**Chen Ying, in collaboration with Claude Aubert,
*The Peasants of Mancang : the Chronicle of a Taiwanese
village***

Paris, Karthala-INRA, 2003, 386 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 Chen Ying, a Taiwanese anthropologist, spent the year from 1979 to 1980 sharing the daily lives of the villagers of Mancang, in the district of Yunlin, to the north of the big agricultural plain on Taiwan's west coast. This book is the product of this field study undertaken by the author at the peak of the "economic miracle" period. Mancang is a village of 1,100 inhabitants. It is one of those Hokkien communities that, having migrated there from Fujian more than two hundred years ago, have maintained the traditions of their native province and still speak the south Fujianese dialect" (*minnan hua*). The writer worked alongside the peasants in their long days in the fields, took part in their traditional festivals and shared in their conversation over cups of tea in the evenings. She offers us her analysis in this crowded monograph, allowing the local people to speak through it. The village's sleepy exterior masks a tough society in which individuals pursue their personal strategies against a background of farming routines and family rituals : Cheng Ying relates its history and its stories too.
- 2 While other books have succeeded in describing in more specialised ways various aspects of the Chinese peasantry, the great diversity of the themes here dealt with offer us a comprehensive grasp of the peasants' social lives and the interconnections between the different spheres of their everyday existence. In the first part of the book,

devoted to work, the writer examines the agricultural production, the jobs that are done, the mutual help systems and the question of money. The second part, on the family, deals with the institution of marriage, the place of children and the handing down of family inheritance. Lastly, in the third part entitled “Powers”, she looks at people’s attitudes to death, to their ancestors and their gods, and at their sources of authority. Beyond the anthropological aspect, the book’s interest is above all historical. In 1980, the real improvement in the condition of the peasantry dated back only a dozen years and the village was living through a period of change. The sudden impact of modernity upon traditional practices and the subsequent process of adaptation impelled Mancang into rapid transition. Today, this society has disappeared ; restoring it is also a work of memory.

- 3 In the author’s view, modernisation has been successful thanks to the peasants’ great capacity for adaptation and to the pragmatic combination of traditional and modern techniques. One peasant puts it like this : “I started growing foxtail millet ten years ago. I was one of the first in our village [. . .] After that, I stopped for a while and started instead to grow mint. But, when most of the mint distilleries went bust, I went back to foxtail millet.” The lure of profit, opportunism, the taste for speculation and innovation were thus enough to push these people, the inheritors of one of the oldest agricultural civilisations in the world, into assimilating new techniques. Furthermore, modernisation did not lead to social polarisation ; on the contrary, it toned down the disparities. Agrarian reforms encouraged the spread of small and medium-sized farms, whereas the former domination of the great families was weakened by the diversification of sources of income and the availability of work elsewhere. The landowners could no longer exploit family labour. They now had to respect the rules of the market. Nor did the rural exodus cause any serious unrest, thanks to the development of communications : intersecting flows of people and capital wove complex links between town and country. There was no opposition between modernity and tradition, between two styles and rhythms of life : rather, there was a juxtaposition of two complementary aspects of Taiwan’s rural society, a society imbued with modernity and in close touch with the cities.
- 4 The modernisation of the village seems to have followed a Western model. The development of social structures shows individuals becoming increasingly autonomous, by comparison with the traditional social stratification and especially in relation to the family. The institution of marriage has undergone some revealing changes. Choosing a spouse becomes more free, while parental authority weakens over offspring now financially independent by the time they marry. During the ceremony itself, the rituals tend towards recognising the couple as an entity, rather than celebrating the pre-eminence of the family. Families are splitting up earlier ; households become independent and free to define their individual strategies. The apparent ease of this modernisation is explained mainly by the flexibility of institutions and by the villagers’ pragmatic and utilitarian approach to tradition, as well as to human relationships.
- 5 The author’s second significant thesis is that sociability in the countryside is essentially mediated, as manifested by the proliferation of intermediaries. They come to intervene in all spheres of social life, whether this be selling a piece of land, finding a spouse or adopting a child. To avoid the risk of conflict, another constant element in social life is “to seek [to establish] a relationship” (*zhao guanxi*) with negotiators, in principle ones from outside. These relationships are cultivated at informal meetings, in groups

forming spontaneously. While these gossip sessions or “drinking clubs” sometimes lead to serious expenditure, it is considered a sort of investment in a “friendship strategy”. “Making friends” is, by inviting people out to eat and drink, a way of establishing socially useful connections. Links can be strengthened by according someone honorary status within the family, a godfather/sponsor, a blood brother. Here again, this reflects the growing individualisation of social life outside the family circle. The traditional codes are maintained but elective groupings and, more generally, relationships of one’s own choice are taking over from the old solidarity networks based on family connections.

- 6 The mutual aid system, particularly well researched, leaves nothing gratuitous in people’s exchanges : in human relationships the approach becomes one of usefulness. Given the ever-present shortages of labour, mutual aid among the peasants consists in swapping work days so as to avoid taking on day-workers during the harvest. It is based on an economic calculation, as one peasant woman puts it : “When you work for other people, it’s like putting money in the bank.” The work, once done, has to be paid back, and within a limited timescale. Peasants far prefer the system of mutual aid to taking on labour. Thus, declining to be paid after one has been hired or turning up spontaneously on a harvesting day when labour is short : these are good ways of initiating a mutual aid relationship. Again, we find here the preference for roundabout transactions, so characteristic of the Mancang peasants.
- 7 The history of Mancang in this time, as presented to us by Cheng Ying, is certainly one of successful modernisation. Traditions have proved sufficiently flexible to allow the development of social structures and economic advance, all this without any loss of cultural identity. Religious practice remains extremely vigorous, attesting the permanence of a symbolical world that modernity has not weakened.
- 8 A great attribute of this research is its richness of detail and the accurate transcription of the Mancang residents’ verbal testimony. Colourful anecdotes, sometimes taking on the style of a soap opera and bringing the villagers to vivid life, can often be more revealing than long analyses. From them is distilled an overall view of rare consistency, throwing new light upon all the subtleties of Chinese social life. This book, an extremely enjoyable read, is like the Chinese world that it describes : amid such abundant life, one senses a profound conviction of universal unity, a belief that all things and all people are in their rightful places, in an all-pervasive harmony contributing to the prosperity of all.