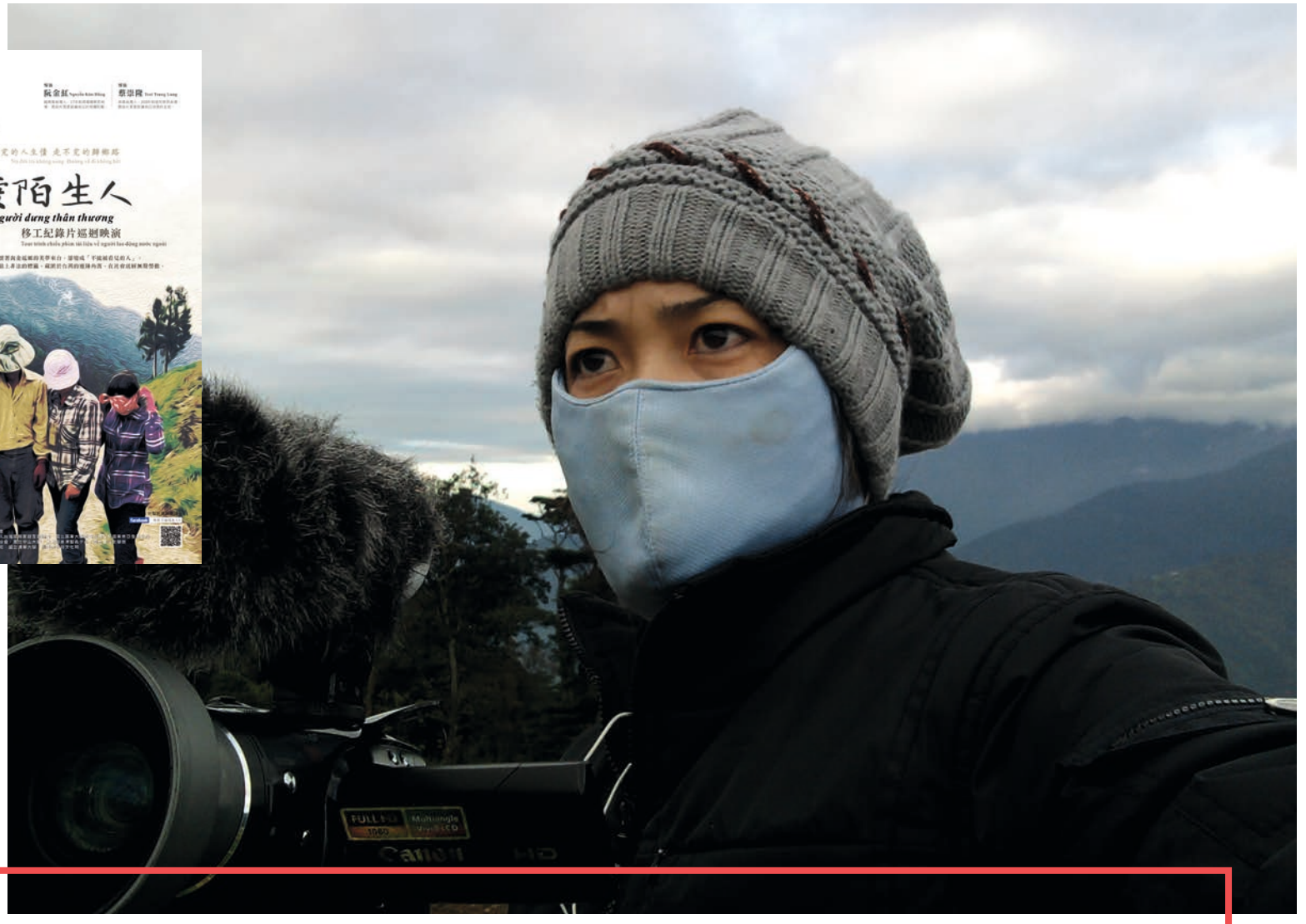

Left: Film poster of 'See You, Lovable Strangers'. The belief behind the making of the documentary is to let the people of Taiwan know that they are not different from ourselves in spite of being economically worse-off.

Right: The co-director had the advantage of sharing the same background with her protagonists. Having worked together for a long time, they trusted her and appreciated her motives.

All photos by the directors, Nguyễn Kim Hồng and Tsai Tsung Lung.

‘See You, Lovable Strangers’

Exploring experiences of Vietnamese irregular migrants in Taiwan through filmmaking

An interview with Tsai Tsung Lung, by Evelyn Hsin-chin Hsieh.
Translated from Chinese and introduced by Isabelle Cheng

‘See You, Lovable Strangers’ is a 2016 documentary about four undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan who decided to take matters into their own hands after the prospect of saving for their families became dim because of monthly deductions, reduced payments or employers’ maltreatment. Filmed by a Vietnamese migrant, this documentary traced the four workers’ footsteps up into the mountains where they built their ‘villa’ with plastic sheets, tree branches and flattened cardboard boxes. The director caught a rare moment when the workers enjoyed a seemingly carefree outing on the beach, and another, when the migrant workers’ demand for justice at the Vietnamese embassy in Taiwan fell on deaf ears. Witnessing how one of the men’s dreams were shattered after his arrest and subsequent repatriation, this documentary informs the audience that the man’s departure from Taiwan and return to Vietnam did not end his migration journey since he was still in debt. As the sequel to the award-winning ‘Lovely Strangers’ (2013), this film enabled these men and women to tell a story, shared with other migrant workers, about their desires, fears and endurance.

Taiwan has been one of the major destinations for migrant workers from Southeast Asia since 1992, when the recruitment of migrant workers was legalised. In February 2020 the number of migrant workers in Taiwan equalled 719,487. A total of 263,533 workers, the great majority of whom are women, provide around-the-clock care in private homes or nursing homes. Another 455,594 are employed in factories, on construction sites, on fishing vessels, with a very small number on farms.[1] Operating a strict guest worker system that denies citizenship to migrant workers, Taiwan is a place where Southeast Asian men and women find themselves permanently on a temporary basis, and where they can only obtain employment after paying a high recruitment fee. Shared between brokers in their home country and in Taiwan, the recruitment fee is often paid with loans provided at a high interest rate or by deduction from their monthly salary. Even where this has not spiralled into a situation of debt bondage, exploitation or abuse can reach such a degree that migrant workers abscond at the price of becoming undocumented and thus working illegally in Taiwan.

Hsieh: What motivated you to make this documentary, and specifically, why did you choose to focus on undocumented migrant workers?

Tsai: Migrant workers are rarely the focus of media coverage in Taiwan. When they do make it into the spotlight, they are often projected negatively. There is limited video documentation about them made by Taiwanese filmmakers, due to language and cultural barriers. Obviously, the filming cannot be done properly without interpretation if a filmmaker intends to explore their inner world. On top of these difficulties, practically, undocumented workers, particularly those who have escaped from abusive employers, are mostly out of reach of Taiwanese documentary makers. Frightened by the prospect of being caught by the police, when approached by Taiwanese filmmakers, they are not easily convinced that the inquiries come with good intentions. Taiwanese filmmakers who have wished to document their experiences have only been able to do so in writing or audio-recording. However, these media are less intuitive; readers, viewers or listeners are less likely to empathise with the subjects.

My wife Kim Hồng and I are migrants. I am an internal migrant; I moved from agricultural Changhua to metropolitan Taipei and am now settled in agricultural Chiayi in southern Taiwan. Kim Hồng is an international migrant; she moved from Vietnam to Taiwan, and is now settled in Chiayi with me. As a long-term activist, she sees filming as part of her daily life. In 2012, she was working as an hourly paid garlic picker, together with farmers in our village. On one occasion, she met a group of ‘illegal migrant workers’, who were taking on jobs in our village. To start, influenced by the stereotype projected by the media, Kim Hồng did not like them. However, in time, she began to understand the hardships they endured as migrant workers in Taiwan, and came to see that her fellow migrants, who originated from northern Vietnam, were kind, honest and hardworking people.

Picking up jobs here and there, Kim Hồng’s migrant friends shuttled between the village and the mountains, where they had made themselves a home. Kim Hồng became a close friend to them and they kept in touch. They told her about the dangers of living in the mountains, such as evading police raids and hiding in the woods. To better understand their work and life, Kim Hồng decided to visit them in the mountains. Grasping this rare opportunity to explore the world of undocumented workers, we began to film them for three long years.

Hsieh: How did you decide what to include in your film?

Tsai: All documentary makers know that the key is to win the trust of the filmed subjects. For this film, for me, the most immediate difficulties were the barriers of language, culture and class differences between them and me. For them, knowing that they were seen as ‘illegal’ added another layer of complications. All of these issues made this film more challenging than the making of *Out/Marriage* (2012), the documentary made by Kim Hồng that focuses on women’s stories of marriage migration.

We did not intend to reveal anything sensational or unusual that was worthy of an eye-catching headline. Kim Hồng simply joined them as a co-worker and, for a long time, she kept to her commitment of working with her fellow migrants. At the crack of dawn, they would pick garlic in the village; at night, they were transported back to the mountains. In the mountains they would also be hired to harvest highly-priced cabbages on a farm 3,000 metres above sea level. Kim Hồng’s

desire to document their lives sprouted soon after she became a close friend to them. However, the migrant workers were on the lookout for potential dangers posed by someone like her who showed uninvited interests in them. Kim Hồng was cautious not to do anything that could raise the police's suspicions. She began by taking photographs of the workers and giving them these photos as gifts. They were very happy with the images and soon agreed to be filmed. In return, we promised to protect their identities: we would not share their images; at screenings, we would not allow the audience to take photos or film, or we would blur out their faces.

When making the documentary *Out/Marriages*, Kim Hồng, as the filmmaker, had the advantage of sharing the same background with her protagonists. This also worked in her favour when filming these undocumented migrant workers. Having worked together for a long time, they trusted her and appreciated her motives. They were at ease with being filmed by her and did not see it necessary to hide or conceal anything. This was critical to the success of this documentary. After all, they have been stigmatised by the media, and it would not have helped to rectify their negative image if they had not been able to be who they are or if they could not speak for themselves. In terms of cinematography, we took a realist approach and did not use any special effects. We believe that to present them as they are is the best way to restore their dignity. We believe that our mission is to let the people of Taiwan know that they are not different from ourselves in spite of being economically worse-off.

There are two versions of this documentary. The shorter version uses Kim Hồng's voiceover; the longer version does not employ any narration – the story unfolds on its own. I used to be an investigative journalist, so I edited some critical information and inserted it as captions in the film. Displayed at relevant moments, these captions inform viewers of migrant workers' socio-economic contributions as well as their exploitation by brokers. I believe that this additional information creates a space for public debate, whilst viewers are led by the humanitarian undertone of the story.

A Cheng and A Fu are two protagonists in this film. To pay for the extortionate recruitment fees, both of them took out loans at a high interest rate in Vietnam before coming to Taiwan. They worked in the village in southern Taiwan and in the mountains in central Taiwan. They were nomads chasing after job opportunities, most of which were laborious and involved unforgiving long working hours. They rarely had time off. Unfortunately, in early 2013, A Fu was arrested by the police but A Cheng managed to escape. A Fu was transferred to the Chiayi Immigration Brigade, where he stayed for 12 days in detention before he was repatriated to Vietnam. I tried to negotiate with the police and was allowed to film the police's transfer and repatriation of A Fu.

After A Fu's arrest, Kim Hồng lost contact with A Cheng for a while. But we met other undocumented workers, who stayed in Taiwan longer, and we were able to film them. Two years later, Kim Hồng returned to Vietnam to visit her family. She went to visit A Fu in central Vietnam and interviewed A Fu's mother and wife. Her visit (on film) allows viewers to observe the circumstances of family poverty under which A Fu decided to run the risk of working in far-off Taiwan.

Hsieh: What impressed you most as a filmmaker when filming these undocumented workers?

Tsai: Before we started, I was hesitant and cautious. Obviously, I could not communicate, as Kim Hồng did, with Vietnamese workers in their language. I had heard a lot of stories about Vietnamese men's drinking problems or their alleged crimes. However, when I first met them, I was surprised by how they interacted with me. Most of them were either shy or treated me with respect. The way they looked at me felt familiar; they reminded me of the apprentices at my mother's hair salon, who had looked at me in the same manner. I did not understand that look when I was little. I now know that it is the look of feeling 'less-than' the person standing in front of you. It made no difference that I was not their employer; they felt to be 'lower', even though we are all human beings.

I talked to an immigration officer about their raids on undocumented workers. He explained that most law enforcement agents are reluctant to arrest undocumented workers. They know that they are hard workers whose only wish is to earn and save money. Vietnamese workers, heavily in debt, run for their lives when pursued by the police. Some of them have broken limbs, others have lost their lives.

It is public knowledge that Vietnamese workers, out of all Southeast Asian workers, pay the highest recruitment fee, which is somewhere between TWD $120,000-200,000 (approximately US $4,000-6,600). Off-the-record, I asked an experienced broker whether this high fee also included bribes for governmental officials. He confirmed that this was so: textbook corruption. Although the brokering industry in Taiwan is regulated by law, the under-the-table deal between Vietnamese and Taiwanese brokers is that the recruitment fee of US $4,500 paid to Vietnamese brokers in Vietnam includes US $2,200 given to their Taiwanese partners in Taiwan. He finished his explanation by reminding me, in jest: "You've learned too much! Be careful about being visited by law enforcement agents!" I knew he was joking, but his 'reminder' still sent a chill down my spine. If those over-charging Vietnamese brokers are criminals, their Taiwanese counterparts are conspirators. As for those corrupt officials in Vietnam and Taiwan, I have no words to describe them.

Hsieh: Would this documentary have any impact on the Taiwanese society?

Tsai: Taiwan became a destination for marriage migration from Southeast Asia and China in the late 1980s. It has imported labour from Southeast Asia since 1992. When manufacturing and construction industries were hit hard by the rise in labour costs, migrant workers became a critical source of supplementary workforce. They opportunely filled the gap in these industries, which were shunned by local workers. In addition, the population of Taiwan has aged rapidly since the 2000s. The critically needed care in homes and in nursing institutions is provided by Southeast Asian care workers. Replacing Taiwanese carers, they take care of the elderly and the sick. The agricultural and fishing industries also experienced chronic labour shortages, which farmers came to solve by employing undocumented workers; for some, their contribution to sustaining the country's food production is accompanied by exploitation and abuse.

It is not difficult to understand the significance of migrant workers for the development of Taiwan. Had it not been for their contributions, the economy would have slumped further and faster. Nevertheless, a casual search online feeds you with plenty of postings of discrimination and hate, as well as stories of abuse. You can find these posts on Facebook, blogs, news outlets and readers' responses to news reports.

I hope this documentary makes the Taiwanese government and people think about how migrant workers have been marginalised in the capitalist economy. These workers, who are perceived as an underclass, as the 'other', pursue the dream of having a better life for themselves and their families, a dream that was also embraced by the Taiwanese ancestors who migrated from southeast China to Taiwan three centuries ago. Why do we see these two groups of migrants so differently?

We have organised several screenings of this documentary at universities, community colleges and other venues. One of the common reactions from our audiences has been their surprise at the hardships endured by migrant workers. Some suggested revealing more of the exploitation or illegality of brokers or employers. Others enquired what they could do for migrant workers. Our responses have been the same: There are 'good' and 'bad' migrants as much as there are 'good' and 'bad' Taiwanese people. We do not intend to portray all brokers and employers as abusers; likewise, xenophobic Taiwanese people should not deprecate all outsiders as inferior. By showing the suffering of migrant workers, we hope this documentary poses a significant question to the audience: What feeds and sustains the discrimination against migrant workers? We hope watching this documentary is a humbling experience. We hope this documentary can generate empathy amongst the audience and empower them to take action. Emotional sympathy is good but it is insufficient if we aim to make a difference. Our goal is to motivate Taiwanese viewers to use their political rights and participate in the making of migration policy. If they are willing to be part of the advocacy campaign that calls for the improvement of migrant workers' plight, their political actions will contribute to making Taiwan a multicultural and civilised nation. This is the impact we hope this documentary can, and will, have.

Above: At the crack of dawn, they would pick garlic in the village; at night, they were transported back to the mountains. In the mountains they would also be hired to harvest highly-priced cabbages on a farm 3,000 metres above sea level.

Below: We believe that to present them as they are is the best way to restore their dignity.

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About the Directors

Nguyễn Kim Hồng is a marriage migrant in Taiwan from Vietnam. *Out/Marriage* was her first documentary and was nominated for Best Documentary in both the Taipei Film Festival and the South Taiwan Film Festival. It won the Best Newcomer Award at the South Taiwan Film Festival.

Tsai Tsung Lung is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communications at the National Chung Cheng University and works as an independent documentary producer and director. He is known for his award-winning works, including *Killing in Formosa*, *Behind the Miracle*, *My Imported Wife*, *Oil Disease: Surviving Evil* and *Sunflower Occupation*
twinflows@gmail.com

Notes

1 Ministry of Labour. *Numbers of Migrant Workers by Industry and Social Welfare* (產業及社福移工人數按開放項目分). Retrieved 1 April 2020 from https://tinyurl.com/MOL-NMWISW