of that work.

Taiwan’s working class has escaped the impoverished fate of many Third World countries from whose labor, minerals, and agricultural products only outsiders have profited. Working-class people have contributed many of the technical, entrepreneurial, and organizational skills that have kept the island’s economy afloat in hard times and made it enormously productive in good ones. Theirs is a culture with considerable power and resilience, as history shows. In any foreseeable future, I believe that, one way or another, people like Mrs. Zhang, Miss Ong, and the rest will somehow get by.

