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Chinese Working-Class Lives

Gates, Hill

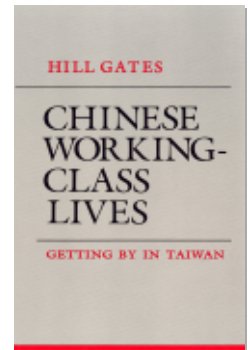
Published by Cornell University Press

Gates, Hill.

Chinese Working-Class Lives: Getting By in Taiwan.

Cornell University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. doi:10.1353/book.57552.



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[Access provided at 19 Nov 2022 00:07 GMT with no institutional affiliation]



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Preface

I wrote this book to help students and others with a new interest in things Chinese to encounter the culture of Taiwan's ordinary working people whose livelihood depends on their hands, backs, and wits. Too little of Chinese life is accessible to most of us in the West: Taiwan and the People's Republic of China are distant and expensive for travelers, though Americans who have been in those places are no longer rarities. Even for those who make the trip, however, Chinese societies turn a neutral-to-friendly mask toward most stranger guests. Getting behind it, in any part of China, is difficult but worthwhile, for only through knowing another society can we experience both the power of culture to shape our lives and the recognition of a common humanity that transcends cultural differences. Studying Taiwan's working class offers these experiences in full measure. The inevitable conflicts and misunderstandings between our two old, proud, and widely different civilizations must be balanced by mutual efforts at compromise and comprehension. This book is one such effort.

Much anthropology fieldwork begins with direct, personal encounters, as the anthropologist comes to know the women and men who will provide most of the material from which to fashion an image of their culture. Often that image is conveyed through carefully constructed abstractions and generalizations that all but obscure individual variation and sense of person. Here I decided to include instead not only a summary of my own understanding of Taiwan's working-class people but also life histories of nine of those people, in their own words. Thus the reader may juxtapose, and sometimes contrast, my observations about this small island's political economy, religious traditions, and status of women with the concrete particularities of real and singular lives. Readers, I hope, will appreciate the

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inherent slipperiness of moving from such direct, personal, and idiosyncratic data to conclusions about a time period, a family, a community of believers, or a class. Moreover, I hope that they will make such connections themselves, remembering the individuality that lies behind a display of Taiwan-made shirts or a magazine story on Chinese elections.

It is the personal directness of fieldwork, I think, that makes anthropology so involving and anthropologists so partisan. In the context of these nine voices, I have felt free to speak in my own voice about Taiwan, rather than assume the impossible pose of a neutral, objective observer. Naturally, my views are constrained within the limits of what other writers, with different analyses, have published. To have an occasion to speak frankly and even critically about a political system I have studied for twenty years evolved, in the course of the work, as another reason for writing this book.

It is for working-class Taiwan people themselves, however, to have the final say about what has happened to them. No one can fully comprehend the society in which she is immersed, for intimate knowledge complicates and may cancel critical perspective. But views from outside the Chinese world, or from “above” the working class in social prestige, are as partial and partisan as those from inside, and often a good deal less well informed. I would like others—Chinese as well as Americans—to listen carefully, as I learned to do, to what these insider voices reveal about how their social system serves these people.

I wrote the book as well, then, to preserve some common voices not usually recorded. The people who speak in these pages wanted to tell things about themselves to a wider world, once they found in my research an avenue to do so. They expect me to get their viewpoints across, to preserve the evidence of their searches for family stability, or loyalty unto death, or perfect filiality, or big bucks. As much as any politician or scholar, they want to be part of history, to leave a memorial to their existence in the libraries that are a changing society’s most persisting reminders of the past. Some have complaints to register with history, or with fate, or with their own or the American government; others would like posterity to be reminded mainly of their successes.

It is especially notable that none of these people speaks directly to the political project of changing the present, however. If there is to be a reckoning, their omissions imply, it will be made by academics and other “great folk,” not by people like themselves.

In the years since I collected these life histories, friends and kin of my subjects have offered me *their* stories to add to my files. I wish they could all be published—a great archive of events and adventures, each telling the

story of twentieth-century Taiwan as a different truth. With such a mountain of evidence, official history might be forced to drop its alliance with those who read and rule, and find a way to include everyone. With democratic histories to learn from, succeeding generations might prepare themselves by study not to justify retrospectively the current social inequalities but to speak for their present needs in a complex and insistent chorus.

Of all disciplines, anthropology may best reveal the collective origins of knowledge, for a work in this field is never constructed by one person. This book owes much to the nine people around whose life histories it is built, who cooperated with sincerity and style in what was to them an unusual venture. They have my thanks and, I hope, the thanks of readers who will also learn from them. Many other Taiwan people whose lives and names are not included here also contributed their time, patience, and insights to my study of Taiwan's working class; all taught me something I needed to know.

Thanks, too, are due to the women who assisted me in the field, as described in Chapter 2. Although they helped in many ways to collect and translate material, like the tellers of the life histories themselves, none had a hand in its arrangement or interpretation; for that the responsibility is mine alone.

Central Michigan University, with several small grants, a sabbatical leave, and a University Research Professorship, provided the time and funds without which this study could not have been completed. I very much appreciate this institutional support. Seeing the manuscript through typing and correction fell to the lot of Denise Jones and Michele St. Pierre, for whose precision and persistence I am grateful.

I am grateful, too, to colleagues who read the manuscript and criticized it: Alice Littlefield, Eugene Anderson, Wolfram Eberhard, Bernard Gallin, Rita Schlesinger Gallin, Roger Sanjek, George Spindler, and Margery Wolf. Stevan Harrell was especially diligent in removing inaccuracies and awkwardnesses. Edwin Chávez-Farfan prepared the map, for which I am most grateful. John Rohsenow, whose comradeship in Taiwan helped me enjoy my early fieldwork, offered support and suggestions on this as on other projects, along with his personal clipping service on the Chinese world.

Finally, I thank my mother, Vera Gates Humphreys, for her sustaining friendship over the years; and Norman Rasulis, for much editorial help.

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