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Some facts about migrant workers in Taiwan

Most Taiwanese see migration in a very stereotypical light. When we talk about migration, we first think about emigrating to the United States. After that, maybe Canada. East meets West? “West prevails over East” might be more precise. Emigration is not only a personal choice but also a human right, protected by the constitution in any free country. The decision people make when they want to pursue a better life out of their country can be just personal, but it could be politically motivated as well. Whenever someone emigrates from Taiwan due to dissatisfactions with the government, we say: They cast their votes with their feet.

Since Taiwan is a small island, tightly packed with 23 million people, we have to put limits on the number of immigrants entering the country. Certainly, immigration by marriage to a Taiwanese citizen is permitted, but the number of instances has been small. The real issue concerning currents of migration in Taiwan is the international migrant workers who have been flooding the labor market for the past 20 years. So far, the numbers of this immigrant population have reached about 400,000, mainly from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

After having become a so-called developed country in the 1980s, the structure of the labor and job market has changed dramatically in Taiwan. For example, our elderly population is growing. Educated women are eager to work outside of the home, instead of being housewives. And young workers aren't inclined to take low-paying dangerous, and difficult, labor-intensive jobs. These changes have provided incentives for our government to allow migrant workers into the country to fill the manpower vacancies.

Thus, the picture becomes clear and simple. While the female migrant workers take the care of the elderly and fill housekeeping positions, the male migrant workers sweat on construction sites and in factories. They take the low-paying, difficult jobs that native Taiwanese refuse to do. They function as a substitute, or, it could possibly be said, a scapegoat for Taiwanese workers.

Let's face it--the issue of migrant workers is not only economic, but also an issue of human rights. In the past 20 years, migrant workers in Taiwan have constantly encountered unreasonable treatment, including physical and financial exploitation. The seemingly heartening economic boom of Taiwan is at least partly balanced on the backs of those workers.

To cross the border to be a migrant worker costs money--the total of nation-to-nation agent charges is almost equivalent to a migrant worker's yearly income, based on a monthly pay of about 600 USD. In other words, labor without getting paid during the first year. It could be seen as a win-win situation, but not for workers--only for both agents.

On the other hand, nobody would deny that liberal Taiwanese citizens work to defend the migrant workers' rights and welfare by pushing the government to improve both regulations and policy. A non-governmental organization, Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA), is the strongest worker advocate. And the Taipei city government has held a yearly poetry and essay writing contest for the migrant workers since 2001.

The mission of the TIWA is to facilitate communication between migrant workers and local communities, to improve migrant workers' labor conditions and social status, and to advocate for laborers' rights and welfare. It's been doing a great job as the guardian angel.

As for the yearly poetry and essay contest, I'd say it's also great to read and to hear the migrant workers speaking out for themselves. It's a chance for them to let us see their frustration, anger, and hope. Particularly, they demonstrate their existence. Their writing may not be great literature, but that may not be necessary. To me, their writing is a representation of their battle against institutional injustices.

If I could speak for them, I'd say: What they say they need from us, through their writings, is not our sympathy but our understanding.

When I was asked to participate on this panel, I read the explanation under this topic: “Those who migrate

need something from the country they enter: food, space, safety. They carry along with them: bodies, desires, values. At times, the flow between migrants and the new places are obstructed, at other times the flow is of mutual advantage. How best to make room for this exchange and for the changes it sets in motion? And how does writing participate in the great migration swirl of today?"

I would not describe the flow of migrant workers into Taiwan as a great migration swirl. What migrant workers need now is supports from every single citizen, whether he or she is a writer or not, to improve their labor conditions and advocate for their human rights.

The plight of migrant workers in Taiwan is a serious and difficult issue. As a writer, it has reminded me to be aware that I'm in no position to write for them, or about them, until I've carefully listened to and learned from them. I feel I cannot casually use their social issues as material for fiction work. It seems disrespectful--almost sinful.

The 2012 publication of the nonfiction book, *Our Stories: Migration & Labor in Taiwan* written by Ku Yu Ling, the former director of TIWA, addresses the real life stories of migration workers in Taiwan. This book has provided an effective way for advocates to get their message concerning the issues of migrant workers out to the public. As well, it reminds me, and makes very clear, the difference between fiction and non-fiction, literature and social issues.