

A conversation with a Vietnamese migrant worker in Taiwan during the Covid-19 pandemic (*Interview*)

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The following is a friendly conversation between me and my old friend, Bau. He and I have known each other for a long time since high school. In Vietnam, Bau was an electrical engineer. He is married and his wife is also working in Taiwan, although they do not live or work in the same city. They have a son who is now living with Bau's parents. Bau quit his job in Vietnam and came to Taiwan as a migrant worker in 2014. Since then, he has been working in a factory that manufactures car parts in Taichung. During our relatively frequent chats, I learned that his life as a migrant worker in Taiwan is quite hard. His situation seems to have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. I asked him to share his experience with me in greater detail.

[*] To protect my friend's identity and also to be true to the way we address each other, in this article, our nicknames are used instead of real names.

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Initial information

Moi (M): If you were to introduce yourself, how would you do it?

Bau (B): Well you know my name and age. I'm Bau, 33 years old. I'm from Nghe An, Vietnam. Right now, I'm a factory worker in Taichung, Taiwan.

M: Could you be more specific about your job? What do you do in the factory?

B: I manufacture car parts such as steering wheels and car bumpers. I stand by the machine, put the item that is being manufactured where it is supposed to go in the machine, let the machine do its job, then I take the item out. Quite a tedious job.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about the factory? What's the scale like?

B: The factory is pretty big actually. There are about 300 workers I think.

M: What about the managers? How many managers are there?

B: Hm...In each shift, there is one manager, so about 2 or 3 managers, I think. At least there are 2-3 managers that work directly with us factory workers.

M: How many hours per day do you work?

B: Normally I would work 13-14 hours, but these couple of months, because of the coronavirus, the working hours have been cut down. I'm now working about 7-8 hours per day.

M: 13-14 hours sounds like a very long working day for me.

B: Yes, it is long indeed, but as migrant workers, if you just work 7-8 hours per day, you won't make much money. After paying all sorts of fees, you really won't have much income left.

M: Could you please share more about these fees? What fees are we talking about?

B: Well, every month I have to pay a brokerage fee, health insurance, and other miscellaneous fees.

M: Brokerage fee? But you've been in Taiwan for a long time, right? Why do you still have to pay a brokerage fee?

B: Yes, I have been working in Taiwan for 6 years, but you have to pay this brokerage fee until you stop being a migrant worker in Taiwan no matter how long you have been here.

M: Wow, I did not know that. I thought migrant workers only had to pay brokerage fees in the first 1 or 2 years of their labor contract.

B: Haha, no way. You have to pay until you leave. In the first year, you pay 1,700 kuai (Taiwanese dollar) per month. In the second year, you pay 1,600 kuai per month. From the third year, you pay 1,500 kuai per month. So I have been paying 1,500 kuai every month now for a long time.

M: To whom do you pay this fee?

B: The Vietnamese broker agency that brought me here.

M: I see. How do you feel about having to pay this fee for so long?

B: It's unfair and I feel frustrated, but what can I do? It's the rule.

M: Weren't there some protests to demand the abolishment of the brokerage system?

B: Yes, last year [early 2019], several Vietnamese migrant workers gathered in Taipei in protests against the brokerage system.

M: How did that go? Any results?

B: No, so far there has not been any change. The brokerage system is still there and we still have to pay the fee every month.

M: Hopefully there will be some positive changes in the future.

B: Thank you.



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Discussing the Covid-19 pandemic

M: How do you evaluate the epidemic situation in Taiwan? Do you feel safe?

B: It does not look too bad, right? I mean in my factory, everyone is okay and everything goes on as normal, so I assume the epidemic is not that bad in Taiwan. I feel pretty safe.

M: What about the news? Do you read, listen, or watch the news regarding the Covid-19 and from which main sources?

B: I don't really read, watch, or listen to the Taiwanese news. Everything is in Chinese or English, right? But I do follow a Vietnamese public figure who lives in Taiwan and could be considered a successful businesswoman. She does a lot of charity, too. She usually keeps her followers on Facebook updated about the pandemic. So, I read the news from her [Facebook] page. I really appreciate her social media platform and find it very helpful.

M: I see. May I know her name?

B: Sure. It's Thảo Vân.

[Bau gave me Thảo Vân's Facebook link: <https://www.facebook.com/donghanhcungcongdongviet/>]

M: What kind of information does she usually post on her Facebook page?

B: Sometimes, she updates the number of infected Covid-19 cases. Sometimes, she provides information about available flights to Vietnam and the fares. Sometimes she just posts some news about Vietnamese migrant workers here in Taiwan.

M: I see. What about the factory where you are working? Do they have any measures to protect their employees such as giving masks or advising on social distancing?

B: Not really. Everything has been normal in the factory. The factory does not ask us to wear masks or practice social distancing. Everybody in the factory knows each other's face, so only when there is a new face in the crowd, a visitor, or something, do we become a little more cautious.

M: What about masks? Do you have access to masks and is it difficult to get hold of them?

B: Yes, I do wear masks but only when I go out of the factory and dormitory. It was difficult to buy them at first because a lot of people wanted them, but now it is easier.

M: Does the company keep the employees informed about new developments regarding the pandemic?

B: No. As I said, I keep myself posted with information from Ms. Thảo Vân's social media. Everything in the company goes on as normal.

M: I see. What about insurance? What kind of health insurance do you have?

B: I have national health insurance. It's pretty good I must say. It covers some expenses if, unfortunately, you have to visit the hospital.

M: What are the expenses does the national health insurance coverage for you in such case?

B: I think it covers a considerable part of the visit to the doctor, and part of the medication as well.

M: Do you know whether it would help in case you get the virus? Chém mồm chém miệng [A Vietnamese expression you're supposed to say after you've jinxed someone by mentioning an unfortunate scenario that could happen to them]

B: I'm not sure actually. Do you know?

M: I heard that the first 2 tests are free for national health insurance cardholders, although I do not know what happens if we are tested positive for the virus and have to be hospitalized.

B: Me neither. Well, let's just hope that none of us will get it.

M: I surely hope so. Has your life changed in any way since the outbreak of the coronavirus back in March? Has it resulted in any difficulty for you?

B: Yes, as I said before, the working hours have been reduced, resulting in lower wages, of course. And with the amount of money I've been making the last 2 months, there won't be a lot of savings at all.

M: What is your biggest concern right now?

B: That is my biggest concern. I worry that the hours will keep dropping for a few more months and we have no control over it.

M: Do you think it is possible that the factory will shut down?

B: Possible, but not likely. I mean, our factory exports car parts to countries that are relatively safe and recovering from the pandemic, such as South Korea and some other countries in Asia. But I know some factories where my friends work that have already shut down, at least temporarily. Those companies export their products to European countries, you know.

M: I see. Let's talk about your accommodation. Are you still living in the factory's dormitory?

B: Yes, I am. I told you before that I asked to move out, right? I wanted some privacy and to have air-conditioning because summer is coming real soon and it gets hotter and hotter every day. The company, however, did not agree. So, yes, I am still living in the dormitory.

M: There is no air-conditioner in your dorm room?

B: No, there is no air-conditioned room in the dorm. There is only a ceiling fan in each room.

M: And how large is it?

B: The room is not large at all, for all of us. It is not very comfortable, you know.

M: How many people do you share the room with?

B: I live with 7 other guys. Everyone has their own bed and a closet, but of course, we share a bathroom and a fan.

M: I would have asked to move out as well.

B: Totally. But well, it's not happening.

M: Why do you think the company would not allow you to live outside?

B: For managerial reasons, I'm sure. They're also afraid I would not come back for work the next day.

M: They are afraid you would run away? That happened before, right?

B: Yes. I left the company and did not come back for a week. There was no work. For a month or so we had had very little work and some days I only worked 2-3- hours. I barely made any money.

M: I see. Eventually, you came back by yourself. Why?

B: Because run-away migrant workers usually do not end up with a happy ending, you know. So, I decided to go back and just hoped for the best.

M: I understand. Is there anything else you would like to say?

B: Yeah, you asked me what my biggest concern is now, right? Actually, I'm also concerned about when I go back to Vietnam, you know. I mean I have a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, but I'm not that young anymore, and I have not worked as an engineer for years. So, I worry that I won't find a job back home. If you were an employer, would you hire someone like me?

M: As an electrical engineer? I mean I do not know how good you are at your job, but in general, I would not care much how old my employee is. If they could do the job I hire them to do, I'd hire them.

B: Fair enough.

M: Alright, Bau, thank you so much for agreeing to share with me this part of your life experience. It seems like you have to go soon, so I'll stop here. One last thing, I'd like to confirm with you again, would you give your consent for me to publish this conversation on my department's online platform?

B: Yes, go ahead. Publish it. I don't mind a little fame [laugh].

M: You're the kindest! I really appreciate your openness and willingness to tell me your story and to let me publish it.

B: Anytime, Moi.

Our conversation had to stop after an hour of talking on the phone since Bau had to cook and have dinner before going to work his night shift at 6 o'clock in the evening. I hope that by publishing this conversation, there will be a better understanding of what a (particular) (Vietnamese) migrant factory worker's life looks like in Taiwan. It reveals the lack of information and preventive measures for non-Taiwanese during the Covid-19 pandemic, which leads to uncertainty that migrant workers like Bau have to cope with. More importantly, it reminds of their rather permanent problems of the parasitical brokerage system and the poor lodging conditions that do not seem to be resolved any time soon.