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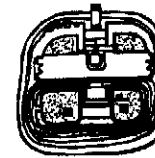
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A TALE OF TWO SISTERS

*Gender in Taiwan's Small-Scale Industry*¹

Anru Lee



SISTERS TELLING STORIES: A TAIWANESE MANUFACTURING FAMILY²

When I was in high school, I disliked weekends so much. Whenever it was Saturday, my classmates all became so excited because they were going to have a day and half off. They always planned to have fun after school. I didn't get excited. My life was so different from theirs. I just went straight home and worked in the factory. I knew I would not have time off. I was doubly busy on weekends.

Wang Mei-Hwa once told me this when I was sitting in her computer appliance shop and sipping the tea she made for me. Her sister Mei-Ling listened; she did not say anything but nodded her head so vividly to show us that she could not have agreed more.

Wang Mei-Hwa was 32 in 1995, and Mei-Ling, 30. The two sisters used to work in their father's weaving factory, side by side with the employees

1. The research reported in this article was supported in part by a grant from the Wenn-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (No. 5784). This research has also received support from the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, in Taipei, Taiwan.

2. All Chinese names and words are romanized in the Wade-Giles system.

on the shop floor, producing fabric to make garments for the U.S. market. Their eldest sister, said to have the best "mathematics mind" in the family, was the accountant; she also cooked for the workers as well as tended the looms when they were short on labor. The son in the family, Mei-Hwa and Mei-Ling's elder brother, was the mechanic. They all worked under the supervision of their father, the owner and manager of the factory. However, this seemed to be a long time ago. Since Mei-Hwa married in 1990, she helps her husband in his computer shop. In her free time she also works as a salesperson in Taiwan's booming insurance industry making her own money from commission. Wang Mei-Hwa and her husband are their own bosses. They make up their working schedule. No more working on weekends!

FROM AGRICULTURE TO INDUSTRY

I met Wang Mei-Hwa and Wang Mei-Ling in the very first week after I came to Hai-kou, a small town in central Taiwan, to study the local textile industry. A friend, introducing Mei-Hwa to me, said that she knew everything about textiles because her family owned a factory. However, instead of telling me everything, Mei-Hwa first took me to her parents' house/factory compound for a trip, and later arranged for me to live there to learn more. Mei-Hwa's parents' house, located in the middle of farmland, is a large three-story, gray cement building; downstairs is the weaving mill and the top two floors are the family's living space. A brook runs through the back of the house. Behind the brook is the Wang family's asparagus field.

Asparagus used to be the family's major source of income. Thirty years ago, in the late 1960s, when Mei-Hwa's grandfather was still alive and in charge of the family, asparagus was an important cash crop in the local economy and a major item in Taiwan's agricultural exports to Japan and the West. In the heyday of asparagus cultivation, the Wang family hired some hands to help them with the daily harvest. Mei-Hwa's father, along with his brothers and sisters, acted like modern factory line leaders in the asparagus field; each of them was assigned an area to work with four or five hired hands. The Wang family was quite well-known for its asparagus business. Once I was told by an old neighbor that Mei-Hwa's aunts used to be called the "Asparagus Princesses" in the region before they married.

However, the good days of asparagus seemed to be gone with Mei-Hwa's grandfather when he died in 1975. After his death, following the local tradition, the three sons, Mei-Hwa's father and his two younger brothers, divided the family's land and property and went their own way. They continued to grow asparagus for a while, but the profit quickly

declined.³ The youngest brother gave up asparagus first; he started a small workshop making small, assembled parts for faucets. The second brother soon followed: he began a weaving mill. Mei-Hwa's father, the eldest brother, continued asparagus cultivation the longest, but the profit in industrial production finally led him to purchase 24 looms and he began weaving in 1978. A few years later he acquired more machines to seize the opportunities provided by the rapidly expanded local textile industry. At its peak the Wang family owned 68 looms and hired 15 workers.

FAMILY MEMBERS WORKING TOGETHER

The Wang family had always hired workers to produce textiles but the family children always comprised an essential part of the workforce. Mei-Hwa and Mei-Ling's brother, who first worked as a mechanic then gradually took over the supervisory role from the father on the shop floor, as the only son in the family would undoubtedly inherit the family business in the future, and the family took for granted that he would be given the opportunity to learn to operate the factory. Mei-Hwa and Mei-Ling, the two younger daughters, were still going to school in the evening when their father started the mill. Regularly they worked for four hours in the morning and took a nap in the afternoon before they went to school. However, they would have to work for longer hours if any workers took the day off.

Family labor plays a crucial role in Taiwan's small-scale industry. Many recently converted industrialists like Mei-Hwa's father rely heavily on family members to assure a smooth flow of production and a profit and industrialists can always count on them to work overtime whenever it is needed. Most importantly, they are cheap. In many family mills, they are not paid but given a "monthly stipend" with a value much less than the wages they might otherwise make in the labor market.

LOCAL INDUSTRIALIZATION IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Family members working together under the supervision of their male patriarchs is nothing new in the Han Chinese culture. Past literature has recorded numerous cases of Chinese families acting as a corporate unit in

3. Taiwan's Asparagus crop dramatically lost its overseas market after the European Economic Community canceled Taiwan's quota and gave it to China in 1979.

various socio-historical circumstances.⁴ However, the engagement of family labor has become even more crucial for Taiwanese families in the current industrial setting. This has to be understood in relation to Taiwan's structural position in the global economy.

Taiwan was a colony of Japan before 1945 and therefore served as a base of the Japanese empire during its war in Asia and the Pacific. As a result, Taiwan was under heavy bombardment by the U.S. Airforce at the end of World War II, and its infrastructure was badly damaged. After the Second World War ended, Taiwan's economy was further devastated by the Chinese civil war on the Mainland; its resources were taken by the Nationalist Party (KMT) to support its military action against the Communist Party as well as to stabilize the fiscal/monetary crises caused by the war. Only after the KMT was defeated and forced to retreat to the Taiwan Island in 1949, was Taiwan given the chance to rebuild its economy.

Taiwan's postwar economy is closely connected with the United States and Japan. From the very beginning, the economy gradually regained its momentum with the assistance of the U.S. Using raw materials supplied by the U.S., particularly cotton, the government launched an import-substitution policy to foster the development of light industries. This economic policy served three purposes. First, it required only minimum levels of technology and capital to initiate but quickly produced urgently needed consumer goods for the domestic market. Second, by promoting import-substitution industrialization (ISI), the Taiwanese government prevented further draining of precious (and extremely limited) foreign exchange reserve. Third, ISI enabled Taiwan to accumulate capital as well as to acquire technical knowledge which facilitated later economic development.

The period of ISI did not last long. The domestic market was becoming saturated in the late 1950s, and the government introduced new economic policies to encourage export expansion. In the meantime, more and more people in the rural areas had become familiar with industrial work. Although most of the older generation remained in agriculture, an increasing number of the young entered manufacturing industries. In Hai-kou, girls became weavers and young male apprentices learned to repair the looms and do the maintenance in the local textile industry. Labor participation in the industrial sector grew as export-oriented industrialization (EOI) boomed and many former farmers/landowners like Mei-Hwa and Mei-Ling's father began to invest their money in textile manufacturing in the 1970s. According to local observers, there were almost 600 textile

factories in Hai-kou in the peak days of the industry. Even though most of these factories were small with a labor force under 30 workers, they hired the majority of the working population in town.

Export-oriented industrialization proved a successful economic strategy for Taiwan. Since the 1970s Taiwan has experienced a remarkably high growth rate. The income distribution is relatively equal and the gap between the rich and the poor is low in comparison to most of the developing countries. Within three decades Taiwan has transformed itself from an agriculture-based to an industrial society (and it is gradually becoming service-centered in the 1990s, with booming insurance, banking, and retail industries).

The success story of Taiwan, along with the stories of the other three East Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs: Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore) has received wide attention in the developmental literature. It has also inspired many other countries to replicate the experience. Even so, one should not romanticize Taiwan's achievement. In fact, Taiwan's export expansion runs parallel to economic restructuring in advanced capitalist countries and a relocation of manufacturing production from these countries to less industrialized regions in the world. In the case of the textile industry, Taiwan was first benefited from the Japanese who sold synthetic fiber to the island in the late 1950s and later brought in orders for garments made of such material for the U.S. market (Lin C.-C. 1994). Textile manufacturers in Taiwan thereby learned the technology to produce fabric from synthetic fiber. The industry was further advanced when U.S. retailers sought cheap apparel to sell in their domestic market in the 1960s (Cheng and Gereffi 1994, Gereffi and Pan 1994). The relation between the garment and textile industry is an effect of backward linkage, that is, when a down-stream industry is growing, it will stimulate its upper-stream industries to grow as well. As Taiwan's garment industry expanded, the demand for yarn and fabric increased as well, which in turn animated the domestic spinning and weaving industries.

SUBCONTRACTING AND DECENTRALIZED PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

Taiwan's link with both Japanese and U.S. retailers denotes a pattern of "marketing-dependent development" in the global system (Skoggard 1996). That is to say, direct foreign investment in industrial production—for example, large multinational factories in export processing zones—plays only a minor role in Taiwan's EOI. Instead, Taiwan has based its "economic miracle" on small-scale, decentralized, family-centered subcontracting firms, which rely on foreign retailers, brand-named marketers, and trading companies to supply them with orders.

4. For example, Skinner, 1957; Cohen, 1976, 1992; Harrell, 1985; Niehoff, 1987; Oxfeld, 1993; Ka, 1993; Li and Ka, 1994; Hsiung, 1996.

Foreign buyers are primarily looking for cheap commodities. However, as the competition in their domestic markets as well as the international market intensifies, they also ask for increasingly shorter turn-around time for products. Manufacturers in Taiwan have proved themselves to be highly effective in meeting those demands. They are efficient and flexible, maintaining quality at a given price, while ensuring reliable, on-time delivery.

Nonetheless, the division of labor between the Taiwan manufacturers and foreign buyers is not an equal one. While Taiwanese firms manage the decentralized manufacturing stages, foreign capital generally controls the more profitable export and marketing networks (Gereffi and Pan 1994:134). Moreover, the manufacturers constantly have to reduce their production cost and adjust their production organization to comply with stringent trading terms. In order to accomplish this, they need to have the cooperation of a workforce willing to work cheaply around the production cycle, i.e. to work overtime for days or even weeks when meeting deadlines and to take unpaid time off when the market is slow. Who will more ideally fulfill these conditions than manufacturers' own families?

FROM SUNRISE TO SUNSET: THE CURRENT PREDICAMENT OF TEXTILE MANUFACTURERS

Textiles used to be the leading industry in Taiwan's export economy, but for several reasons it has rapidly declined since the late 1980s and has now become a "sunset industry." The first hard blow came from the U.S. government, which in order to reduce its own foreign trade deficit pressured Taiwan to appreciate its currency (Schive 1992). The exchange rate of the New Taiwan dollar vis-a-vis the U.S. dollar plunged from forty in 1985 to twenty-six in 1990, which severely impeded Taiwan's export capability just when it was facing increased competition from other industrializing countries in Southeast Asia and China.

Labor shortages further shattered the prospects of textile manufacturing. Cheap labor was always a key to success for Taiwan's labor-intensive industries such as textiles. However, textile manufacturers have confronted an insufficient labor supply since the early 1980s, a result both of a declining birthrate after the 1960s and recent changes in the economy. Young people entering the wage labor market for the first time now prefer to work in the booming service sector instead of manufacturing industries. Also, more and more young women in rural areas continue their education to senior high school or even beyond to prepare for white-collar jobs. Their families no longer push them to take on factory work right after elementary or junior high school, as their counterparts in prior generations were expected to do.

The wages in the textile industry have rapidly risen as a result of the labor shortage. Textile manufacturers in Taiwan have responded to the appreciation of the New Taiwan dollar, labor shortages, competition from other industrializing countries, and international protectionism with two major strategies: relocating and downsizing.

RELOCATING AND DOWNSIZING: STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

By the late 1980s many textile producers, in search of cheap labor and inexpensive raw materials, had closed down their plants in Taiwan and relocated production to China and Southeast Asia. (Klein 1992, Chang & Chang 1992, Bonacich et al 1994). In Hai-kou, according to local observers, more than half of the looms were removed from the production line in the past five years or so. Those who remain in business in Hai-kou have rearranged the labor division on the shop floor, or they have upgraded their machinery to reduce the number of workers needed. Only a few wealthy industrialists in town could afford to purchase new machines. Many of the small factory owners just sold part of their looms and downsized production to the extent that family members alone would make up a sufficient workforce. Responding to the labor shortage, in the early 1990s, the Taiwan government finally legalized the employment of foreign workers for some industries including textiles. Yet, the manufacturers have complained that the quotas are too low and the hiring procedures are too cumbersome to meet their pressing needs.

CONFORMITY AND CONFLICT IN THE FAMILY

For those families who can neither find native workers nor get the government's approval to hire foreign labor, once again and even more crucial than ever before, they have relied on family labor to make up for the missing workforce. However, the husband and wife—or the father and mother—bear the burden this time. Young people having attained (or attaining) higher education, are more interested in the booming financial/commercial world than in working for their parents in the declining manufacturing sector. Parents who are running a factory may desperately need their children's labor now, but to their misfortune, they can no longer count on their children.

Parents are losing control over their children's lives. The transformation of the economy plays a major role here. Young girls in particular are benefiting from the newly granted educational opportunities and sometimes the wide range of jobs in the wage labor market. They have more alternatives now. Yet, conflict and struggle between the generations seem

also aggravated as a result. If one looks closely into the dynamics in a patriarchal corporate family like the Wang's, one discovers that the elder and male authority in such a family is always on the verge of being challenged. In the Wang family, for example, even though the children had been working together under their father, the daughters were not submissive. On the contrary, each of them has striven for a life of her own outside the family factory, albeit still under the constraint of her particular social circumstance.

MEI-HWA: THE DAUGHTER WHO'S MARRIED OUT

Mei-Hwa always speaks in a light-hearted tone when she tells me about those "old days." Despite the fact that she had worked so hard and was often forced to juggle her time among school, factory, and her job in the insurance company after her graduation from junior college in 1987—and later, dating her boyfriend in secrecy—she rarely shows hard feelings towards her parents. She usually laughs at the silly things she did before. The one story she loves to tell is how she "stole" half an hour daily on the way home from the insurance company in order to meet her boyfriend.

I had to sign in at 8:00 in the morning, and went to the routine meeting that followed after. The meeting usually ended around 10:30, and I would immediately leave the company and rush home to tend looms. I worked at home till 4:30 in the afternoon, and hurried back to the company at five, signed out, and hurried out again to meet my boyfriend. We met around 5:15, and had a bowl of shaved ice or a glass of juice together. I had to say good-bye to him at 5:45, that left me fifteen minutes to rush home so I would not be late for my 6:00 shift, and nobody would be suspicious about my movement. And we did it all over again the next day!

After she came back from the insurance company at 6:00 in the evening, Mei-Hwa continued to work on the shop floor usually till midnight. "I was always working, working, and working. There was no time left for me to think of anything else," she told me.

Mei-Hwa not only lived an extremely busy life, she also lived a life with a "double" identity: she was an insurance salesperson in the professional world and a weaver in her family. Pursuing her own career did not release her from her duty in the family business. She was expected to fulfill her family role first before she could do other things. Despite the fact that she had been deliberately arranging her daily schedule to fit the family's demands, her job eventually caused tension in the family. Her brother, the supervisor on the shop floor, frequently complained to their

father that Mei-Hwa was irresponsible because she did not do her share of work until it was too late, i.e. in the late afternoon after she came back from the insurance company. He wanted their father to force Mei-Hwa to quit. But Mei-Hwa insisted in keeping her job, and according to her sister Mei-Ling, the more the father and the brother pushed, the more determined Mei-Hwa became. Consequently, the brother and sister were in disagreement all the time.

As time went by, the family's objection seemingly waned and they gradually accepted Mei-Hwa's divergent attention as part of the reality they had to live with, although they were never happy about it. On Mei-Hwa's part, by taking a job outside the family in the first place and later resisting the pressure from the elder, she was negotiating for more space of her own, although the family duty was still an important guideline for her decisions and actions. The recognition that she had her own ideas about life did not come easily, however, and the tension continually simmered beneath the compromise made by the family. The conflict of interests was only solved by Mei-Hwa's marriage.

Mei-Hwa now looks back with amusement. After all, she is a daughter who is "married out." She is no longer obliged to work for her natal family. Instead, as a married woman, her fate is linked with her husband (or rather, her husband's family), as is her labor. Nevertheless, Mei-Hwa is fortunate because her parents-in-law neither run a factory nor own a company; her labor is thus not bound by her husband's family. Furthermore, her parents-in-law have already retired from farming, therefore, they are able to take care of Mei-Hwa's children, which sets her free to explore new possibilities for herself and her husband.

MEI-LING: THE DAUGHTER WHO'S LEFT BEHIND

Mei-Ling, the youngest sister in the Wang family, has a different story to tell.

As a woman who is over 30 but still remains single, she is under tremendous pressure not only from her family but also from relatives and neighbors who all urge her to get married. Mei-Ling always becomes very demoralized when we touch this topic in our conversation. "You know how gossipy those old women are in the village? They often tease my mom by asking her how much longer she is going to keep me home. They say I must be a treasured daughter so that she is reluctant to marry me out even though I have passed the age already. My mother said to me that if I do not get married soon, she will have no face to live in the village anymore." Mei-Ling's parents are clearly bearing the stigma of having a middle-aged unmarried daughter.

Mei-Ling's parents have been trying very hard to arrange for her to meet prospective mates, but Mei-Ling was either unimpressed by the arrangement or too upset to go. "I have told them [the parents] many times that I am not going to get married unless I graduate from college, but they just do not listen"; she became really upset when she said this to me: "It is all their fault that I am still in school now and have not got married yet. I always wanted to study, and I have expressed myself very clearly to them ever since Mei-Hwa graduated from college. And they kept saying yes to me, but never really supported my decision in action. But even if they had been willing to let me go, with a constant problem of labor shortage, what could they have done otherwise? They had no choice but to keep me working in the factory."

Mei-Ling explained to me why she insisted on schooling first and marriage second. She said, "Eventually I will be married out. If I do not get my education now, I will not have any chance at all after I get married. My own parents do not even support me on such matter, who else in the world do you think will support me? My husband's family? Ha, you imagine it!"

Neither Mei-Hwa nor Mei-Ling continued their college education right after high school. Both of them had waited for a few years. Mei-Hwa waited three years and finally went back to school in 1984; she was 21 and Mei-Ling was 19. Mei-Ling had expressed her wish to go to school with her sister, but the parents disagreed. They could not afford to lose two workers at the same time; they could allow only one daughter to study, and therefore lose one worker, each time. Nevertheless, Mei-Ling was discouraged again even after her sister had graduated from college. Mei-Hwa was about to get married, and the family would lose her labor permanently upon such occasion. Mei-Ling's labor had become even more indispensable than before. Once again, the family could not afford to let her go.

FAMILY WELL-BEING VS. INDIVIDUAL INTEREST— BUT WHOSE FAMILY IS IT ANYWAY?

After Mei-Hwa married, Mei-Ling became the only daughter who worked for her parents. Meanwhile, the Wang factory had been affected by the current crisis and was suffering from a lack of labor. Mei-Ling's father decided that he was too old to endure the pressure anymore. He retired in 1991 and passed the business to his son, the only heir of the family. Mei-Ling's brother made the decision to downsize the factory. He sold all of the old machines and bought six more advanced ones. In his plan, which was supported by his parents, he only needed one worker on each shift for this minimized production scale. He was going to perform the mechanic's task. Having Mei-Ling work on one shift, he simply needed to

find two more weavers. Mei-Ling's labor was obviously seen as part of the factory assets which were naturally transferred from the father to the son in his inheritance. As long as she was not married, she belonged to the family, and so did her labor.

Mei-Ling eventually went back to school in 1991, after many years of waiting. While she was going to school in the evening, she continued to work in her brother's factory on the day shift. In fact, she was her brother's only weaver because he could not find another. Although he had to turn off the machines at night to accommodate Mei-Ling's schedule, he had tried to keep Mei-Ling at work except for the time he had to let her go to school.

Mei-Ling's relationship with her brother and her parents began to turn sour when she insisted on having Sundays off in addition to her school time. There was a long struggle before the brother and the parents finally yielded to her will.

My mother was particularly upset. She was offended by my request. She felt that I was letting down the family by taking Sundays off. Without me there, my brother would either have to tend the looms himself or shut down the production completely. It would cut back his profit either way. How could I do this to my brother, particularly in such a difficult time? She had refused to talk to me for a very long time.

But they [the parents] only care about their son! This is their son's factory, not mine. I will not be able to live under my brother's roof for all of my life, even if I want to. I will have to find something for myself.

Mei-Ling is aware of the possibility that she may have to stay single, although she does not reject the idea of getting married. But until she marries, she wants to have a career of her own. She believes that to pursue more education will help her in finding a job she really likes.

CONCLUSION: GENDER IN TAIWAN'S FAMILY-CENTERED SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRY

When Taiwan began its export-oriented industrialization in the 1960s, many farmers set up factories on their own land and mobilized their family members to perform the production tasks. Although family members working together and acting as a corporate unit was not new in the Han Chinese culture, the newly emerged economic opportunities gave the cooperation a new meaning. Family labor proved crucial in the success of Taiwan's small-scale industry. It provided a cheap, steady, flexible, and

efficient workforce which enabled Taiwanese manufacturers to produce goods at a low price while ensuring reliable, on-time delivery.

Under the current predicament within which Taiwan's labor-intensive industries and the producers are troubled by the problem of labor shortage, family labor becomes even more important than ever before. However, when family labor is desperately in need, the elder in the family can no longer count on their children for help. The economic changes in the past three decades have created new opportunities for the younger generations. Young people — and young women in particular — nowadays have attained higher education, and they are more inclined to acquire jobs in the booming service sector rather than in the declining manufacturing industries.

Conflict between generations has been exacerbated in recent times when young women have alternatives other than working in factories. Even in a patriarchal corporate family like the Wang's, the senior and male authority has always been on the verge of challenge. Although the daughters had worked for their father and helped to accumulate the family wealth which would one day be inherited by their brother, they were not docile. Each of them has striven for a life of her own, despite the fact that they are still under the constraint of their social circumstances.

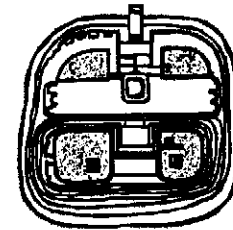
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ANTHROPOLOGY FOR A SMALL PLANET:

*CULTURE AND COMMUNITY
IN A
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT*



Edited by
Anthony Marcus

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Cover: This nearly 100 foot tall rectangular pyramid with rounded corners—seen here from above—was the main public building at MOXEKE on the north central coast of Peru where the Chavin civilization, an early predecessor of the Incan empire, flourished between 1800 and 1400 B.C.

Cover design by *Jill Suzanne Gussow*

*To Robert Marcus, my father,
and Mary Weisstein, my grandmother,
for both nurturing and challenging me*

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