Chinese Working-Class Lives

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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 legacies 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
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women and men 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 neigh-
borhood, they are also affected by and conscious of the country as a whole,
the China mainland, and Taiwan's international position. The parochialism
and anonymity 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,
dispensers, 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 Com-

munist revolution, and the emergence of Taiwan as a separate and econom-
ically 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 tea; 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

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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 exist still very much on the margin of 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 community 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 resources 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 inevi-
table 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 recount-
ing their life experiences.

Chapter 2 presents a necessarily rather personal account of how I col-
lected my data. The intimacy and trust necessary for the collection of life
histories is not easily achieved, particularly because I was especially inter-
ested 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, north China peasants, Japanese colonialists, and the
refugees of the Communist revolution in China’s 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 govern-
ment 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 these 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 an-
thropology 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.