Disciplined Bodies in Direct Selling

Chien-Juh Gu, Western Michigan University
"This valuable collection offers highly focused but penetrating analyses of different aspects of everyday life in Taiwan, particularly that associated with the vibrant and complex popular culture of the island. Unlike 'big-picture' studies that focus on displays of culture and power—government institutions, economic structures, and public organizations—each of the essays in this volume takes a specific cultural phenomenon, from baseball teams to Amway sales, as a small window into a place where people live and reveal their believable, if often flawed, humanity. This book lends itself to the classroom, for in its specificity each chapter leads to larger, often comparative cultural issues that should capture the imagination of students. It reads with an ease and coherence that is a perfect complement to the serious and complex issues it raises."

—JOSEPH R. ALLEN, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

"This is a powerful, well-written, and well-designed book that addresses the hidden realities of Taiwanese life. With its rich and readable set of essays, The Minor Arts of Daily Life will find a wide readership."

—MURRAY A. RUBINSTEIN, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

The Minor Arts of Daily Life is an account of the many ways in which contemporary Taiwanese approach their ordinary existence and activities. It presents a wide range of aspects of day-to-day living to convey something of the world as experienced by the Taiwanese themselves. What does it mean to be Taiwanese? In what way does life in Taiwan impart a different view of Chinese culture? How do Taiwanese envision and participate in global culture in the twenty-first century? What issues (cultural, social, political, economic) seem to matter most? What does “China” mean to them today?

Focusing on such broadly appealing topics as baseball, movies, gay and lesbian identity, television shows, and night markets, the contributors seek to introduce Taiwanese culture to a broad readership. In lively, nontechnical prose, they approach their topics from a variety of disciplines in ways that will not only give students a comprehensive view of Taiwanese life but also provide them with a range of theoretical perspectives with which to explore this fascinating nation.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: A Taiwanese night market (photo by Shuenn-Der Yu)
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THE
Minor Arts
OF
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POPULAR CULTURE
IN TAIWAN
EDITED BY
David K. Jordan,
Andrew D. Morris,
AND
Marc L. Moskowitz

Map of Taiwan

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Taiwan is often described as a Chinese island. In many ways this is a fair enough description; the population of Taiwan is made up overwhelmingly of speakers of Chinese, and Taiwan's culture is intimately related in many ways to the culture of the mainland's southeastern Fujian Province. However, it is important to note one major way in which it is not “Chinese”: during the last 109 years, Taiwan has been ruled by the ruling government of China for a total of four years. For the remaining 105 years, it has been ruled by regimes Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese that have not controlled the Chinese mainland. This century-plus of independent development has not made Taiwan “non-Chinese” so much as “culturally Chinese, but with a difference.”

For these reasons, the scholar or student who wants to study China must also understand Taiwan. And while the Chinese mainland has been closed to free research by foreign scholars for much of the past half century, Taiwan has provided an open environment for research and has generated an enormous body of English-language literature on topics for which there is no comparable research for mainland China.

Clearly, despite the fact that it is often overshadowed by its giant neighbor, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan is worthy of a study on its own account. One of the twentieth century's most startling examples of economic success—and of the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism—Taiwan is also a shining example of intellectual productivity and artistic creativity.

This book is an account of some of the many ways that people in modern Taiwan approach daily life. It is, of course, not exhaustive. That would not be possible. Our goal has been to touch a wide range of different aspects of everyday life and to convey something of the world as people in Taiwan experience it. What is happiness? Who matters? What does it mean to be Taiwanese?
Disciplined Bodies in Direct Selling
Amway and Alternative Economic Culture in Taiwan
Chien-Juh Gu

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION
Economic changes around the world introduce ever-changing opportunities for profit, for loss, and for social engagement. Commerce has a long history in China, of course, and an intimate relationship with the rise of cities. Taiwan a century ago was an agricultural world, but one with towns and cities full of small shops and wandering peddlers. Today most of the population lives in the island's cities, and the island as a whole has emerged as a powerful marketplace where small shops and wandering peddlers—still on the scene—are joined by department stores, catalog sales, and Internet vendors. In this chapter, Chien-Juh Gu describes the world of “direct selling” by door-to-door vendors partly in the tradition of peddlers of old, but also very much attached to the developing commerce of the present world. She approaches this through a case study of the Amway Corporation in Taiwan.

What makes these modern direct sales agents special is less what they sell or even how they sell it, but rather what selling means to them. In the case of people working for Amway, it is clear that selling means a lot. Recruited from a segment of the Taiwan population with few resources to undertake individual businesses, the sales agents gain from the direct sales corporation a sense of engagement and entrepreneurship that, in its most extreme forms, approaches “religious” dimensions, becoming a core part of the identity of many participants.

Gu describes this to us and seeks to provide an explanation for the remarkable appeal that direct selling has had for urban people in Taiwan. The transformation of society from largely rural to largely urban has changed the class structure, Gu explains. In a place without “old money,” where all the rich are nouveaux riches, the interest in ending up in a higher rather than a lower social stratum is great. Moving up and getting rich—rapid class mobility—becomes a prime goal for much of the population, and direct selling is seen as a route to this kind of advancement.

It is clear that direct selling is quite different from the door-to-door peddling of earlier eras. The phenomenon is more than economic. It is the playing out of a dream stimulated by the critical importance that money now plays for some people’s sense of their place in the world.

Direct selling is a burgeoning labor regime in Taiwan. In the 1990s, more than 2 million Taiwanese people have become distributors, seven hundred thousand of whom are active salespersons in the industry (Xingzhengyuan Gongping Jiaoyi Weiyuanhui 1995). Rather than being an economic activity, direct selling is often described as a religion—or even a cult—in Taiwanese society. In the direct selling community, distributors are trained to behave and talk in a uniform way, and outsiders are often shocked by such an unusual phenomenon. The cultural presentation of direct selling has become a social issue that has yet to be investigated. Many questions remain unanswered: Why do so many Taiwanese people join direct selling? How does direct selling brainwash distributors and unify their vocabularies and behaviors? What sociocultural factors encourage such a unique cultural formation of direct selling in Taiwan? What does direct selling tell us about Taiwanese society today?

In this chapter, I begin by introducing the definition and origin of direct selling and discuss the social context and structural factors that supported the development and growth of this industry in Taiwan. Next, I provide an analysis of a case study—Amway—to demonstrate the alternative economic culture that direct selling has produced in urban Taiwan. Following this analysis, I conclude with the implications of direct selling culture for Taiwanese society.

DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF DIRECT SELLING ORGANIZATIONS (DSO’S)
Direct selling is the face-to-face (salesperson-to-consumer) sale of products. The salespeople or so-called distributors are independent contractors, not employees. Their earnings come from selling at a profit goods that they buy wholesale from one or more manufacturers or distributors. Sometimes distributors are paid a commission by the wholesaler.

For example, if distributor Mary recruits John, then Mary becomes John’s “upline” or “sponsor,” while John is Mary’s “downline.” John recruits Paul and Linda, who become “downlines” for him and also Mary’s “leaves.” These upline-downline relationships develop a pyramid scheme similar to family trees.
Amway established a branch in Taiwan and began its marketing in 1982, Taiwan Family (Taijia) Company was the first direct selling firm in Taiwan. Surprisingly, in spite of the notoriety of direct selling in Taiwan in the early society ever since.

DIRECT SELLING IN TAIWAN

Tai­
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"mouse
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popularity popular parlance, direct selling enterprises became known as
DSOs
Arnway, basically adopt similar systems, and the number of
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marketing vitamins. Later corporations of direct selling, such as Avon, Nu Skin, and
Amway, basically adopt similar systems, and the number of DSOs has been increasing since 1950.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
DIRECT SELLING IN TAIWAN

Taiwan Family (Taijia) Company was the first direct selling firm in Taiwan. It was an international corporation established in 1978, capitalized by American, Japanese, and Taiwanese sources (Liu and Chen 1990). The forerunner of Taiwan Family was the Best Line Company, a corporation that went bankrupt and was accused of illegal business practices in Japan. In the reward system of Best Line, the profits from recruiting downlines exceeded those of selling products to a great extent. Consequently, distributors tended only to recruit new people rather than selling products themselves. Best Line's direct sales became a fraudulent business that had numerous workers but little actual commercial behavior. As a result, Best Line was outlawed in Japan and California; the company then turned to the Taiwanese market with a new firm name-Taiwan Family (Hua 1986).

As with Best Line in Japan, Taiwan Family rewarded its distributors much more for recruiting people than for selling products. Thus many Taiwan Family distributors devoted themselves to recruiting new members instead of selling products. Meanwhile, when joining Taiwan Family, distributors were required to purchase a certain amount of products—mostly detergents. Many distributors paid the membership fee (in other words, bought packages of detergents) for their family members, relatives, or friends out of their own pockets in order to create more downlines. Consequently, most Taiwan Family members ended up accumulating too many products in their home. They were forced to find more downlines by any means possible, not only to earn money but also to seek compensation for the cost of their membership fees. The direct selling in Taiwan Family, therefore, became an expanding web of distributors with little trade.

The consequences of Taiwan Family's reward system soon became a serious problem among members. These distributors requested assistance from the Taiwan Family Company to solve their overstocking problem, but no advice was forthcoming. As a result, they turned to the Consumer's Foundation for help, condemning Taiwan Family for neglecting the problems of its members. The Taiwanese government investigated this case and learned that Taiwan Family, therefore, became an expanding web of distributors with little trade.

Colonial peddlers can be regarded as the forerunners of today's distributors, as salesmen sold tools, tea, and liniment door-to-door (Biggart 1989). The contemporary direct selling industry, however, is highly organized and has sophisticated devices of reward systems. The first formal organization of modern direct selling was the Nutrilite Company in the United States, whose reward system was designed by Lee Mytinger and William Casselberry in 1934 for marketing vitamins. Later corporations of direct selling, such as Avon, Nu Skin, and Amway, basically adopt similar systems, and the number of DSOs has been increasing since 1950.

(see Figure 1). In this example, John, Paul, and Linda are called Mary's "frontlines" because they belong to Mary's same pyramid scheme. Yet each of them, including Mary, is an independent entrepreneur. Biggart (1989) calls the direct selling industry "network direct selling organizations" (network DSOs), highlighting such pyramidal networks in direct selling.

Distributors have several sources of income in network DSOs. First, they make money on goods personally sold—usually about a 30 percent markup between the wholesale and retail prices. Second, distributors can also earn volume purchase bonuses. In other words, the more one buys wholesale from the company, the less one has to pay. Uplines usually charge their downlines more than they pay for the products, so each upline also profits as a wholesaler. Third, distributors earn royalties from the sales of their frontlines and from the sales of their frontlines' own recruits. This royalty usually ranges from 3 to 5 percent, although different companies might have varying policies.

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companies, including Avon and Nu Skin, then followed in Amway’s footsteps and entered Taiwan’s market. Unlike Taiwan Family, these direct marketing firms adopted legal methods of direct selling, and they consequently promoted the development of direct selling in Taiwan (Lin 1994).

In 1991, the Taiwanese government passed a law clearly defining direct selling and establishing specific rules of business management. Since this decree was legalized, the direct selling industry has mushroomed in Taiwan. According to one government survey report, 431 direct selling companies and 2,028,000 distributors were in Taiwan in 1994 (Xingzhengyuan Gongping Jiaoyi Weiyuanhui 1995). It should be noted, however, that most of these distributors were merely consumers (approximately 66 percent)—that is, they only consumed products but did not practice business. Therefore, if we count only the distributors who actually practiced direct selling, 690,000 were active distributors. Direct selling generated a profit of NT $40 billion (U.S. $1.4 billion) in 1994. A later report pointed out that these numbers had increased in 1995 and would continue to increase in the future (Xingzhengyuan Gongping Jiaoyi Weiyuanhui 1995). Lin (1994) also reported that, according to the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, the business profit of direct selling in Taiwan was the sixth highest in the world, and the number of distributors in Taiwan was the fifth highest in the world in 1992. Undoubtedly, direct selling has prospered in Taiwan’s market, and it has also become an alternative labor trend since the 1990s.

As direct selling has become a popular “second job” in contemporary Taiwan, the distribution of this enterprise is disproportionate on this island. Nearly 80 percent of direct selling companies are in the metropolitan areas, especially in northern Taiwan (Xingzhengyuan Gongping Jiaoyi Weiyuanhui 1996). As a result, activities of direct selling such as business meetings, reward ceremonies, and family meetings are much more prevalent in such large cities as Taibei and Taizhong than in rural areas. These activities have become a new social phenomenon in urban Taiwan, and the accompanying cultural presentations are astonishing. Before proceeding to a case study of the Amway Company, I will first illuminate the economic and sociocultural factors within the context of which direct selling emerges in Taiwan.

**SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIRECT SELLING**

Direct selling—an industry that began in Taiwan with a negative and illegal image but turned into a popular business—has absorbed a considerable amount of capital and labor force on the island. In the early 1990s, when the Taiwanese market suffered from economic depression, direct selling was not affected at all. Rather, it began to occupy an important position in Taiwan’s economy. Three structural factors supported this development: (1) postindustrial economic structures and labor trends; (2) capitalized social structures; and (3) the social values of economic success.

**Postindustrial Economic Structures and Labor Trends**

The prevalence of new types of economic activities is closely related to the economic structures of the times. The economic structures that supported the development of direct selling in Taiwan from the 1980s through the 1990s can be attributed to the transformation of two aspects: changes in the larger economic structures and labor trends.

Since 1981, the structural proportions of the agricultural and industrial sectors in Taiwan have been in decline and the service sector has been increasing (see Figure 2). Since 1988, the service sector has occupied more than 50 percent of the whole economic structure and thus dominates Taiwan’s economy (Wu...
On the other hand, labor structure was confronting a transformation coincident with the change in economic structures. The proportion of the labor force in the service sector was growing, while those in the agricultural and industrial sectors were decreasing (see Figure 3).

According to Wu (1994), this transformation in both the larger economic structure and labor trends is a feature of a “service economy” or a “postindustrial society.” In other words, during the period when direct selling was introduced and grew to reign in Taiwan’s market, the economic structures once dominated by industry were becoming service dominated. Hence the larger economic environment since the late 1980s provided great advantages for the direct selling industry, as a new form of service economy, to establish and expand its business in Taiwan.

**Capitalized Social Structures**

In the 1960s, numerous farming tenants became landowners because of the postwar policies of land reform, which consequently allowed real class mobility. Yet the economic structures encountered a transformation in the 1970s, when Taiwan began the process of industrialization and the development of capitalism. The industrial section continued to absorb capital and labor from the agriculture section. As a result, a new working class and a new white-collar class with professional techniques (also called the middle class) emerged in urban areas. Xiao (1988, 1989) uses the term “capitalization” to describe this transformation in social structures as resulting from the change in economic structures. He argues that the change in social structures corresponds to that in the economic development of capitalism; that is, the working class and the white-collar class replace the capitalists and farmers according to the needs of the industrial era. Xiao points out that such “capitalization” has been the main feature of the social structure in Taiwan since the 1970s.

The capitalized social structures have stabilized class structure in Taiwan. For more than two decades, the working class and the middle class have been the main classes in Taiwanese society (Xu 1994). In spite of the continuous differentiation within these two classes, the larger social structure has been very stable. This stability of social structures has made class mobility increasingly difficult in Taiwanese society (Xiao 1988, 1989). From 1950 to 1970, the rapid economic growth in Taiwan created miracles of class mobility. Many small businesses were started because of the prosperous economy during that period. In Taiwanese society, it was believed that the working class, even without capital, could succeed and ascend the social ladder with hard work.

Yet since the 1970s, the social structures in Taiwan have been relatively stabilized, and class mobility is no longer as common as before. Nevertheless, the legacy of “class turnover” from the old times remains in contemporary Taiwanese society. People still believe in the possibility of becoming millionaires and establishing their own businesses, as many capitalists have done in the past. Moreover, the popular folk belief, “Better to be the head of a chicken than the tail of a cow” (Ningwei jishou, huwe niuhou), motivates Taiwanese people to work hard and to climb the social class ladder in any way they can.

Within such social contexts, the successful stories of Amway distributors who became millionaires in a short period of time offer people the hope of possible class mobility through the direct marketing industry. The slogan of direct selling, “no investment, no risk” (lìng chēnghén, wú fēngxiàn), is also a temptation for those who want to own their businesses but lack the capital to do so. For those people who are tired of their routine jobs, the flexibility of practicing direct selling is also appealing. Therefore, to pursue their dreams of becoming millionaires, numerous Taiwanese people of various classes and occupations have become distributors.

**Social Values of Economic Success**

Taiwan’s rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s has been a historical miracle in Asia. The rich island has become a society within which people hold wealth in great regard, and thus economic success has become one of the major sources of social pressure. A person’s success and social status are often judged by his or her financial situation, and this is the criterion upon which social recognition is based. People desire material goods and the capacity of consuming expensive commodities but are not overly concerned about the sources of wealth.

In direct selling, numerous stories regarding how distributors become wealthy in a short time, how they spend tons of money on luxury goods, and how they are respected and envied by others have made this business a dreamland for millions of distributors. In spite of the stigma of being labeled as part of a “mouse association,” direct salespeople are willing to confront and conquer potential suspicion and devaluation from outsiders.

**DISCIPLINED BODIES IN DIRECT SELLING: ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC CULTURE IN URBAN TAIWAN**

Amway Corporation was founded by Rich DeVos and Jay Van Andel in the United States in 1959. Amway’s headquarters are located in Ada, Michigan, and it manufactures more than four hundred products (Anli Taiwan 1993). Amway has also established its branches in more than thirty countries and has had more than 3 million distributors worldwide. During the 1999 fiscal year, Amway generated approximately U.S. $5 billion in sales through this global product distribution network (Amway 2002).

Amway did not begin its Asian operations until 1974, when the Hong Kong Branch was established (Gongshang zazhi 1985). In 1982, Amway Corporation Taiwan Branch was launched in Taibei. During the business year of 1993-1994,
throughout her childhood and adolescence, Ms. Chen thus devoted consider­
really unbelievable! I don't know
"It's 
Amway as an escape from the poverty she suffered
Seeing
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Lihua, another nondistributor, correspondingly described her
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She
to go to a teachers' school sponsored by the city government after graduating
Chen's family could not afford her college education. For this reason, she chose
Meiyu,5 a nondistributor
similarities surpass their differences because
This American ethic is the spirit of capitalism and a belief
What happens when such an “American way of life” or “American ethic” is
How are the values central to the American society interpreted by Taiwanese people? How does Amway impact on Taiwan's economic culture? I attempt to answer these questions in the following pages.

Fieldwork Methodology
Three informal systems were operated in Amway during my period of fieldwork in 1996: Meihua (Plum Blossom), Feiying (Flying Eagle), and Chengguan (Cap of Maturity). Each system has its own pyramid scheme led by different Crown Ambassadors (the highest title in Amway). I joined the Meihua system, the largest community among these three. Two of the four Taiwanese Crown Ambassadors were from the Meihua system—Ms. Chen Wanfen and Ms. Huang Likai (a down­line of Ms. Chen's)—which makes this community the most renowned in Amway. In spite of the fact that these three communities have established their own discourses and culture, their similarities surpass their differences because
Ms. Chen Wanfen, the leader of the Meihua system and the first Amway Crown Ambassador in Taiwan, is a legend in this community. She grew up in a poor family in a rural area of the outlying island of Jinmen, and her father died before she was born. In spite of her outstanding performance in school, Ms. Chen's family could not afford her college education. For this reason, she chose to go to a teachers' school sponsored by the city government after graduating from junior high school and then became an elementary-school teacher. When she was in her thirties, dissatisfied by the fixed and limited salary of being a schoolteacher, Ms. Chen began to work as an Amway distributor in addition to her teaching job. Seeing Amway as an escape from the poverty she suffered throughout her childhood and adolescence, Ms. Chen thus devoted considerable time and effort to direct selling.

Ms. Chen's diligence paid off when she earned the highest title in Amway after nearly twenty years of hard work in the business. She established the Meihua system and began (in a huge pyramid scheme) to teach her downlines in much the same way that an elementary-school teacher does in a Taiwan classroom—that is, emphasizing the importance of life education. Incorporating both Amway's values and her own, Ms. Chen set certain moral and behavioral standards. She also asked distributors to call their uplines "teachers" (laoshi) and their downlines "babes" (baobei).4 These "teacher-student" and "parent-child" relations in the Meihua system not only build the fundamental power structures in this community but also legitimate various forms of regulation and discipline. Ms. Chen also claims that following her teaching is the only way to succeed in Amway, because she is the one who made her dream come true—going from a poor country girl to a multimillionaire.

Ms. Chen Wanfen's story is a legacy in Amway, and she has become a charismatic figure in that community. Distributors want to imitate her personal characteristics—and even to become her. They recite her story over and over to others and follow her teaching everywhere. Whenever Ms. Chen goes overseas, there are always thousands of distributors at the airport to see her off (some distributors even call in sick at work in order to see her in person at the airport). The same phenomenon can be seen when she returns. From my observations, Ms. Chen is not just the leader of this community—she is president of the Amway nation and a goddess of the Amway cult.

During my fieldwork, I saw Ms. Chen only once at a daily meeting. Although I jostled to the front of the crowd that surrounded her, I was able only to shake her hand. While I was feeling frustrated that I did not get the chance to talk to her that night, a distributor said to me in an amazed tone, "Wow, you're the luckiest person tonight! You got to shake Ms. Chen's hand! Congratulations!" This astonishing comment forcefully demonstrated the impact of Ms. Chen's charisma on Amway members. Amway is not just a business, it is a social phenomenon that contains prosperous sociocultural meanings.

THE AMWAY PHENOMENON IN TAIWAN: A PRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE BODILY ORDER
Amway's direct salespeople are well known in Taiwan for their highly uniform discourses and gestures. Such a unique phenomenon—and its shocking impression to outsiders—can be expressed by a quote from Meiyu,5 a nondistributor who had attended Amway's meeting and was astonished by what she saw. She said: "Every one of them said the same words, used the same gestures, and even smiled in the same way! It was like they were brainwashed! My goodness!"

Meiyu even described Amway as a "cult"—an organization with religious characteristics. Lihua, another nondistributor, correspondingly described her feeling of the cultlike culture in Amway: "It's really unbelievable! I don't know why they are so crazy about it. The atmosphere in that meeting was like a cult,
with a lot of emotions going on. I felt that they were willing to sacrifice everything for this corporation.

Such quasi-religious characteristics and their effect on direct salespeople were well portrayed in an article that won a Documentary Literature Award from China Times in 1994: “I realized that whenever mentioning this business [direct selling], Richeng’s eyes shine with incredible glory. He looks like a reverent believer who has received the message from God and guidance toward heaven” (Zheng 1994).

“The beautiful dream come true” is the common goal of direct salespeople, and it is also a phrase that is repeatedly emphasized in Amway’s TV commercials in Taiwan. This beautiful dream includes wealth, freedom, leisure, success, love, and trust. Amway is depicted as the key, and the only key, to turning this dream into reality. In order to make this wonderful dream come true, therefore, distributors are required to transform themselves into believers of Amway as “the savior,” followers of their uplines as “guidance teachers,” and advocates of Amway values as their behavioral norms. All of these characteristics feature Amway as a quasi-religious community—or simply as a cult.

Amway’s daily meetings serve not only as an exhibition of its cultlike culture but also as the practice of internalizing its behavioral norms and discourses. Once registered with Amway, distributors are expected to attend daily meetings in order to learn and carry out the Amway way of talking, gesturing, perceptions, and behavior—even before beginning to sell products and recruit downlines. Unlike other direct selling companies’ OPP meetings that mainly focus on the introduction of direct selling business and reward systems, Amway’s daily meetings are organized in a quasi-educational and quasi-religious way. With the exception of one day a week that is dedicated to introducing the business, Amway’s meetings have themes such as “The Path to Success,” “Skills of Interpersonal Communication,” “Self-Growth,” “Nutrition and Health,” “The Importance of Helping Others,” and “The Key to Happiness.” Participants are told to learn “the way of life,” rather than “the business.” By making this claim, Amway legitimates its education of values, attitudes, and behaviors and thereby creates its religious aura. In doing so, Amway not only whitewashes the stigma of direct selling as a “mouse association” that treats social networks as mere commodities—it also disguises its primary goal of profit making. As a result, Amway distributors regard themselves as educators (of Amway’s way of life) and preachers (of Amway’s values), rather than merely as salespeople.

Certain rituals are routinely held at Amway’s daily meetings to assure members’ uniform beliefs, discourses, and behavior. The meeting usually starts with short talks by two or three distributors who have earned titles for their sales achievements (see the appendix for a description of Amway’s formal reward and title system).

These speakers tell their personal stories about how they succeed in a way not unlike that of a minister speaking about the miracles of Christianity. For instance, they might relate how poor and unhappy they were before becoming Amway distributors; how Amway changed their lives in the wink of an eye; how Amway gave them the great opportunity to live happily and wealthily; how grateful they are for Amway and their uplines; how Amway provides a hospital home; and how others who have not yet joined Amway are suffering from misery and poverty.

Becoming wealthy in a short time is the most appealing part of these stories. Speakers repeatedly emphasize that only Amway can make this “miracle” happen, a dream that no ordinary wage worker could ever truly realize. Moreover, these stories attempt to stimulate among the audience another form of desire: that of enjoying other people’s envy at their own luxurious lifestyles. Many stories begin with how the speakers were looked down upon before they became rich and end with how other people envy their wealth. In these “before and after” stories, the power of money reinforces the motivation of becoming rich through Amway. The following accounts—stories that I heard from distributors—demonstrate the ways in which Amway members perceive the power of money:

I have a friend who used to look down upon me when he knew I was a distributor. But ever since I bought a BMW [with earnings from Amway], his attitudes and the way he talks to me have been totally different than before [he became respectful and envious].

Mr. Yang, a Diamond Direct Distributor in Amway, began his direct selling business in his freshman year. Throughout his college years, his classmates often looked down on him, teasing him that he was a slave of money. On his graduation day, he donated NT $100,000 [U.S. $3,500] to his university. It was only then that he regained his classmates’ respect.

Obviously, distributors are aware of the fact that outsiders often stigmatize direct selling, and some of them are even victims of such stigma. Yet after becoming wealthy, especially after being able to exercise the power that money provides, distributors feel entitled to whitewash the stigma and legitimate their business activities.

The same two stories above, along with numerous others, are often recited either in informal discussions in this community or at formal meetings. During my fieldwork in Amway, these stories were repeatedly told by several different distributors. Of course, the details in each story might vary slightly when told by different members, but the main characters and conclusions are always the same. Every time, when any of these stories is recited, a feeling of déjà vu emerges. Consequently, after participating in this community for a while, I could even tell some of the stories to others in a similar way. It is through such storytelling acts that distributors homogenize discourses. This act of storytelling also plays a role similar to that of witnessing in religion. Direct salespeople use these stories to persuade and convince nonmembers that joining Amway can actually make their dreams come true, just like those in the stories. The stories assert, “They did it, so can you!”
The skill of storytelling in this community is not learned just by listening but through diligent work. During the speeches at the daily meetings, Amway members always take notes in order to record important information—words or phrases—that they can apply to their own discourses in the future. Then the members have small group discussions based on their upline-downline connections. In this group discussion, which is called “sharing time” (fenzhang shijian), each member repeats what the speakers have just said and praises the valuable wisdom of their words. Most of the time, members have to look at their notes in order to repeat what the speakers say correctly and exactly. Sometimes, when a member mentions a phrase heard at another meeting, others write it down in order to enrich their collections of “Amway wisdom.” When this happens, the next person who talks will usually praise and repeat this new wisdom. During this sharing time, members always give their complete attention to the one who is speaking, nod their heads, applaud, and cheer for each other. The more someone can recite the original talks, the more that person earns others’ admiration, assurance, and praise. Consequently, participants learn and even memorize a couple of sentences or stories at each meeting, because these words have been repeatedly stated in the same way—and mostly in the same terms—during a three-hour meeting.

Such repetition assures Amway members’ uniformity of language, perceptions, and behavior. As their leader Ms. Chen Wanfen claims, “There is only one way to success—that is, the way I succeeded. Follow me, my babes! Copy my ability, my knowledge, and my accomplishment!”

This one-way approach establishes and legitimizes the “requirement” for members to imitate Ms. Chen’s ways of thought, speech, and behavior. By replicating her behavior and thoughts, members are assured that they can be “rescued” and will enjoy a “sacred” wealthy life set apart from a secular, ordinary, boring, and restless existence. Hence the importance of imitation is repeatedly emphasized in this community. For example, one day in the daily meeting, a high-level distributor, Guoxiong, reminded everyone that they should show more thoroughness and effort on imitating their leader. He said: “If we want to succeed, we must follow our leader’s steps and copy all of her abilities. I feel that we are behind. Last month when I followed Ms. Chen to China, I witnessed how excited and serious those Chinese members were. Many of them video-recorded Ms. Chen’s speech and watched the tape over and over at home in order to imitate her every single word and smile. We must reflect upon ourselves and show more efforts to our leader.”

Such discourse conveys an image to the members that “once you can act like our leader, you could become her—a wealthy and successful distributor.” As a result, the daily meeting becomes a stage where its members perform Amway’s way of life based on a standard script day after day. Furthermore, the Amway salespeople’s bodies become not only the medium of such acting but also the product of the body plastic that exhibits a collective bodily order. At the individual level, the body is supposed to be both the medium and product of self-expression and self-presentation that depicts unique personal characteristics.
than a business” (DeVos and Andel 1992). As Wenhui, a five-year Amway distributor, said: “Direct selling is not a job. Rather, it is life. Each distributor is like a twenty-four-hour department store. Every morning when you wake up, your store is open, and it won’t be closed until you go to bed. In other words, Amway is not work but my way of life. We are always doing direct selling in our everyday life without a single break.”

As a human “twenty-four-hour department store,” every distributor attempts to introduce Amway or sell products to people whenever they can. Direct selling is usually a second job for most distributors, but it is actually practiced without any time constraints in everyday life. At their day jobs, distributors talk about Amway with coworkers whenever they have the opportunity. After work, they usually attend Amway’s nightly meetings. On weekends or holidays, Amway people either hold “family meetings” or go shopping together.

In Amway, members who have the same original uplines—or those within the same pyramid scheme—establish a quasi-familial bond. Each “family” holds “family meetings” regularly on weekends. Members turn to these meetings in their own houses. The format of these family meetings is similar to that at Amway’s daily meetings, but the scale is smaller. Distributors invite their “potential downlines” to these meetings and introduce Amway to them. In other words, members in each quasi-family practice direct selling mostly in a collective way. They often bring friends to these meetings and let other members take on the task of persuasion. By so doing, distributors can avoid possible embarrassment while attempting to sell products to friends or to recruit friends as their downlines (both methods, it should be noted, are attempts to earn money from friends). Although Amway people adopt this collective fashion of doing business, they do not compete for credits or profits. They acknowledge who is whose “potential babe” (potential downline) and help each other to earn the newcomers’ trust.

Distributors who belong to the same “family” sometimes go shopping together. Yet their shopping activities actually carry a special “mission”—recruiting strangers as potential downlines. When practicing direct selling, distributors usually start from their own social networks, such as their family members, relatives, friends, and neighbors. In practice, however, solely relying on personal networks will not be enough if a distributor wants to earn titles or millions. Extending downlines beyond personal networks is therefore essential. Recruiting downlines from strangers or remote acquaintances sometimes reduces distributors’ anxieties of being perceived by friends as putting profit before friendship. By means of shopping collectively, Amway people attempt to seize the opportunity of recruiting store clerks—and even other customers—as new members. They might talk about Amway with the clerks while shopping or, when in a coffee shop or a restaurant, see people sitting next to them as potential downlines. In other words, Amway distributors practice direct selling whenever they can in everyday life, since they are themselves “twenty-four-hour department stores.”

According to such a “working is living” principle, the practice of Amway sellers is limitless in their daily life, in which the distinction between labor/production and leisure/reproduction is negated. Unlike wageworkers whose labor sphere and personal life are separated, Amway members’ work and private spheres overlap and are guided by Amway’s way of life (an American way of life?). Ergo, they are not just the agents of Amway’s products but the very products of Amway per se. Since “there is only one way to success,” as Ms. Chen Wanfen claims, Amway becomes the dominant force that governs how its members’ lives should be lived and how members’ bodies should act and move. Once a direct salesperson has been resocialized by the Amway’s body techniques, his or her individual bodily performance portrays and mirrors the collective regulation within the Amway community. Even when alone, such an aggregate of motions, postures, and gestures can still be observed in one’s individual bodily presentation. In the next section, I will demonstrate how such bodily order is formed and maintained in Amway.

REPRODUCING AMWAY BODIES: DISCIPLINE AND SURVEILLANCE OF KNOWLEDGE/POWER

Amway people claim that it is the “knowledge” they possess that distinguishes them from outsiders. As Ms. Chen, leader of the Meihua Amway system, said: “We are here to learn how to live a worthy life. Many people out there are experts in their professional arenas but idiots in running their lives. People’s perceptions determine how their lives are, and that is why I’m teaching you my knowledge and perspectives of success. As direct salespeople, we are selling knowledge of life rather than products. Our goal is to help people learn the right ideas about life.”

The “knowledge of life” in the Amway community includes the knowledge/philosophy/value of human life, success, marriage, work, nutrition, cooking, and cosmetology, which covers a wide range of everyday life. In the members’ views, the act of telling others about Amway and recruiting them is bestowing a favor upon them, because they offer others the opportunity to learn the “right” ideas and knowledge about life. “We are selling knowledge,” “We are helping others,” state Amway members. From the Amway members’ viewpoint, direct selling is not a business or economic activity anymore. Instead, it is a quasi-educational institute, teaching people how to live their lives, and it is a quasi-religious organization, saving people from poverty and endless labor in “traditional” jobs. Based on this recognized ideology, Amway people construct their social reality, perceiving themselves as educators and prophets rather than as salespeople.

Ironically, knowledge of life has its price in Amway. It is not “free of charge.” Once I asked a distributor, who was an Amway “nutrition expert,” about how to change my diet in order to improve my health. I was expecting some simple advice when raising that question, as a friend or a teacher would
offer when one needed help. Yet that distributor's answer was, “You have to attend our nutrition classes.” Attending the “basic” nutrition class that contained four sessions costs NT $1000 (U.S. $35), and the “advanced” and “professional” classes, also based on certain product lines, cost even more.

Amway's classes are usually held at the same time and location as daily meetings but in different rooms. Each series contains basic, advanced, and professional classes and charges various fees. Therefore, when preparing themselves for the “knowledge sale,” distributors have to pay a lot of money out of their own pockets, even though this contradicts the direct selling slogan: “No business capital is required.” In addition to paying and attending various classes, distributors sometimes have to participate in Amway retreats to learn the secrets of the trade. Meetings like the “Gold Producers Retreat” and “Ruby Direct Distributors Retreat” are usually held for certain groups of distributors who then have to pay their own travel and accommodation expenses. Consequently, the reality is that before becoming successful distributors or millionaires, Amway members have to invest a considerable amount of money. For working-class people who lack capital, the “Amway dream” is more of a fantasy than an achievable goal—let alone a means of achieving real class mobility.

Furthermore, since “there is only one way to succeed,” members must believe in this claim and regard Amway's knowledge of life as “the only truth.” Regardless of one's class, ethnicity, or gender in the “outside” world, everyone must start over upon entering the Amway community. It is similar to a religion: Once baptized, many start a new life following this religion's values as the only truth in their life.

The “goddess” of Amway, Ms. Chen Wanfen, rules the “cult of the Meluhia community.” By claiming that her wisdom is “the only path” to success, Ms. Chen's discourse and behavior impose an absolute power over Amway members. In the meantime, the members' desire to become wealthy— as well as their acknowledgement of Ms. Chen's claim—enforces such power hierarchies. As Foucault (1980, 59) states, “Power is strong at the level of desire and also at the level of knowledge.” Ms. Chen's fortune and success provoke Amway members' desire and envy. Her utilization of knowledge (of life) as the key to success and the distinction between insiders and outsiders, therefore, works as a spell, governing members' behaviors and perceptions. In other words, Ms. Chen's discourse creates tremendous power in the Amway community, and the members' bodies become the arenas where such power takes effect. Within Amway, the collective constraining force derived from this power/discourse overcomes individuals' subjectivity and thus reproduces numerous docile bodies.

Ms. Chen's discourse, knowledge, and power not only generate voluntary body discipline among Amway members, they also create an automatic mutual surveillance among them. For instance, the “sharing time” in their daily meeting executes the task of such surveillance. By repeating their leader's words and imitating her gestures and behaviors, Amway members earn applause and reassurance. In this community, members mutually supervise each other, verbally and nonverbally, on the “right” way they should act and the “right” thoughts they should think. Not only are all members mirroring the leaders' characteristics, but they are also mirroring other members. Even when the members are alone, they are expected to supervise themselves, because “direct selling is a way of life.” When internalizing Amway values and practicing Amway's way of life, distributors' perceptions of the distinctions between work and personal lives and between individual and collective spheres do not exist anymore. Every single distributor turns out to be a corporeal product of the Amway factory, carrying Amway's patent and components. Ms. Chen's teaching serves to provide members with specific meanings of life/work. Through bodily practice, Amway people recognize, experience, and reproduce such meanings. In these ways, the collective bodily order in Amway is formed and maintained.

**BODY RESISTANCE IN STRUGGLE: SUCCESS AT COST IN AMWAY**

The resocialization and reproduction of Amway bodies is not always a smooth or instant transformation. Instead, it is an ongoing process within which the body is always experiencing two countering forces between the outside-in constraints (from the Amway community) and inside-out enabling (from the previous social self and inner emotion). Before entering the Amway community, each distributor has already been socialized by the broader society and has formed certain perceptions, modes of behavior, and even bodily gestures. Reshaping the self and the body in adulthood thus requires more effort than it does in childhood. The elimination of the division between work and leisure in direct selling entraps distributors in a continuous laboring state and self-surveillance. No matter what emotion they have or what situations they encounter in everyday life, Amway members are expected to act like “standard Amway bodies.” This means that Amway distributors not only perform bodily labor but also emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) in that they constantly have to manage and control their own emotions. Mingren, a one-year Amway distributor, once told me his management of personal emotion: “Two months ago, my dad had a heart attack and was hospitalized. I was very sad and worried, but I had to stop crying and come to our daily meeting. In Amway, you have to smile and laugh.”

Emotional management is not easy for everyone. As Jiaying, a former five-year Amway distributor said: “I felt very tired after a period of hard work. In Amway, you have to maintain a high emotional level every day, no matter what. It was very tiring. I always thought it would be wonderful if I could take off just one day and spend some time with my family. I think Amway is for those people who are strong, because it's very difficult to overcome that kind of fatigue.”

Because they think becoming a millionaire will result in unlimited freedom, “laboring for no more labor” (Gu 1997) is the goal of distributors' hard work. But the reward system of direct selling actually prevents distributors from ceasing work, because profits would decrease. As a result, most distributors are
trapped in an endless labor process and an incessant disciplining of bodies and emotions in their community (Gu 2000).

Does everyone under the regulation of this community succeed in being blessed by the Amway legacy? The Taiwanese government evaluated distributors of high, medium, and low levels in the direct selling industry. According to this report, only 11.83 percent of distributors are at the higher level, whereas the majority (65.38 percent) are at the lower level (Xingzhengyuan Gongping Jiaoyi Weyuanhui 1993). Regardless of the fact that only about one-tenth of them are on the top of this pyramid, millions of distributors maintain their faith in direct selling. Also, in spite of the exhaustion resulting from endless work in Amway, numerous members continue to embrace the dream of becoming millionaires.

Amway’s strategy of objectifying failure helps to maintain such a dreamy atmosphere, as distributors only see successful cases in this community. In Amway, members’ success is said to be an organizational and collective outcome, whereas failure is due to personal factors. Talking about failure is taboo in Amway because “you will become what you talk about and look at.” Distributors are encouraged to discuss only successful cases, and any failure is regarded as a “personal problem.” They are also told to avoid keeping in touch with those members who quit. Consequently, the downside of direct selling and the frustrations of being distributors are never mentioned in this community. The beautiful dream, therefore, retains its legacy in Amway.

Underneath the disguise of the beautiful dream of direct selling, there are actually numerous distributors who are struggling with feelings of burnout and frustration, and many of them quit after various lengths of hard work. Thus it appears that human corporeality is not merely a docile body passively dominated and manipulated by social forces. Instead, it has its inner drive of emotion that generates a potentiality of resistance. As Foucault argues, “Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counterattack in that same body” (1980, 56).

Before becoming 100 percent “corpooreal products” of Amway, distributors usually wander back and forth between the two opposing forces—Amway’s regulatory forces versus their inner emotion and selves. When the outside constraints overcome the inner drive, the uniform Amway body is on the “production line” and distributors become the standardized products of the Amway industry. But when the resistant potentiality exercises its capacity of enabling the self and conquers the external domination, the self regains its empowerment and embodiment. Under such circumstances, distributors are therefore willing and able to escape from the disciplinary forces. Here is what several ex-distributors told me:

Direct selling is “doing simple stuff repeatedly.” Yet you’d feel very tired and bored after a while, because what you do every day is all the same. There’s no variation in your life.

I felt exhausted. Every day when I went to the meeting, I had to smile and act energetically. I was really emotionally exhausted. I felt that I just wanted to take a break and be with my family for a day or so.

I ran into a member one day after I quit. He just quit Amway and told me several others did, too. We realized that we experienced the same kind of frustrations and tiredness while in Amway, but we never had the chance to talk about that before. We were not allowed to. In Amway, you only talk about success and joy.

CONCLUSION

Despite the stigma of the Taiwan Family event, direct selling has become a popular second job in Taiwan since the 1990s. The legalization of direct marketing, as well as certain structural factors, helped prepare a beneficial environment for the development and growth of direct selling on the island. As a new labor form of the service economy, direct selling has its advantages in Taiwan’s market, in which the economic structure has been dominated by the service sector. As a new path of class mobility, direct selling provides the hope of becoming a millionaire in Taiwanese society, where this mobility has become more and more difficult. The economic opportunities direct selling offers also correspond to the popular social values that place a high regard on financial success. All of these economic, social, and cultural factors have helped to build the direct selling regime in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the popularization of direct selling also reflects these sociocultural characteristics of Taiwanese society.

This case study of Amway provides an analysis of the micropolitics in the direct selling community. In Amway, distributors are taught to behave and talk in a uniform manner that displays a collective bodily order. By claiming that she holds the only path to success, Amway’s leader commands members’ absolute obedience in that no suspicion or discussion of failures is allowed. Amway becomes a totalitarian community that imposes a powerful disciplinary force on its members’ minds and bodies. Under mutual and self-surveillance, distributors are engaging in an endless process of remaking their selves, their bodies, and their emotions. The collective bodily order of Amway is successfully maintained when the disciplinary force overcomes individuals’ abilities. Yet distributors’ bodily resistance can also defeat this constraint and revitalize the individuals’ subjectivity and embodiment.

When practicing direct selling, distributors claim that they are actually selling knowledge and helping others, with an attempt to whitewash the stigma of the “mouse association.” Their economic motivations are disguised by noneconomic purposes, which also serves to legitimatize their cultlike behavior. The quasi-religious and quasi-educational figures of Amway have given direct selling rich social and cultural meanings that go beyond an economic
action. The alternative economic culture that direct selling has produced in urban Taiwan has also highlighted certain attributes and trends of Taiwanese culture today.

First, people tend to seek “shortcuts” for achieving economic success. The merit of hard work is not necessarily appreciated in contemporary Taiwan. As a folk proverb goes, “Three features compose a good job: lots of money, little work, and close to home [qian duo, shi shao, li jiajin]”—what people desire from work is instant and great financial reward. This phenomenon is similar to Robert Weller’s observation (1996) that success seems less likely the result of hard work than of good luck in modern times. Taiwanese people retain the mentality of “better to be the head of a chicken than the tail of a cow” from old times, but nowadays the quick and easy means of “becoming the head of a chicken” is preferred over the ethic of hard work valued in the past.

Second, people tend to “sacralize” their economic motivations. In spite of the desire and social pressure to attain financial success, Taiwanese people are inclined to conceal their intention of making profit, especially in public. In traditional Confucian culture, businessmen are ranked in the lowest category in the order of occupational reputation: “intellectuals, farmers, industrial workers, and businessmen” (shi, nong, gong, shang). Such a cultural heritage shapes Taiwanese people’s ambivalent views concerning business or businesslike activities. While society places high pressure on financial achievement, it also devalues profit-oriented behavior. Legitimizing (even “sacralizing”) economic actions therefore becomes not only important but necessary for businesspeople to establish their reputations and social status. In the case of Amway, distributors claiming to be “knowledge sellers” and “saviors” represent such an effort, in addition to whitewashing the stigma of direct selling.

Third, there is the common need to seek a group that provides moral guidance and feelings of belonging. Like their Western counterparts who live in the modern era, Taiwanese face increasingly serious moral crisis and alienation. The prosperous economy and advanced technology have brought better material goods, but the meaning of life seems to have been gradually lost. In this vacuum, the traditional moral values Amway advocates, such as trust, love, reciprocity, and respect, as well as the quasi-familial ties in this community, have created a paradise-like atmosphere for distributors. Similar to a religious group, Amway constructs a system of beliefs and behavioral norms that serve to provide moral guidance and meaning for its members. Yet the economic opportunities Amway offers are benefits individuals cannot get from religion. In sum, Amway not only meets people’s need of searching for meaning and values in modern alienated times, it also meets the need of financial success in a material-oriented secular society.

Western scholars (Biggart 1989; Butterfield 1985; Cross 1999; Xardel 1994) continue to discuss “the American way of life” and “the American spirit.” Meanwhile, Amway and other DSOs in Taiwan have incorporated into their “Amway way” many local, social, and cultural characteristics in response to structural changes and contexts. Taiwan’s Amway community has taken what was once Amway’s “American way” and used Taiwanese ways of life and culture to influence and transform it in many ways. As David Harvey (1989) correctly points out, capitalism is a revolutionary mode of production. It keeps finding new organizational types, techniques, lifestyles, and new ways of production and exploitation. Like other forms of capitalism, direct selling has created a new mode of production that links both local and global markets and meets both economic and noneconomic needs in modern times. Yet it has also produced a new form of exploitation and false consciousness. While embracing the dream of unlimited wealth and freedom, distributors are actually trapped in an endless process of labor. While believing in love, trust, and equality, distributors are actually manipulated by the invisible power of discipline.

APPENDIX: AMWAY REWARD SYSTEM
(SOURCE: CROSS 1999)

Distributor
Earn profits through retail markup on products sold, plus bonuses of 3 to 25 percent based on Point Value (PV), which averages approximately 50 percent of wholesale prices paid on total business volume.

Silver Producer
For one month, generate personal group PV of at least 7,500 points, or sponsoring a 25 percent group (one containing a qualifying Silver Producer or Direct Distributor) and generating at a personal group points of at least 2,500 points, or sponsor two 25 percent groups in the same month, or foster sponsor a 25 percent group and have PV or 2,500 points.

Gold Producer
Generate three Silver Producer months in a year.

Direct Distributor
For six months of a fiscal year, generate PV of at least 7,500 personal group points, or sponsor two 25 percent groups with 2,500 personal group points, or sponsor two 25 percent groups in those months, or foster sponsor a 25 percent group plus achieve PV of at least 2,500 points.

Founders Direct Distributor Pin
Maintain twelve months of Direct Distributor qualification in a fiscal year.

Ruby Direct Distributor
Generate personal group PV of 15,000 or more points in a given month.

Founders Ruby Pin
Maintain Ruby qualification for twelve months within a fiscal year.
Sapphire Pin
Direct Distributors below Emerald who have either three groups qualifying for six months in a fiscal year, or 2,500 Award Volume over the same two qualified groups for each of six months in the fiscal year, or a combination of both.

Emerald Direct Distributor
Direct Distributors who personally, internationally, or foster sponsor three or more qualified groups for at least six months of a fiscal year.

Founders Emerald Pin
Maintain Emerald qualifications for twelve months within a fiscal year.

Diamond Direct Distributor
Direct Distributors who personally, internationally, or foster sponsor six qualified groups for at least six months of the fiscal year.

Additional Pin Levels
Executive Diamond Distributors who personally, internationally, or foster sponsor nine qualified groups for at least six months of the fiscal year; a Double Diamond does so with twelve groups, a Triple Diamond with fifteen groups, a Crown Direct with eighteen groups, and Crown Ambassador with twenty groups.

PART V
Entertainment and the Audience
LIVING FOR THE MOMENT AND MOMENTS FOR THE LIVING