

WHY ARE MIGRANT WORKERS ALWAYS LIVE-STREAMING?

移工怎麼都在直播

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Jiang Wan-Ci's observations on the everyday experience of Taiwan's migrant workers remind us their hackneyed portrayal in the media has failed spectacularly to capture either their uniquely compelling stories or the complexities of living as an economic migrant from Southeast Asia in modern-day Taiwan.

Despite its important role and prominent profile in 21st-century Taiwan society, Taiwan's migrant worker population from Southeast Asia is regularly portrayed unfavorably in the media and thus negatively regarded by mainstream public opinion. While studying for her undergraduate degree in ethnology, Jiang Wan-Ci took to frequenting the hangouts of migrant workers, making friends, exchanging language tips, and listening to stories. She soon recognized media tropes about migrant workers, such as their love of live-streaming, as mere surface reflections of cultural and social patterns deserving of more empathetic exploration.

Migrant stories around the world share similar themes of homesickness and of a desire for familiar things and friendship. In Taiwan, migrant workers' need for rest, relaxation, and fellowship outside the workplace has transformed public train stations throughout the country into regular venues for off-the-clock socializing. An active observer as well as participant in Southeast Asian migrant workers' down-time experiences at Taipei Station, the author parses out the importance of these leisurely "sit-ins" in the station's cavernous main hall, once a target of social derision, to a population with no true place of their own.



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The author also introduces readers to other regular migrant worker hangouts such as “Indonesia Street” – an alley near Taipei Station where food and news from home are always enthusiastically shared. Follow Jiang’s carefully laid narrative to discover the little appreciated or understood lived experiences and stories of Southeast Asian caregivers, laborers, fishermen, and factory workers across the country.

Finishing this book offers a fresh perspective on the question, “Why are migrant workers always live-streaming?” The answer rewards curiosity over subjective judgment. After all, better understanding and empathizing with the migrant worker experience moves us all further along the path to self-awareness and understanding.

Jiang Wan-Ci 江婉琦

Jiang Wan-Ci, born in Tainan in 1997, holds a bachelor’s degree in ethnology from National Cheng-Chi University. She has experience working both for a major Southeast Asia-focused bookstore and the Taiwan Literature Award for Migrants program and currently works as a freelance writer. *Why are Migrant Workers Always Live-streaming?* is the author’s first literary effort.

WHY ARE MIGRANT WORKERS ALWAYS LIVE-STREAMING?

By Jiang Wan-Ci

Translated by Joel Martinsen

Taipei Main Station: Life at a Crossroads

Taipei Main Station was my starting point for making Indonesian friends. Four years after meeting Indri, she told me that for her, coming to Taiwan had been *pelarian* – escape. “You know something? That’s the case for 70% of the people around me,” she said. There were many reasons to escape: a failed romance, an unhappy marriage, the shame of a failed business. “People with happy homes don’t come to Taiwan. Believe me.”

I understood her immediately. Perhaps I didn’t know my previous interview subjects well enough, and that’s why they tended to emphasize earning money as the reason for coming to Taiwan. That’s the general impression of migrant workers you get from the media: they’ve come to Taiwan to make money. But there are actually lots of reasons why migrant workers find their way to Taiwan.

That being the case, I had to rethink. If escape was a reason for coming to Taiwan – if lots of people had that weighing on their mind – then coming to Taipei Main Station might bring them to a crossroads in life.

Lost

The migrant workers who spend their free Sundays at Taipei Main Station belong to a minority fortunate enough to have time off. In my many interviews with these people, I discovered their journeys all seemed to involve a period of “learning how to take holidays”.

Female caregivers must negotiate with their employers for any time off they receive, as such is not required under the Labor Standards Act. For workers whose employers do give them days off, I’ve found that most treat breaks during their first year in Taiwan as “language-learning time”. They say their employers have them watch the news, primetime TV, and the drama series *A Traditional Story of Taiwan* to learn how to communicate with their elderly charges. Within three years, a caregiver is typically comfortable enough with the language and familiar enough with the environment to be bolder about speaking up to her employer. Then she can use language as a tool for negotiations or to go outside and explore the world beyond her employer’s home. At a nearby Indonesian shop, she might buy an Indonesian magazine with reports of the splendid

activities migrant workers get up to at Taipei Main Station every weekend. Or, she might read on social media that her compatriots spend their days off at the station, so she might as well check it out. Perhaps she's already started using buses or the MRT. But even if she hasn't yet, she can still reach the station by taxi and find a well-established social group she probably knew nothing about only three years earlier.

Male factory workers, on the other hand, spend most of their time in their dorm and rarely go out on their days off. A friend told me that many factory workers stay in on Saturdays and Sundays, spending the time shopping at 7-11, cooking for themselves, and vichatting with family. Unlike caregivers, factory workers don't have to spend day and night chatting with elderly Taiwanese, so most of them aren't good with the language. A worker with poor Chinese who wants to go to Taipei Main Station on his day off either has a wife in Taiwan, has met a girl locally, or has connections to a social group. Otherwise, the vast majority simply stay inside. If a group of workers go out, they rely on girlfriends or caregivers with better Chinese to guide them to the station. Because male factory workers amuse themselves differently than women, they won't necessarily go to the station. Instead, they head to New Taipei Metropolitan Park to fish along the riverside in hopes of catching tilapia or visit the storied street markets around Lungshan Temple or in Sanchong District to buy mobile phones and other cheap essentials.

Wie (Chia Yang-ti) went to Taipei Main Station for the first time in 2008, during her first year in Taiwan. At the time, she didn't have monthly days off but did occasionally visit Indonesian shops in the neighborhood to buy dried goods or wire money. Her first trip came on a day when she felt a particularly strong craving for Indonesian food. She told her boss she needed to go out to wire money but headed off to the station on her own.

Prior to actually visiting, her impression of the station was of a wonderful, huge, and crowded place with lots of people sitting and eating in a big hall and plenty of space to sing and dance. A friend warned her to avoid the underground Taipei City Mall, fearing she'd get lost. Sticking to the above-ground Indonesian street, her friend said, was a better bet. She took a bus to get there but asked an Indonesian friend to help her ride the MRT back to her employer's home.

"Anyone, Indonesian or Taiwanese, can get lost in Taipei Main Station."

On that day, she had *sate* and *bakso* at an Indonesian eatery. Prices are high around the station – that bowl of meatball soup cost NT\$150 (US\$4.50). She said she's never sure how much individual items cost, since the cashier only tells her the total amount.

The Dead Train

Taipei Main Station is a transport hub, so off-duty migrant workers from all over converge there in search of a public space to share their time off. Wie said typical spots to meet friends include the statue behind the main hall, the clocks at either end, clearly numbered and labeled entryways at each of the station's four sides, and the "dead train".

The old locomotive and train car displayed outside the station's east gate is what Indonesians call *kereta mati*, which literally means "dead train". They said that on visits to Taipei, it's a photo stop, a landmark, and a meeting place. Similar to the way young Taiwanese used to use the station's "bird-head man", Indonesian workers use the *kereta mati* as a familiar landmark. Search for the hashtag #keretamati on Instagram and TikTok and you'll find photos and videos from various angles of migrant workers with the dead train.

The train is dead.

The train – a LDK58 steam locomotive built in Japan in 1923 and one carriage – ran on the narrow-gauge Taitung Line in an era when eastern Taiwan was just beginning to be developed. It primarily took students to and from school and was known as the "yellow-skin train". When the Hua-Tung Line gauge was widened in 1982, these narrow-gauge engines were retired, and the dead train was installed outside Taipei Main Station in 2000 as a historical exhibit. By that point, migrant workers had been in Taiwan for a decade. Indonesians say that if you visit Taipei without getting a photo of the *kereta mati*, it's like not having visited the city at all.

Another popular photo spot is the fountain – *air mancur* – located outside South Exit 2. In 2008, Wie and her friends spent *Lebaran* at the station. She recalled how they chatted in the main hall first before going outside to take pictures at the fountain, where the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Store and tall buildings in the background give an international vibe to the scene. Afterward, she proceeded to the dead train for more photos. If you want to take a picture at the dead train during *Lebaran*, expect to wait in a very long line.

Circles

Indonesians tend to sit in circles on the polished floor inside the main hall on the first floor of Taipei Main Station. When Wie and her friends had finished taking photos, they went inside to sit down for a chat. The problem was, there were so many people they knew there that they ended up gravitating from circle to circle as people raised their hands and called over to them "I'm over here!" Wie said that so many people had packed the hall during *Lebaran* that cellphone signals were spotty and text messages and phone calls seldom came through. Those circles – and the sharing of food – made her feel she was back in an Indonesian village celebrating *Lebaran*.

The conversation circles at Taipei Main Station intermingle with one another on holidays and ordinary Sundays alike. When someone in one circle hears a familiar voice in another, or if they recognize someone from their hometown, they'll often join in the conversation, making that circle even larger.

When joining a circle or running into friends or strangers at the station, shaking hands is an essential courtesy with deep roots in Indonesian culture. At first, I had to watch everyone else to learn the proper way to shake hands.

There are various styles of handshakes, but for all of them, the final step is to put your right hand over your left breast to indicate that you have seen the other person and placed them in your heart.

Handshakes are the foundation of a relationship. As I was learning, I'd often forget to shake hands and would feel bad. "How could I have forgotten *again*?" I'd say to myself. But I was also curious – when migrant workers first arrive and meet Taiwanese who don't normally shake hands, do they feel they are being kept at a distance? My migrant worker friends told me they tend to see different circles on every visit, but once you've shaken hands with a person twice, it means you'll be remembered as a friend.

With every handshake, I increasingly felt the person-to-person interactions so commonplace in Indonesia had taken on a greater significance in Taiwan. Culturally ingrained patterns had become features distinguishing the communities at Taipei Main Station. For me, going inside is like entering a new social order, but for them it is a return to a familiar environment. Only here does shaking hands seem normal. In the station, handshakes are the normal order, an order not found in Taiwanese culture at large but commonplace here.

A Handshake, a Smile, and "What's your name?"

As I spent more time in Taipei Main Station, I discovered lots of common names among my Indonesian friends. When I think of the groups of migrant workers there, the names Linda, Siti and Wendy most often come to mind.

Many migrant workers in Taiwan hail from *Pulau Jawa* – the island of Java. Wie told me that the most common names for Javanese men are Yanto, Anto and Susanto and that women's names often end in -i, like Ati and Yanti.

This might be why lots of Indonesian caregivers are called "Ati" by their employers. Ati and Eka are common names for a family's eldest daughter, while Dwi is common for the second and Lastri for the third daughters. Common names for Christian Indonesians include Christina and Linda, while those with Hindu backgrounds may be recognized through such names as Rita, Rintha, and Hindra.

Outside of the station along Beiping West Road and around Exit Y27 of the underground Taipei City Mall is home to lots of Indonesian shops. In the main hall, I'd occasionally see people going from circle to circle peddling Indonesian dishes they prepared themselves. Hot food is pricey at eateries near the station – forget that NT\$150 bowl of bakso! A trip to an Indonesian buffet can easily cost NT\$200-300 (US\$6-\$9). Wie shared that she usually spends over NT\$200 for five sate skewers and a soft drink. I asked her how much that would cost back in her village in Indonesia – Rp13,000, she said, or around NT\$26 (US\$0.80). "Then it's really expensive!" I exclaimed.

"So when we shop in Taiwan, we can't always think about the conversion to rupiah. We'd only get depressed," Wie said. "You've got to treat yourself from time to time." She also remarked

on the less expensive aspects of Taiwan. At a market, clothes could be had for NT\$100 (US\$3). “I tend to buy infrequently, but I buy clothes in the style that suits me,” she said.

I asked her about the wage gap between Taiwan and Indonesia. She said a caregiver in Taiwan averages around NT\$17,000 (US\$530) a month. That’s the level of a university professor or doctor in Indonesia. Cities and rural areas are different, of course, but the average monthly income in Indonesia is 1-2 million rupiah, or around NT\$2,000-4,000 (US\$60-120).

Sitting Down

When migrant workers come to Taipei Main Station on their weekly, monthly, or annual holiday, they tend to sit in the main hall. The Taiwanese have the impression that migrant workers love sitting on the station’s floor. But was it always this way? “No,” Wie shares. “There used to be chairs here.”

The chairs the hall used to provide for weary travelers were removed during major renovations in 2011. In an article that year under the headline, “Taipei Main Station removes chairs from main hall; passengers cope by sitting on the floor,” a reporter wrote, “Gazing across the hall, I see not a single chair. But in every corner, people lean on pillars or sit against walls, setting their food directly on the ground.” The people described sitting on the ground in that article were Taiwanese. The station was the scene of the “Red Cordon Incident”, when Taiwan Railway officials, responding to public outcry against migrant workers occupying the main hall with their conversation circles during Lebaran 2012, cordoned off the hall to prevent people from occupying the floor. In 2013, the station relented slightly and installed seats around eight of the station’s main pillars. However, those were removed in 2015 due to public aversion to their being used by the homeless.

Sitting on the floor in circles is how people in Indonesia chat with friends, hold events, and conduct meetings. Sitting down is part of everyday life for them. Migrant workers and the station’s unhoused are all aware of the unwritten rule: no lying down before 9:00 p.m.. The questions they deliberate – *Can I sit down? Can I lie down?* – to me aren’t necessarily questions of etiquette. When I interviewed a few homeless people, I discovered that each had internalized these station rules, applying them even when out on the streets. “*This* is when I can sit down. And by *this* time, or when no one’s watching, I can lie down.” Being able to take a seat or lie down is actually a discipline demanded by society. But have we forgotten that our bodies are our own?

When you consider the mental rules the homeless follow for sitting and lying down, and the dissatisfaction felt toward migrant workers sitting on the ground, you’ll sense that what disgusts us seems to be a reflection of the things we want to, but cannot, do. Does sitting on the floor make us uncomfortable? Pop star Lim Giong once sang his hit “Marching Forward” in Taipei Main Station. As we march forward in Taipei, do we too feel the pressure in our hearts to say, “I must work hard!” As we speed ahead, can we take a moment to sit down? Must we remain standing?

If I were a migrant worker and my only break came after standing for a week or a month or a full 365 days, I imagine that when that moment came, I'd probably sit down too.

Long Journeys

"But no one's going to stay at Taipei Main Station indefinitely."

Wie told me that for Indonesians, Taipei Main Station has everything. You can buy phone cards, eat Indonesian food, wire money, and visit hair salons that speak your language. But she has also heard that many of those who've been in Taiwan a while stop coming as much. A place like the station feels fresh and new at first. It has everything you'd want, she said, including air conditioning. But when you come so often, you gradually discover that's all it has. The station is big, but it's also very small. People still come, but those who want to save money stick mostly to the main hall. The people who find pleasure in spending come to shop. But eventually you'll find there's nothing new to see.

"If you're here all the time, people feel you're not making progress," Linda (Pei-ching), the first Indonesian friend I made at the station in 2015, once told me. She had come to Taiwan as a student and after graduation covered news about migrant workers and translated Taiwan news reports for the Indonesian-language magazine *Nihao Indonesia*. She told me that every report about Taipei Main Station that goes online with an accompanying photo draws comments from migrant workers saying, "You're all abroad, so why spend your time there? You're still in a place full of Indonesian people and Indonesian food." "Why is that the only place you go? You're not making progress."

What's interesting, Linda said, is that lots of people – herself included – still come back to the station when they miss Indonesian food.

The station is a place you return to. Indri, who lives in Wugu District, said that when she has to go to certain places in Taipei, she'll catch transfer at Taipei Main Station since it has convenient routes to all destinations. "Sanchong District is next to Wugu, but I still need go to Taipei Main Station first to catch the bus. It is a long detour." For migrant workers unfamiliar with Taipei, the station is both a major landmark and a transportation hub. They often meet here, at the center, before proceeding on to their respective destinations.

A Clash of Ideas

Migrant workers are outsiders in Taiwan – outsiders in an unfamiliar place who must search for others like them. At Taipei Main Station, they form a community, make friends, and search for comrades. When I came here for fieldwork, I was an outsider too, and there were times when I'd feel ill at ease walking alone through the Indonesian street because, in the eyes of those around

me, I was different. Yet, from time to time I'd run across one of the few other Taiwanese in the area.

Chia-yen, a Taiwanese woman I met at the station, was writing her master's thesis on migrant worker music groups. During her fieldwork, she joined one of the bands as their keyboardist. At the station, we frequently encountered individuals who challenged and sometimes completely upturned common migrant-worker stereotypes. The Indonesian migrant workers here included Hallyu-dressed hipsters who had completely abandoned their headscarves, party girls in tight tops and hot pants, gay men who, while closeted at home, were open with their boyfriends here, and men and women with lots of friends of the opposite sex.

One of the migrant workers in Chia-yen's band had grown his hair out and gotten tongue and nose piercings – eccentric choices for the average Indonesian! But, when his contract was up and he returned home, he once again transformed his appearance. The next time I saw him – in a photo taken with his kid, he was practically unrecognizable. His hair was neatly cut, his piercings had been removed, and he was wearing a white shirt and the round hat traditionally preferred by observant Muslims in his country.