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Ploughshare Village

CULTURE
AND CONTEXT
IN TAIWAN

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WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS
Seattle and London

Preface to the 2015 Edition

In July 1972 my wife, Barbara, and I, together with our nine-month-old daughter, Cindy, moved into the working-class village of Lei-ci-be, which I translated into English as "Ploughshare," planning to do a little more than a year of fieldwork. Barbara, a recent college graduate already planning a career in medicine, wanted to experience local life as a village mother, cooking and washing, while doing some research on the side about breast-feeding. Our stay, however, did not work out as planned.

To be sure, the presence of my family alleviated some of the suspicion that communities have often felt toward young foreigners engaging in what to them was an incomprehensible enterprise, and our fat, white baby girl melted the hearts of a lot of local people. But there was the matter of pathogens, and Cindy had intermittent bouts of respiratory disease until November, when one of them turned her blue and we decided it was time to bail. It had not helped that I was so obsessed with doing good fieldwork that I sometimes dumped unnecessary burdens on my family. So Barbara and Cindy returned to the United States, and I stayed in Ploughshare until the following April, managing to finish a version of my research. It got me a job at the

University of Washington, and we moved to Seattle, where Barbara started medical school in the fall of 1977, and where she wrote an article titled "Lactation and Menstruation in Cultural Perspective," which was published in *American Anthropologist* and was partly based on the research she had done in Ploughshare.

I returned to Ploughshare for seven weeks in the summer of 1978, this time alone, collecting data mostly on changes in family economy during the period of rapid economic development since my first fieldwork. I drafted a monograph and submitted it to a university press, which rejected it. A year later, a heavily revised draft was rejected by the same press. By that time, finding myself within a whisker of being denied tenure, I asked Margery Lang, the editor for the publication program at the University of Washington's School of International Studies, if they would consider the book on a short timeline and get peer review completed quickly enough for my tenure decision in the fall. Fortunately, the then-anonymous Myron Cohen of Columbia University praised the manuscript in his report, University of Washington Press accepted it as a School of International Studies publication, and it appeared in 1982 as *Ploughshare Village: Culture and Context in Taiwan*.

Skip to April 2005. On one of my periodic visits to the now prosperous and wealthy Taiwan, I visited Ploughshare again and presented a slide show in the community hall, showing pictures from the 1972-73 and 1978 field trips. Lee Yen-ying, a local schoolteacher who had been a child during my fieldwork year, prepared a colorful poster to advertise the evening event, and fifty or sixty people of all ages showed up. I had been back several times in the interim, so there was little that surprised me about the physical setting, though people had, of course, aged greatly. Only a few remained from the older generation, who had been so forthcoming with their observations and analyses to the young fieldworker I once was. The children captured in the slides, running and laughing, were now responsible adults sitting quietly in the rows of folding chairs, while a new generation of children watched with little idea of what Ploughshare had been like in the time of their grandparents.

I have continued to go back to Ploughshare and nearby Sanxia, most recently in 2010. Everything is, of course, modern now in Taiwan; most families have all the amenities of contemporary life, including cars, air-conditioning, and the Internet. Two traffic lights regulate both the fleets of trucks shuttling to and from the numerous low-tech factories that now dot the former farmland of Cap-sa:-thi immediately to the south, and the streams of weekend tourists headed out in the family car to fish, splash, hike, and barbecue in the mountains be-

and. The Ciam family store was still there, selling a little fresh food and a little this and that, but since 2007 it had had to compete with the Eleven store a few meters up the street.

The region has been transformed along with the village. The former bumpy bus ride from Taipei to Sanxia on crowded two-lane roads is now a twenty-minute drive on the freeway (outside of rush hour at least), and Sanxia itself is a doughnut. The outer ring consists of high-rise apartment buildings and three- and four-story commercial-residential properties, along with the campus of Taipei University in the former rice fields between the town and Ganyuan. In the hole of the doughnut, the Old Town is still centered on the Zushi Temple and the former Store Street (Tiam-a Kei). The temple is now an architectural and cultural tourist destination as well as a place for festival and individual worship of the Ancestral Teacher. The street, now called the Old Street, was lovingly redeveloped by the Ministry of Cultural Construction at the turn of the century, and accurate replicas of Taisho-period storefronts sell croissants, for which Sanxia has become famous, along with such exotic products as Pu'er tea. There are several galleries and museums.

If the built environment is thoroughly transformed after forty years, the social environment is even more so. Previously, older men were literate mainly in Japanese, and older women were not literate at all; now everyone is expected to go to college. Many of the children pictured in my old Ploughshare slides have moved out to pursue careers in nearby cities, returning to the ancestral village only on weekends to visit their aging parents. Perhaps the most important change is that Taiwan no longer has an urban-rural divide. In the 1970s, conversation in Ploughshare, especially among older and middle-age people, had much to do with kinship, marriage, and what so-and-so said about such-and-such within the community. People knew about international politics, gold prices, and the latest political gossip, but these were things of the outside, and even going to Taipei meant entering a slightly alien world. By the late 1980s or 1990s, however, there was a single society and a single culture among young adults and adolescents. Although metropolitan Taipei was richer and more prestigious than a peripheral town like Sanxia, let alone the former coal miners' village of Ploughshare, they were all part of a newly democratic, very egalitarian Taiwan obsessed with the politics of ethnicity and nationalism and with the quest to make money.

Even international differences have been bridged. Then, China was the Communist enemy that the Guomindang (Nationalists; Kuomintang) was going to counterattack; now, just about everyone has visited China as a tourist, and many people have lived there for months or

years as part of the Taiwanese business and manufacturing community. Barbara and I have three times entertained people from Ploughshare at our home in Seattle, including a graduate student in clinical psychology and the family of a dentist with three successful clinics, one of them across the street from Taipei University in Sanxia. Renaming Taipei County as New Taipei City in 2010 symbolized the fusing of urban and rural communities and cultures into a single Taiwan society: urban, wealthy, and educated; cosmopolitan, democratic, and contentious. Ploughshare is now as much a part of that Taiwan as anywhere else is; in some ways it is more a neighborhood than a community in the sense in which I portrayed it in *Ploughshare Village*.

The world of the village as village is thus gone now, and we might ask what we still have to learn from a book written about what it was like in another time. When I wrote *Ploughshare Village*, I was interested in questions of household economy, of social structure, and, as the subtitle suggests, of how social, political, and geographic contexts shape culture and everyday behavior. I was also interested in adaptation, in how a culture and society imported to Taiwan from China had adapted and changed over the course of 150 years of East Asian history. And I was interested in contributing to Chinese studies, a field of study that had been exiled, since the Communist revolution in 1949, from the inaccessible People's Republic to the peripheries of the Sinic world in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

These questions seem quaint in 2015. In 1999 I published a retrospective reflection on what I called the "golden age of 'China' ethnography," noting that anthropological works written about Taiwan between the 1950s and 1980s carry three biases of their times, which I called "cultural holism, adaptationism, and synchronicism" (Harrell 1999, pp. 214–21). Because *Ploughshare Village* is also a product of that time, it too is partly a product of these biases, which I would like to briefly examine here.

CULTURAL HOLISM

Even though *Ploughshare Village* pays attention to the historical and political context of the island, the region, and the community, it still proceeds from an assumption that there is a thing, a culture, that can be studied as a whole and in isolation from the national and international discourses and political economy in which it is embedded. The larger context is seen as *external* to the community; and although it influences the community, it is not part of what we are studying. Two examples of this are the school and the factory.

Even though little girls in yellow sailor hats and little boys in yellow baseball caps trundled off to Min-yi School every morning in

1972–73, I considered what they did there to be irrelevant to the study of the community, and I hardly mentioned the school. And even though almost every day for my ten months in the village I walked by Township Representative Kou Pou-kim's factory employing aboriginal workers from Taiwan's mountains, I never thought to go in there and did not mention it at all in the book. The coal mines, the pushcart railway, the knitting factories run by wealthier Ploughshare people were part of What I Was Studying, but the school and the factory with the aboriginal workers were not. I was still trying to do what in the anthropology of those days was called a "community study," and the boundaries of the community were pretty clear. In retrospect, it seems like I lost some important opportunities.

ADAPTATIONISM

Another unfortunate bias is the assumption that this thing, this cultural whole, *adapts* to changing political and economic circumstances rather than somehow being part of them. I point the arrows of causation in a single direction, *from* the outside world of the Guomindang, the East Asian political economy, and the trends of global modernization (the term *globalization* was not yet widely used) *to* the changes in religion, social structure, and family economy that are the topics of the book. In my analysis, the people of Ploughshare carried Chinese culture from somewhere else to Ploughshare Point, where the village sits, and adapted it. This made the culture described in *Ploughshare Village* into a variation on a larger Chinese theme, rather than something to be described and analyzed in its own right.

SYNCHRONICISM

It is striking, looking back from the present day, that the ethnographies of the golden age, including *Ploughshare Village*, assumed not only that there was a cultural whole that adapted to the culture's context but also that this cultural whole somehow did not change. An example I brought up in my 1999 article shows this very clearly. In those days, most of us were obsessed with the simplistically Durkheimian notion that whatever religion meant for the individual believer, it reflected the structure of society. And thus the bureaucracy of higher- and lower-level deities naturally reflected the imperial bureaucracy of the Qing dynasty. But we neglected the obvious fact that the people of Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s had not lived under the imperial bureaucracy for two and a half generations, and we thus passed over the equally obvious question of why people who had been educated in Japanese and then in Mandarin by two different colonial governments, both of which dismissed Taiwan's folk religion as backward

superstition, still organized their religion around a bureaucracy that had disappeared when their grandparents were young. Rather than taking this as a confirmation of the right way to understand religion, we should really have asked why.

Perhaps another reason for selective and incomplete attention to history is that history was not a topic that could be freely discussed or written about in Taiwan between 1945 (actually, probably between 1937 or earlier) and 1987. Taiwan in the golden age was under the rule of a repressive Leninist dictatorship, which had established its rule most conclusively by massacring ten to twenty thousand of its democratic opponents (no one knows the exact number) in what became known as the February 28 Incident of 1947. And it had continued to legitimize its rule by teaching an extremely party-centered historical narrative that both relegated Taiwan to the sidelines of its own history and constructed a fantasy-history and fantasy-geography of an imagined (almost hallucinated) China. The regime arrested people who challenged these fantasies, making us afraid for our friends if we circulated any challenge locally and, craven as it possibly was, afraid for our own visas and our ability to continue our work. *Ploughshare Village*, to its credit, does mention the gap between the historical fantasy and the real past, but it does not dwell on it. It was best to pretend that Taiwanese culture was Chinese, and that it had an unchanging essence.

As I pointed out in my 1999 article, all this changed because of a combination of changes in the discipline of anthropology and, perhaps more important, alterations in the island. I can do no better than quote at length—with a few modifications—from that earlier work:

If the theoretical/political critique of functionalist ethnography compelled at least a partial move away from synchronicism, adaptationism, and cultural holism in writing the ethnography of Taiwan-as-China, it was changes in Taiwan itself that pushed ethnography the rest of the way. The "Taiwan Miracle" of course came first, and foreigners who visited Taiwan in the late '80s after sojourns in China realized that there had not just been adjustments around the edges, adaptation of old wine in new bottles, but a profound and thorough transformation. As early as 1988 and 1989 I was amazed to find vacation villas for the rich in sight of Ploughshare Village, villagers running tourist attractions, four-story houses with hardwood floors and designer furniture, and more profoundly, a young-adult generation whose world was simply much wider and more complex than that of their grandparents. No family lived entirely in the village anymore, either physically or mentally. Ordinary people, many of them with college education and technical or professional jobs, no longer tried to figure out what

I was doing there, but in fact helped me design and carry out my survey research. It was simply no longer possible to write about anything *except* as an aspect of change, of history, of the narrative (no longer the blueprint), of a family, a place, or an occupation.

This, however, was only part of it. The other part was the freeing of social and political discourse about Taiwan. From not being able to mention February 28 to having it declared a holiday, from one-party dictatorship and elections that were nothing but patronage contests to having a party spin off to the *right* of the Guomindang, with its support mainly from young professionals rather than grumpy old army officers, from Taiwan province to just Taiwan to thoughts, at least, of someday—all this disrupted the possibility of a Chinese culture that encompassed Taiwan. In the midst of the identity debates, which raged for decades on cable TV and not just in intellectual magazines or scholarly journals, it became downright ludicrous to hold to the old assumptions of cultural holism. Common threads, of course—this is why Taiwanese business investors do so much better in China than Westerners do, and why even the Taiwan nationalist hero Peng Ming-min had no trouble acknowledging his Chinese roots in a 1996 TV presidential debate. But commonalities, connections, similarities and differences, all these are a far cry from the net of Chinese culture or the set of uniform cultural principles that guided ethnographic writing in the Golden Age.

And finally, not only was Taiwan freed from the shackles of having to represent China; China was freed from its imaginary confinement in the very small space of Taiwan. In the early 1980s, a few American anthropologists were given the opportunity to do fieldwork in China; by about 1986 the gates were wide open, and just about everyone who had contributed to the Golden Age on Taiwan at least tried his or her hand at China. Some stayed and some returned, but nobody investigating Taiwan was doing so anymore because China was inaccessible, and nobody who wanted to know about China was forced to come to Taiwan as a surrogate. We were free to draw connections where we saw them, but not to assume them in advance of the ethnographic enterprise. The only unfortunate aspect of this change in scholarly habits was that people stopped paying so much attention to Taiwan [Harrell 1999, pp. 223–25].

Given the dated nature of *Ploughshare Village's* theoretical and conceptual assumptions, what can we gain from reading it in the twenty-first century? I think there is still plenty.

Probably most important, there are just the facts. Of course, the theoretical context of the time a book is written partly determines which facts are there, but the ones that are there can be useful for several reasons. First and perhaps ironically, those ahistorical facts

can be used in writing history. My slide shows demonstrated that a photographic and, by extension, a written record of an earlier time can be of interest to local people, and as I write this I have been asked to contribute photos from 1972-73 to a planned exhibition of "Old Sanxia" pictures at a local gallery. But more than that, facts can be of use to professional historians. Reading *Ploughshare Village* gives us one of the few records of a particular historical era, and in fact the chapters "Ploughshare in the Socioeconomic System," "The Changing Nature of Work," and "Social Inequality" open a window into the details of an era of rapid social change, which otherwise might be lost or at least telescoped when the definitive histories of "Taiwan's economic miracle" are written.

Second, a book like *Ploughshare Village* gives us a clear view of the material world of the time. To know that refrigerators were mainly a status symbol in 1972, placed in the guest room and used to store only beer and soda, and that by 1978 they were a household necessity, placed in the kitchen and used to keep food fresh for a day or two, is to relive a time that exists otherwise only in memory. And it also tells us something about the social function of prestige goods, even though today it might be a Mercedes or a memento from a Parisian honeymoon rather than a humble refrigerator that serves the same social purpose.

That it is mainly the facts that survive from earlier ethnography is to be expected. The study of society is not like the study of natural science—knowledge of society is not cumulative like knowledge of nature. We move from one paradigm to another, assuming for a relatively short time that the new one is better or more accurate or less politically objectionable than the last. But in time (sometimes in a very short time) we discard the new one in favor of something else, and occasionally we even resuscitate part of the earlier one, though usually under a new name and often without acknowledging the debt. And I venture here to say that the explanatory value of earlier paradigms might be working when we look at *Ploughshare Village*.

Despite historical change, there do seem to be some threads of cultural assumptions that extend all the way from the Chinese ancestral home to today's Taiwan and beyond. In particular, the concern with demonstrating social status in order to preserve face is something that was mentioned by analysts of Chinese culture from Arthur Smith (1899) to Fei Xiaotong (1948) to me, in my own work in *Ploughshare*, and something that we need to know if we are going to understand the East Asian world. Just because we paid too little attention to change and context during the golden age does not mean there is no continuity. Perhaps by looking at old works like *Ploughshare Village*, we can get a better idea of what has changed and what has not.

Even at the distance of four decades, I still want to acknowledge those who led me to Taiwan and to Ploughshare, and who supported my work during the 1970s and afterward. My advisers Arthur P. Wolf, the late G. William Skinner, and Renato I. Rosaldo set high standards of scholarship that I have tried ever since, mostly in vain, to match. Li Yih-yuan and the late Wang Sung-hsing arranged for me to be a visiting researcher at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, and gave me institutional and intellectual support during some trying times.

During various trips to Taiwan, friends and colleagues offered me hospitality and encouragement, including Emily Ahern (Martin), Bob Martin and Katherine Gould-Martin, Robert Weiss and Jane Chu, Lung-sheng and Margaret Mian Yan Sung, Bill Speidel, the late William Newell, and especially my fellow Adoga, Rob Weller.

Several people gave me helpful comments on drafts of the book manuscript, including Barbara Harrell, the late Jim Townsend, the late Jack Dull, the late Jim Palais, Arthur Kleinman, David Spain, Susan Greenhalgh, and Bud Winans.

Margery Lang of the School of International Studies was most instrumental in getting *Ploughshare Village* published in 1982. She had an oversize sense of professional ethics, however, and would not let me thank her in print. She is gone now, but readers should know how much help she provided. Others who aided in various aspects of publication were Wilhelmina Savenye, who printed the pictures; Jeanne Woo, who drew the maps; Lisa Kennedy, the able editor; and Rose Fishman, the compositor. This time around, Lorri Hagman, my longtime editor and friend, has been instrumental.

I am most thankful of all to Barbara Harrell, who not only endured the hardships of rural Taiwan in the 1970s, contributing substantially to the success of my fieldwork, but who also, for the more than forty years since then, has been my loyal supporter, my severest and most constructive critic, and my best friend through thick and thin.

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