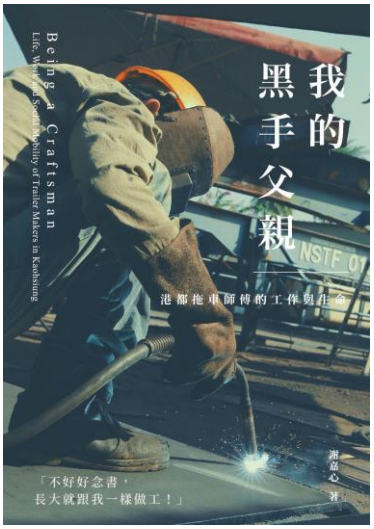
MY GREASE MONKEY FATHER: THE LIFE AND WORK OF A KAOHSIUNG TRUCK MECHANIC

我的黑手父親：港都拖車師傅的工作與生命



A sociologist's tribute to her blue-collar father, this is a moving portrait of a generation of working-class men in the boom times of Taiwan's largest industrial port, as well as a personal reflection on the comfort, security, and success the author enjoyed as a result of her father's sacrifices.

In Taiwan, mechanics who repair and maintain heavy machinery and vehicles are known as "black hands", since their hands are always covered in grease. Author Hsieh Chia-Hsin's father entered the trade of tractor trailer manufacturing and repair when he was still a teen. For five decades he has plied his trade, using his two blackened hands to support a family of four, raising both the author and her younger brother. Yet, her parents always encouraged them to study hard so they could escape from the bonds of physical labor that shackled their father.

Taking these words to heart, the author hit the books and tested into top schools, but all the while, she wondered why her parents seemed to look down on their own professions. This question was still with her when she entered graduate school to study sociology, and the lives, work, and social mobility of the black hands of her hometown, Kaohsiung, became the subject of her master's thesis.

Adapted from her thesis, *My Grease Monkey Father* starts from the industrial landscape of Siaogang District, Kaohsiung, an important manufacturing and shipping hub for southern Taiwan, describing a

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social milieu born of Taiwan's miraculous 20th century transformation from an agrarian economy to one dominated by manufacturing. Having established this social and economic setting, the author turns her attention to the life stories of working men like her father, who, through an apprenticeship system that provided young men from the countryside a second family as much as it did vocational training, learned to become skilled laborers who could hold their own in a newly industrialized economy. Going further, the author delves into the philosophy and values of these blue-collar tradesmen, the limiting labels applied to them by society, and the resulting self-image they maintained.

Combining field research and ethnographic records, *My Grease Monkey Father* challenges the narrow lens through which Taiwanese society evaluates "a good career". The author's flowing, readable prose lends dignity to her subjects, and provides an integrated socio-economic analysis of the tractor trailer repair industry's boom times during Taiwan's economic miracle.

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Author Hsieh Chia-Hsin holds a master's degree in sociology from National Tsing Hua University. Her thesis on the lives, work, and social mobility of tractor trailer mechanics, received the Taiwanese Sociological Association's Award of Excellence and Master's Thesis Fieldwork Prize, as well as the Taiwan Science Technology and Society Association's Outstanding Master's Thesis Prize. She currently works in the education sector.

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Founder of YO FU, a hybrid food and beverage/cultural space in Kaohsiung, Wu Chih-Hsuan is now deeply involved in local community renewal efforts. A writer and photographer, his photographic works were selected for exhibition in Thailand for three years running, 2019-2021.

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By Hsieh Chia-Hsin
Translated by Chris Findler

Chapter 1: The Red Blood Cells of Taiwan's Economy

01 My home in Kaohsiung's Siaogang District

The high school I tested into was 40 to 50 minutes from my house, so my father usually took me there by motorbike to minimize my commute time.

Morning self-study started at 7:30 a.m., so we generally had to leave the house by 6:45a.m.. My father always took Jhongshan Road, which took us along Siaogang Airport, and then turned on to Kaisyuan Road which brought us to my school. After dropping me off, he would double back to either the Qianzhen District or the Siaogang District where he would work all day.

An important artery, Jhongshan Road cuts straight through old Kaohsiung City from the periphery to its heart. Our home was located just outside of the Siaogang District, south of old Kaohsiung City. Going north on Jhongshan Road, we would ride up Jhongshan 4th Road and 3rd Road. Jhongshan Road goes through Kaohsiung's two major industrial areas: the Qianzhen and Siaogang Districts. We would turn on to Kaisyuan Road just before the Sanduo Shopping District begins on Jhongshan 2nd Road.

My father took me to school every day, rain or shine. Occasionally, if he was held up at work for some reason, my mother would take me. Our daily shuttle continued like this for three years, during which time we experienced our share of accidents, major and minor.

Sitting behind my father on those long trips, I usually had nothing to do. It was during this time that I developed the habits of whiling away the time by watching people or just spacing out.

As I recall, the motorway was always packed with motorbikes. In all seasons and types of weather, I saw riders of all kinds zip by, from those decked out in sleeveless white undershirts, shorts, and flip flops to those completely covered up in long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and gloves to shield themselves from the sun, and everything in between. There was something individualistic and spirited about motorbike riders in Kaohsiung as they dashed along Jhongshan Road with its expansive 14 lanes.

Between 6 and 7 o'clock in the morning, most motorcyclists careening down Jhongshan Road were clad in blue denim shirts, dark jean pants, and thick-soled, heavy leather work boots.

In the heat of summer and the cold of winter, their outfits, just like the black grease stains that graced them, never changed.

Their gear was typical of Kaohsiung's Qianzhen and Siaogang Districts, hubs for plants in a variety of industries and points of convergence for massive numbers of blue-collar workers, who, like my father, rode their motorbikes to work each morning.

Where Blue-Collar Workers Assemble

The Qianzhen and Siaogang Districts were characterized by meticulously laid out streets and austere, sprawling buildings. In addition to Siaogang Airport, on the other side of the lengthy walls we rode past were factories set up when industrial development was just getting underway.

If you traveled from the opposite direction on the route we took, that is, along Jhongshan 1st Road from the high-rises in downtown Kaohsiung toward Siaogang, you'd see more and more of those large perimeter walls on the sides of the road. They served to demarcate Kaohsiung Linhai Industrial Park's 1,560 hectares. In that park alone, there were some 40,000 people employed in over 490 factories.

The park was home to many large factories that were key to Taiwan's economic development, including Taiwan Sugar, China Steel, Tang Eng Iron Works, China Ship Building, and China Petroleum. It was also home to Kaohsiung Ammonium Sulfate, which had a huge impact on industry, but which has since gone out of business, and numerous chemical plants that thrived here for decades. Also located here, the Qianzhen Processing Export Zone, which helped spearhead Taiwan's economic miracle. A center for light industry, it drew many female workers.

Under government guidance, Kaohsiung became Taiwan's center for heavy industry, an undertaking which required an excellent transportation network. Siaogang was a major hub for land, sea, and air transport; home to Taiwan's second largest international airport; and had several docks utilized exclusively by China Ship Building, China Steel, and China Petroleum. Not far from the airport was a vast container yard, known locally as the "Taiwan Sugar Parking Lot". The various modes of transport, tailored to facilitate import and export, provided the ideal environment for industry to connect locally and with the world.

A transportation system set up for industry, however, can never really suit the needs of local residents, no matter how well it's designed. I don't know if it was because the population here was composed primarily of secondary industry workers – nuts and bolts individuals accustomed to deciding for themselves when they wanted to leave for work and how long they wanted to spend on their commute – or because local conditions weren't conducive to the development of a better mass transit system. Siaogang had only one metro station to service the district's swelling population. It was ten minutes by motorbike from our house in Dapingding. As for buses, those were pitifully few and far between, both in terms of routes and frequency. In any case, public transportation was not the best option for local commuters.

Industrial development always comes at a price. Due to the concentration of light, heavy, and chemical industries, the air quality in the Siaogang District was persistently poor. Because I

was born and raised there, however, I never particularly noticed until I went away to college and later working in a city even further north. Whenever I returned to Kaohsiung on holiday and exited the Siaogang station, I would find myself sneezing as my body tried to adjust.

The buildings around here were nothing special to look at. Other than a few clusters of small-scale apartment complexes and the occasional high-rise, most residences were single-family units. The locals preferred living in unattached buildings. New homes, especially in recently developed residential areas, like Dapingding, were marketed with ads touting "Sunny villas near green mountains and blue water". Apartments just didn't sell around here. In addition to the nearby garbage incinerators and industrial zones, the area itself was pocked with pineapple fields and tombs. It was not uncommon to get a whiff of some strange chemical as you walked down the street. Yes, there were mountains, but you could barely make them out. Yes, there was water, but you probably wouldn't want to swim in it. And the air quality, well, it was pretty bad. Despite this, they kept building "villas" as the population grew.

From Gaosong to Dapingding

During the 18 years that I lived in Kaohsiung, we moved once. When I was born, my family lived in Gaosong, close to the border between the Siaogang and Fengshan Districts. This area, built when my grandmother was younger, had many cookie-cutter, three-story, unattached houses. When my grandmother had squirreled away enough money to buy a place of her own, she read about this new residential area in a newspaper ad.

Houses were cheaper here. That was probably why she and my mother bicycled south along Jhongshan, the road I would later take to high school, checking out homes all the way, from their rental in Shihjia in the Qianzhen District to Siaogang where they eventually bought one. After my mother married, she used the money she had saved up while working as the down payment on a house near my grandmother's, so they could be close to each other.

We lived under the airport's flight path, so frequently heard the roar of airplanes passing overhead. The noise never bothered me, however, probably because I grew up with it.

We moved into the house in Dapingding during my final year of high school, just as I was preparing to head off to college. The Metro hadn't opened yet, so I couldn't figure out why my father had decided to buy a place there. I couldn't understand why he would relocate us to the mountains where everything was so far away, to an area that was worse than what we were leaving. And then there were all those tombs there. I've had a thing about tombs since I was a kid. To this day, I can't shake off the dreariness that characterized Dapingding.

But once my father made up his mind, there was no changing it. Maybe it was because he sensed I was upset about the move, but when we were divvying up living spaces, he assigned me the entire third floor. It was a spacious area of 16 pings, or about 50-square meters, including a bedroom, a study, a bathroom, and a storage room, and I had it all to myself. Sure, I had to climb a few more stairs, but I was won over instantly by this special treatment.

Thinking back, my father probably relocated us to a remote area like that for the same reason that my grandmother moved where she did years earlier. New residential areas tend to offer favorable conditions and prices to entice people to purchase homes they would otherwise not consider because of their location. Both my father and grandmother had limited resources at their disposal, so affordability was top priority for them when buying a home. This also explains why my parents decided to take my little brother and me to and from high school. They were trying to make up for the inconvenience of the long commutes.

I think this embodies my father's work ethic and that of others of his generation. Exchanging physical labor for money is what they did and what they couldn't pay for with money, they would pay for in sweat.

Most people here were like this, so if they came across a weird smell or suspicious black smoke when passing through an industrial area, they would simply hold their breath, hit the gas, and try to get out of there as quickly as possible. I'd never seen anybody lodge a complaint or stage a protest.

Locals coexisted with those factories for decades, because Siaogang was their bread and butter. When Taiwan's economy took off in the '60s and '70s, the driving forces behind it were this sprawling, non-descript district and the simple, honest people that resided here.

Siaogang – The Gears Grind Faster

Siaogang developed slowly. Compared with Zhubei, Taichung, and Taipei, cities that change with each visit, new construction projects in Siaogang increased at a plodding, "friendly" pace and the trendy artsy stores that dot the landscapes of other metropolitan areas were a rarity here.

For locals, a swanky bistro with eye-catching dishes was not nearly as enticing as a bento shop offering large chunks of braised pork. Roadside stands that served up indistinct offerings thrived and became an enduring feature of the landscape.

I used to think that the gears of time high above Siaogang would forever grind slowly, unhurriedly, but they have steadily accelerated over the past decade. Since Kaohsiung County and City merged to form a single special municipality, the Siaogang District is no longer off the beaten track and the new residential area of Dapingding is becoming increasingly well known. Buildings with elevators and administrators have begun to crop up around Siaogang Hospital and nearby shops with their ever-changing storefronts reflect the change.

I have a friend I have been close to since grade school. Our families both live in Dapingding. He went to college in Taichung and, later, went to work for Taiwan Sugar in Pingtung. When we return to our hometown for long weekends, we like to meet up, but we now find ourselves agonizing over which shop to go to.

In terms of décor and quality of food, the restaurants that we grew accustomed to after leaving home to pursue studies and work differed in every way from the shops in our old stomping grounds. That said, over the past two or three years, an increasing number of coffee shop chains have been making inroads into our old neighborhood and the inflow of brunch

restaurants is challenging the dietary conviction of farmers and factory workers that "breakfast is breakfast and lunch is lunch".

Not only are the shops changing, even the landscape that we were once used to is gradually disappearing. When my little brother and I got sick as kids, we would go to a pediatric clinic in Guilin. On our way there or to our cram school, we would take a road near the airport with farmland on both sides. The edges of the fields went right up to the airport's perimeter fence and the runway where planes took off and landed was just inside. If our timing was right, we could watch an airplane fly by overhead. The roar of its engines would leave our ears ringing.

I always liked the rice paddies in that area: the emerald seedlings in the planting season, the golden heads just before harvest, the breezes gently sweeping through. The road was narrow and vehicles rare, so the ride was quite pleasant. There was one drawback, though: a constant stench emanating from the hog lot and two or three small junkyards at the end of the road.

Those rice paddies had a special significance for me as a small child just learning about the world. It was the closest thing to a rural life near us. On our rides there, I heard story after story from my parents about planting rice, raising pigs, and what it was like for them growing up in the countryside.

Probably because of its proximity to the airport's flight path, the area developed slowly. Aviation safety regulations placed restrictions on the construction of tall structures and land use. So from the time I was a kid until I was in high school, the area remained pretty much the same.

Things changed, however, after I left home. The "two or three small junkyards" were replaced with a large convenience store and the pig farm – which I credit for my ability to hold my breath so well – and the fields have vanished.

Silent Cogs Driving Taiwan's Economy

The Qianzhen and Siaogang Districts have been strongholds for Taiwan's light and heavy industry, but for years, manufacturing and agriculture occupied the same landscape. Together, the scenery produced by the patch-working together of these two industries and the character of the locals shaped me as a person. I used to gripe a lot about my world back then, but looking back, I now realize that this unassuming place has a certain charm about it.

The second largest city in Taiwan, Kaohsiung was built around manufacturing. The industry that flows through the veins of this unique seaport city give it vigor and vitality that set it apart from the island's other urban centers.

In its heyday, Kaohsiung was the third-largest container port in the world; today, it is ranked 17th. It's not hard to imagine how the factories built up around this port city drove her development and shaped her distinctive character and that of her workforce. Unsung cogs in the wheel that powered Taiwan's economy, these workers have gradually fallen to the wayside of history as the economy slowed. The transportation network, the arteries that feed Taiwan's economic development, have also received little attention.

The transportation infrastructure is crucial to industrial development and Kaohsiung's ideal location made it the cradle of Taiwan's developing trucking industry. Much like red blood cells deliver oxygen throughout the body, tractor-trailers transport goods up and down the island. Mechanics in Kaohsiung use their hands to keep these trucks and, by extension, Taiwan's economy, rolling.

Truck mechanics were an everyday sight here. Where they resided, what they did, and how they lived were all dictated by Taiwan's industrial development.

This book has as its central character my father and as its setting his work and family life which it uses to paint a picture of Kaohsiung's tractor-trailer mechanics, their work, and their personal lives. Prior to delving into the life stories of my father and his fellow mechanics, let's first learn a little about the role tractor-trailers and the trucking industry played in Kaohsiung's development.

02 Tractor-Trailer Basics

Officially dubbed "tractor-trailers", these vehicles are referred to within the industry in Taiwan as "thua-tshia".

Tractor-trailers consist of two main parts coupled together. Indispensable to industry, big rigs are generally utilized to transport heavy machinery, materials, and large objects.

In the language of a traffic safety textbook, a tractor-trailer is composed of a "tractor" or "vehicle" and a "heavy trailer" of which there are two main types: "full-trailers" and "semi-trailers".

Mechanics call the "tractor", or "vehicle", the "tshia-thâu". Made up of the cab and engine, the tractor supplies the power needed to move the entire rig. Notably, a tractor has three axles, while a trailer has two.

Taiwan does not manufacture these types of engines, so tractors are all imported. Mitsubishi, Suzuki, and Meiji from Japan, Mercedes-Benz from Germany, and Volvo from Sweden are the main truck brands seen plying the local roads.

Cab bodies alone are huge, so to keep costs down, various methods are used to import them, two of which are most common. The first is to import the entire tractor, including the cab interior, as a complete unit. The second is to import a drivetrain that consists of two axels ("tshia-tō" in Taiwanese) and an engine. Local plants then produce the cab body ("tshia-tshù-á") and install the interior.

Full-trailers and semi-trailers

Trailers can be divided into two broad categories, "full" and "semi", based on coupling mechanisms employed. The rear of a semi-trailer is mounted on wheels and the front is supported by the kingpin. When in use, the kingpin is inserted above the drive axles on the back of the tractor. When not connected to the tractor, the trailer is supported on the ground by the wheels in the

back and the landing gear at the front. Full-trailers have wheels at both the front and back. When in use, the front is attached behind the third axle at the back of the tractor.

Tractors that pull full-trailers are comparatively long and have room in them to haul freight. Although full-trailers can also be detached and swapped, they are shorter than semi-trailers and additional trailers cannot be attached behind them. In contrast, a semi-tractor consists of only a body and a short coupling shaft, so it cannot carry freight. The semi-trailer has no front wheels and depends on the tractor to tow it.