

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SCOTT SIMON, *Sweet and Sour: Life-Worlds of Taipei Women Entrepreneurs*. Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003. xii, 246 pp., plates, glossary (paper). ISBN 0-7425-1609-1.

Scott Simon has written an engaging study, in *Sweet and Sour*, of women entrepreneurs in Taipei. He uses a collection of life-stories of women whose businesses range from running a global fashion design empire to selling soy milk from a breakfast stand. The sensitivity with which Simon relates the stories, and the way that he allows himself to be a presence in the narratives, adds an intimacy and humanity that is too often missing in anthropological studies.

Each of the stories is a remarkable glimpse into the motivations and difficulties for women entrepreneurs in Taipei today. Taken as a whole, the author presents the reader with more of a collage than a coherent narrative that builds a specific thesis. It is, therefore, not always clear how one story builds on the next and a logical order sometimes eluded me. Nonetheless, this technique gives the reader a strong sense of the complexity of gender in the Taiwanese context that is, in fact, truer than an artificially imposed order would have been.

While there did not seem to be an over-arching thesis to the book, there were a number of themes which reoccurred throughout, and Simon deftly ends each chapter by pulling out some of them so that continuity comes through by the sum of stories rather than the progression. The themes that he deals with are numerous, but the ones that stood out most prominently were empowerment and identity. The background to the stories was persistently the massive social and economic changes that have occurred in Taiwan in the last fifty years.

Simon upholds the idea that entrepreneurship can be a means to empowerment. However, he also points out that gender was not always central to the narratives, and that empowerment took place within the traditional family model as often as by total rejection of it. As could be expected, entrepreneurship could be used as a strategy to escape from abusive or disempowering relationships. This could be seen, for instance, in the story of a woman who left an abusive relationship, with her baby, divorced her husband and eventually opened up a chain of boutique cafés. Alternatively, the story of a stonecutter, whose husband manages the company's production in China while she manages the finances and orders, showed that entrepreneurship can provide power and independence while maintaining more traditional relationships. Still other stories, such as that of a ritual goods seller, show how entrepreneurship can be empowering through escape from alienating jobs, and illustrate that while the predominant gender structure can be an obstacle, the role of agency to work within that structure should not be overlooked.

One could expect that gender identity was at the forefront of the investigation, and this is certainly the case, but there were a number of different forms of identity that weave through the book, such as sexual, class and ethnic.

The later forms of identity are dealt with particularly well by Simon. Taiwan today is in the middle of a tumultuous period in regard to its ethnic and national identity, with the “Taiwanese” asserting their difference from Mainland Chinese and China. The issue of independence and the dangerous consequences that this direction may entail is an issue that is pervasive in the media and in everyday conversations.

Particularly illustrative of discourses of Taiwanese versus Chinese in this book were the stories of an eel exporter whose Taiwanese identity is partially formed in opposition to the “culturally backward and lazy” mainlanders. Illustrating a different perspective, Simon gives the story of a former beauty queen who now runs a non-profit dog shelter and whose mainland, elite background introduces the tensions and contradictions of re-defining identity at a time when “Taiwanese-ness” is gaining cultural ascendancy. Simon also brilliantly includes narratives from aboriginal women, allowing for the inclusion of more marginalised expressions of identity, and providing an alternative to the Taiwanese/Mainlander dichotomy.

Simon has presented us with a fascinating look at women entrepreneurs that will be relevant for scholars of gender (especially in the Chinese/Taiwanese context), globalisation, identity, small-scale economy and for anyone interested in social change in modern Taiwan. *Sweet and Sour* is remarkable for the depth and sensitivity of the stories that the author presents. Simon’s masterfully executed collection of life histories, as a whole, brings unique perspectives and provides a compelling view of the intricacies and complexities of identity and empowerment among Taiwanese women entrepreneurs. The stories were all so engaging that the brevity of each made me wish at times that the author had chosen fewer and gone into more depth for each. However, because the life stories were all so fascinating and all added significantly to the overall picture, it would be difficult to decide where cuts could have been made.

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