

Civil Society, Political Society, and Self-organized Migrant Communities in Taiwan Ports

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This article is a fragment of my thoughts, analysis, reflection, and critique regarding the establishment of migrant labour unions in Taiwan and my encounter with self-organized migrant fishers communities in Taiwan fishing ports. The paper will combine my ethnographic study of self-organised migrant fishers' communities in Taiwan fishing ports with Partha Chatterjee's critical scholarship on civil society and political society. My argument is constructed as a reflection of Partha Chatterjee's critique of civil society as 'elite-led bourgeois society, "an actually existing arena of institutions and practices inhabited by a relatively small section of the people" (2004, 38) and 'political society' as less formalised.

The critical point I want to make is, instead of establishing migrant labour unions, I suggested the existing NGOs or CSOs better support, nurture, and strengthen self-organized migrant communities as political societies, build horizontal cross-cultural communication and partnership, and form an 'assemblage' of formal and informal organizations to counter exploitative working conditions and laws that do not favour the workers. Thereby, existing NGOs and CSOs could use their relationship (partnership) with self-organized migrant communities as a method to broaden their engagement in empowering labour migrants.

Keywords: FOSPI, political society, migrant fishers, Taiwan, labour activism

In the last few years, we have witnessed the establishment of several migrant workers unions in Taiwan, namely Yilan Migrant Fishermen's Union (YMFU, est. 2013), Domestic Caretakers Union Taoyuan (DCU, est. 2016), Keelung Migrant Fishermen's Union (KMFU, est. 2021), and National Industrial Trade Unions (Serikat Pekerja Industri Nasional-SPIN¹, est. 2021). In addition to this, we also witnessing emerging NGOs coalition and networking locally and internationally, such as the Migrant Empowerment Network in Taiwan (MENT)² and 'Human Rights for Migrant Fishers' Coalition³. Following these trends, we could see the ethical problem of representation, a small number of middle-class activists leading and occupy those institutions. However, self-organized migrant communities have existed years before these institutions were established. In February 2021, a friend shared news regarding the inauguration of the Keelung Migrant Fishermen's Union (KMFU), the second migrant fishermen's union in Taiwan after the Yilan Migrant Fishermen's Union (YMFU) in 2013 (Kao, 2021). The news on the establishment of the KMFU struck me in a way the author undermined the capabilities and power of the religious and hometown-based migrant (fishers) association in Taiwan. Furthermore, the author made several arbitrary claims which I will also

discuss further on this note. The author, citing YMFU's leader, stated that "the exclusion of migrant workers [fishers] from the union due to their place of residence created tensions in the group and hampered the organizing drive." This statement is incorrect if we look into the existing self-organized fishers associations across Taiwan fishing ports. On the contrary, the exclusion of migrant fishers from their place of residence (ports, vessels, and high seas) created a stronger sense of brotherhood, kinship, and solidarity among the fishers. For instance, FOSPI (*Forum Silaturahmi Pelaut Indonesia*-Indonesian Seafarers "Gathering" Forum)⁴, an extraordinary self-organised Indonesian fishers' community in Donggang. FOSPI is extraordinary due to their achievement in establishing the An-Nur Mosque in Donggang and the recognition they had received from the neighbourhoods, police, labour bureau, and National Immigration Agency in the past few years. Fishers' brotherhood is not only exist in Donggang ports, but also other ports across Taiwan islands, such as Bolo Dhewe (Our Friends) in Cijin island, Indonesian Fisher Communication Forum (*Forum Komunikasi Pelaut Indonesia*, FKPIT) in Nanfang Ao, and Penghu Indonesia Taiwan Gathering Forum (*Forum Silaturahmi Penghu Indonesia Taiwan* - Forspita) in Penghu islands. In my observation, these groups were established due to the exclusion from the labour laws, local communities, and strong sense of kinship and brotherhoods among them.

Andi Kao, the author of the news also pointed out that "these migrant fishermen tend to turn to hometown associations and faith-based organizations for help". He uttered this argument as a challenge in unionizing migrant fishers by emphasizing "difficulties recruiting members whom the organization seeks to protect." From these statements, we could see that the author does not understand the cultural and educational background of Indonesian fishers in Taiwan. He blindly blamed migrant fishers to explain the challenges faced in unionizing them. I want to make two points here to explain these misunderstandings. First, the majority of Indonesian fishers in Taiwan, particularly fishers in distant water fishing are Primary Education graduates. They have difficulties in cross-cultural communication and have a low understanding of reading written texts, particularly their job contracts. Therefore, in order to survive in Taiwan (the ports and seas), the newly arrived fishers have to rely on the people who have been here before them (seniors) and speak the same language as them. In doing so, their seniors will explain things in their own dialects and guide them on how to survive in Taiwan. Second, other than language, cultural differences become other barriers that drive migrant fishers to form their own communities. For instance, religious needs (for Muslims, they need a place to pray five times a day) and home-taste food. These are the reasons why in every Indonesian community in Taiwan we will find a communal kitchen and praying room. Another essential cultural element that needs to be discussed here is the "Javanese politeness (*sopan santun*) and etiquette (*tata karma*)". Since most of the Indonesian fishers in Taiwan come from Java, Javanese politeness and etiquette take crucial roles in their daily conduct and behaviour. According to Wijayanto (2013), Javanese politeness is

"built on the feeling of *isin* (shame) by which polite conduct is introduced to children by making them to feel ashamed about what other people may think when they cannot show proper behaviour (Geertz, 1961). Outside their family, all social relationships are threatened by *isin* and only in the family circle do they feel relaxed completely (Suseno, 1997). To minimize *isin* in wider social contexts, Javanese people establish a strict formal etiquette (*tata krama*) which will secure and protect them against the feeling of *isin* when they perform it accordingly (Suseno, 1997). To feel and show *isin* is the basis of the Javanese socio-psychological inner state of politeness proposed as *santun* ('inward' politeness or 'self-oriented politeness) in this paper. To uphold *santun* means to fulfil one's intentions and

public expectations for one to obey the guidelines of behaviour institutionalized in the Javanese *tata krama* (etiquette) so that one will not bring shame or disgrace to oneself and others with whom one affiliate [the state]”.

The standard Javanese politeness (*sopan santun*) and etiquette (*tata karma*) as I quoted above are being misunderstood in the transnational context. Manning agency and researchers have identified these cultural behaviours as racialized divisions of labour that construct Indonesian (mostly Javanese) migrants as docile, discipline, and obedient workers (Liang, 2011; Lan 2006).



"FOSPI was invited by local police, coastguard, NIA, and Local Labour Bureau to patrol in the port during level four COVID-19 alert". Photograph by Yogi Satgas FOSPI

Self-organised community, squatters, and political society

In several of his publications, Partha Chatterjee (1998, 2001, 2004, 2011) illustrated different forms of political society and how it works in Indian post-colonial societies. Interestingly, his example of a squatter settlement in the city of Calcutta and the efforts of the members of those settlements to assert their presence in urban life (Chatterjee; 1998, 2004) is very similar to the ongoing negotiation between Kampo Community and FOSPI with the Pingtung County government regarding the eviction of the Kampo Pos. Kampo community is a group of migrant fishers occupying/squatting a plot of empty land next to a port in Yanpu fishing harbour, Xinyuan Township. They made their own

living space on land so they could gather together during their days off. The shelter, named Kampoa Pos, was originally a hut in 2008 and slowly expanded into a shelter that can accommodate about 30-40 people overnight. They made their own beds, kitchen, living rooms, washroom (no toilet yet), and a Musholla (small mosque). They connect the electricity from a house of the neighbour. This place functioned as a temporary shelter for those who are in transit or jobless during the transfer from one employer to another employer. The shelter also becomes a comfortable place to avoid cold winters and scorching hot summers on the vessels. Kampoa Pos has been a safe haven for thousands of Indonesian migrant fishers over a dozen years of its existence.

However, in late March 2021, Pingtung local government notified the Indonesian fishers community in Yanpu fishing harbour over the plan to build the area into a modern port. In the said notification, the fishers were instructed to remove the shelter and empty the land by mid of May. However, after a series of discussion and negotiation with the Pingtung government and the representatives of Legislative Yuan, the Indonesian fishers community in Kampoa were given additional time until October 2021. The Indonesian fishers community realizes and accepts that the occupation of the reclaimed public land in Yanpu fishing harbour is illegal and against the law. Their illegal occupation of the land was exacerbated due to the fact that they are 'temporary' migrant workers in Taiwan. In our conversation on April 17, 2021, the leaders of Indonesian communities in Donggang confessed and expressed their readiness to move out and remove all their properties from the land, but what they are asking for is compassion, feeling sorry for the fate of those who have made Kampoa their home while in Taiwan. Undoubtedly, this case gives us another feature of "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2007). Unlike Brazilian Favela or urban peripheries' residents who "converted their violence into law talk" (234), temporary migrant fishers in Yanpu fishing harbour converted their illegal occupation of the land into human rights talk. They demanded the government to give them a space to build a new shelter, arguing that it could be described as a form of government support and responsibility for the welfare of the migrant workers in Taiwan. This case provides an alternative meaning of 'non-citizenship rights' in which they engaged their needs in terms of rights as government responsibility for migrants' welfare.

An assemblage of formal and informal institutions

Another question I want to address is whether existing NGOs or CSOs are willing to recognize and include self-organised migrant communities in their movements and coalitions. We do know that the establishment of a labour union is to acquire legal recognition from the state and local and international non-governmental organizations forum in pursuing social justice and protection for workers. Following this spirit, we could see The Human Rights for Migrant Fishers coalition consists of groups focused on advocacy and service such as the YMFU, Serve the People Association, and the Taiwan International Workers' Association, as well as groups, focused on research and lobbying such as the EJF, Taiwan Association for Human Rights, and Greenpeace Taiwan. Also, coalition members and faith-based organizations such as the Rerum Novarum Center, Stella Maris, and the Seamen's/Fishermen's Service Center have been instrumental in exposing the exploitation and abuse aboard Taiwanese fishing vessels.

Several previous studies have pointed out and traced the significance of assemblages of formal and informal elements in social policy discourses. Bilecen and Karolina (2015) suggested that informal and formal are interconnected and approached as an assemblage that is important to life chances and to the production and reproduction of inequalities in transnational social spaces. Palmer (2018)

pointed out important examples from Indonesia where a group of migrant fishermen who identified as human trafficking victims successfully claim back pay of wages despite their illegal migration status. My question is whether it is possible to pursue transnational 'assemblages', embracing both formal and informal elements in Labor Supplying State, Port State, State of Shipowner, and Flag State, including self-organised migrant communities in Taiwan?

Notes

1. Facebook post on SPIN establishment
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/261910178134284/permalink/519345749057391>
2. The MENT members consist of 11 NGOs, namely Migrant Workers' Concern Desk (MWCD), Scalabrini International Migration Network—Taiwan, Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA), Vietnamese Migrant Workers and Brides Office (VMWBO), Hope Worker Center (HWC), Hsinchu Migrant and Immigrant Service Center (HMISC), Migrant and Immigrant Mission (UGNAYAN), Center for Migrants' Concerns-Central Taiwan, Stella Maris International Service Center, and The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan-Seamen and Fishermen's Service Center (PCTSFSC) (TIWA, n.d.)
3. Meanwhile 'Human Rights for Migrant Fishers' Coalition members consisted of seven local and international NGOs, namely Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA), Yilan Migrant Fishermen Union (YMFU), The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan-Seamen and Fishermen's Service Center (PCTSFSC), Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR), Serve the People Association (SPA), Greenpeace, Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) (Greenpeace, 2019)
4. FOSPI is the umbrella organization of migrant groups in Donggang-Pingtung. The organization leads 11 Paguyuban/Communities of different Ports and regions from Indonesia. The active members (mostly fishers who worked on offshore fishing and fish processing) of each group range between 50-100 and about 200 inactive members (fishers on distant water fishing vessels). These categorizations of active and inactives members came from the leaders of the Paguyuban as a strategy to accommodate all fishers to their communities.
5. The name Kampoas is the Taiwanese pronunciation of the Yanpu (鹽埔) and Kampoas Pos is the name used by Indonesian fishers in Donggang to name the temporary shelter they built between 2010-2015 in the Yanpu Fishing Harbor (鹽埔漁港), Donggang.

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