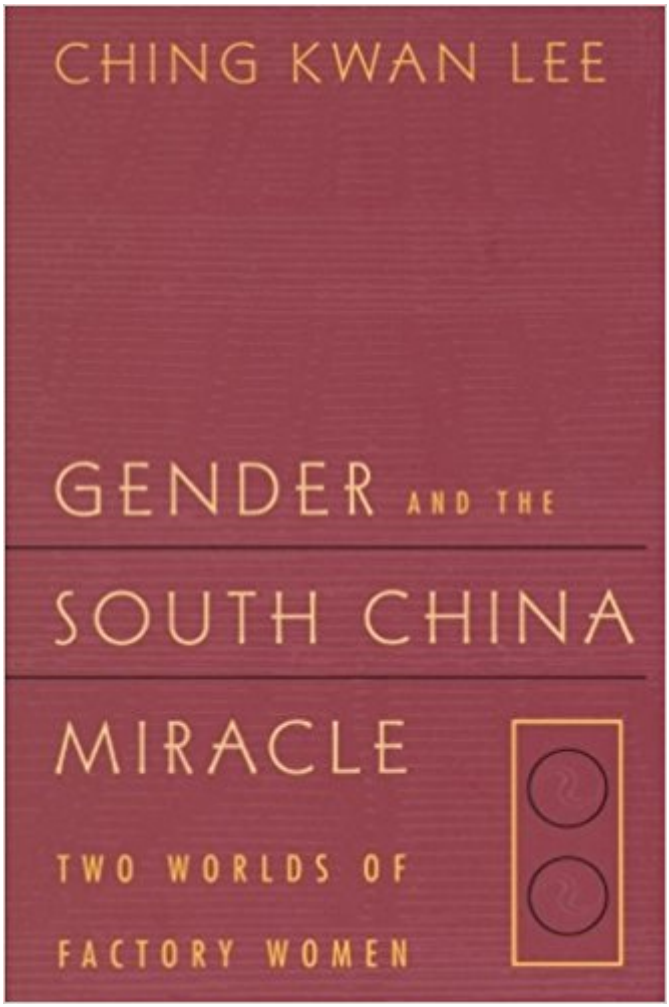
Gender And The South China Miracle: Two Worlds Of Factory Women



Synopsis

Both Yuk-ling, a busy Hong Kong mother of two, and Chi-ying, a young single woman from a remote village in northern China, work in electronics factories owned by the same foreign corporation, manufacturing identical electronic components. After a decade of job growth and increasing foreign investment in Hong Kong and South China, both women are also participating in the spectacular economic transformation that has come to be called the South China miracle. Yet, as Ching Kwan Lee demonstrates in her unique and fascinating study of women workers on either side of the Chinese-Hong Kong border, the working lives and factory cultures of these women are vastly different.In this rich comparative ethnography, Lee describes how two radically different factory cultures have emerged from a period of profound economic change. In Hong Kong, "matron workers" remain in factories for decades. In Guangdong, a seemingly endless number of young "maiden workers" travel to the south from northern provinces, following the promise of higher wages. Whereas the women in Hong Kong participate in a management system characterized by "familial hegemony," the young women in Guangdong find an internal system of power based on regional politics and kin connections, or "localistic despotism."Having worked side-by-side with these women on the floors of both factories, Lee concludes that it is primarily the differences in the gender politics of the two labor markets that determine the culture of each factory. Posing an ambitious challenge to sociological theories that reduce labor politics to pure economics or state power structures, Lee argues that gender plays a crucial role in the cultures and management strategies of factories that rely heavily on women workers.

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Customer Reviews

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Yuk-ling, age forty-three, assembles high-end audio systems in a brightly lit, air-conditioned shop floor in a modern factory building in Hong Kong. The pay that she brings home, about US $600, is low by local standards, but it supplements the family income and helps pay the mortgage subscribed under a government sponsored home-ownership program. The flexible hours allow her to bring her two daughters to day care and kindergarten, and the relaxed atmosphere of the factory gives much autonomy to line female workers, who more or less control the shop. These "matron workers" have been in the same factory for decades, their skills allow them to produce small batches of complex products with miniaturized features, but the lack of promotion prospects and the threat of plant closure hang over their future.Chi-ying is a "dagongmei", a twenty-two-year-old working girl from the countryside, lured to Shenzhen by the city lights and the prospects for a better life. She works eleven hours a day, sometimes more, six days a week, for about US $35 a month. She wears a uniform and has to follow strict rules, enforced by line leaders and supervisors who only promote their own locals. She needs a "leave seat permit" to go to the bathroom and gets fined whenever she breaks a regulation. In the factory dormitory, she shares a shower with about fifty coworkers from the same Hubei province. Because of state laws dictating that those born in the countryside cannot permanently leave their villages, and familial pressure for young women to marry by their late twenties, she knows that she won’t stay in Shenzhen indefinitely. She has plans for her future: accumulate a dowry, marry on her own terms, and perhaps open a small shop.The two factories are owned by the same foreign corporation, they are located a few miles away across the northern border of Hong Kong, they produce similar products, and yet they could not offer more dissimilar worlds of labor. Whereas the women in Hong Kong participate in a management system characterized by "familial hegemony", the young women in Guangdong find an internal system of power based on regional politics and kin connections, or "localistic despotism".This fascinating comparative ethnography can be read at three different levels. The first is a rich description of the

working lives and factory cultures of these women, whose years of hard toil lay behind the spectacular economic transformation that has come to be called the South China miracle. More theoretically inclined readers will find a solid social science apparatus, in which the author mobilizes both feminist scholarship and Marxist labor studies before offering her own perspective on gender, class and localism.On a third level, it is also possible to read this study as a personal journey of a young female PhD student grown up in Hong Kong and trained at UC Berkeley, who negociates access to fieldwork and shares the experiences of shop floor women by working side by side with them and observing their everyday lives. In the end, the research fieldwork ends badly: the social scientist is barred access to the Shenzhen factory by suspicious managers who accuse her of fueling social unrest, and the Hong Kong factory is closed because it is no longer economically viable. What happens next to the matron workers and the maiden laborers is left to the imagination of the reader.

The second chapter in this book produces an amazingly deep study of potential theoretical explanations (Marxist, feminist and her own hybrid) for the corporate cultures found in two southern Chinese factories. Lee explains that the factories, while owned by the same company, are microcosms of radically different cultures on and off the Chinese mainland.While her theory is interesting and well studied, she hangs all of it on two small anecdotes; one story of life in each of the factories. While anecdotes reveal realities, I believe we would be hard pressed to think of a single phenomenon that did not occur somewhere in a nation of 1.3 billion people. It seems quite possible that she came up with her theory and then looked at a few of the thousands of factories in southern China until she found some that displayed what she wanted. She simply does not enough people to make me believe that she it really seeing a difference that generalizable or important. She may understand these two factories well, but to make a book like this worthwhile, I'd like it to offer understanding of a larger subculture than that.

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