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# ‘Fettered mobility’ and translocality: Irregular farm workers and the informal labour market in rural Taiwan

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10.  
11. **‘Fettered mobility’ and**  
12. **translocality: Irregular farm**  
13. **workers and the informal**  
14. **labour market in rural Taiwan**  
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25. **ABSTRACT**

26. *Investigating the multi-layered mobility of Southeast Asian irregular farm workers*  
27. *in rural Taiwan, this article examines the formation of their mobility in a physical,*  
28. *geographical, occupational and socio-economic sense. Focusing on frequent move-*  
29. *ment in these four aspects, this article coins the term ‘fettered mobility’ for workers’*  
30. *constant relocation in the villages’ informal farm labour market. In tandem with*  
31. *the focus of this Special Issue on the ongoing transformations of migration at the*  
32. *crossroad between the legal, social and economic obstacles dictated by nation states*  
33. *and the market, and new patterns of movement, this article shows how ‘fettered*  
34. *mobility’ is an unintentional result of the Taiwanese state’s mobility regime, which*  
35. *regulates foreign nationals’ mobility by categorizing a hierarchical legal status.*  
36. *Fettered mobility is facilitated by the translocal migrant community constituted*  
37. *by the co-ethnic link between migrant workers and migrant spouse farmers, and*

**KEYWORDS**

mobility  
mobility regime  
categorization  
informality  
migrant labour  
work regimes  
farmwork  
immobility

*also by the inter-ethnic link between the migrant community on the one hand and Taiwanese farmers and unlicensed brokers on the other. When migration is reconfiguring at a global, regional and local scale, fettered mobility is an assemblage in which the state, market and individual amalgamate into a networked, mobile, irregular and precarious labour force in which unprotected migrant workers are vulnerable to the state's power to repatriate. Repatriation is an omnipresent threat, and anyone who knows of a migrant worker's fettered mobility can put an end to their migration. Presenting fettered mobility as an assemblage, this article enriches the ongoing debate on the relationship between mobility and immobility and underlines its conditionality and instability.*

### **MIGRANT FARM LABOUR IN RURAL TAIWAN**

Migration studies are increasingly concerned with the ways in which migrants and migrant workers oscillate between situations of mobility and immobility when they simultaneously navigate regulatory and mobile practices along diverse social, spatial, economic, political or cultural experiences. Today, we are growingly witnessing how individuals' movements are being challenged not to say prevented or even obstructed – by the proliferation of social, economic and legal constraints migrants face on their roads to displacement, settlement, legal status attribution, or work. As a result, migration patterns are taking novel shapes and unseen orientations, and so are the theoretical concepts and epistemological approaches scholars mobilize in migration studies – what the guest editors of this Special Issue provocatively named 'the end of migration'. Taking on questions of migration, borders and power, the concept of the 'migration regime' has become a crucial prism for apprehending the complex dialectic between mobility and stasis (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), that is to say how movement, settlement and work are permanently constructed at the crossroad between social, racial, spatial and legal obstacles and opportunities (De Genova 2005; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Along with the provocative question raised by this Special Issue about 'the end of migration', while scholarly interest in both domestic and cross-border migration mainly stems from the incentive produced by industrialization for workers to seek employment in urban areas or in high-income economies (Massey 1998), research is also concerned with how the agricultural industry in the Global North hunts for workers, formal or informal (Martin 2002; Rogaly 2009; Preibisch 2010; Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014; Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser 2023). Recently, small family farmers in rural Taiwan have joined the ranks of cash crop farmers in the Global North in their search for such mobile foreign labour. However, the recent legalization of the employment of Southeast Asian farm workers in Taiwan is mainly playing catch-up: the illegal employment of foreign workers has become a practice so widespread that is perceived to be an open secret (Cheng et al. 2023). Regarded as a potential threat to law and order and public health, migrant workers' physical and geographical movement is closely monitored by economic, labour, security and health ministries (Cheng 2022; Cockel forthcoming 2024). In tandem with De Genova's analysis of the processes of racialization, labour subordination, illegalization and class formation amongst Mexican migrants in Chicago, we argue that the migration regime in Taiwan has created new forms of illegality, which not only criminalize migrants, but also create a category of highly exploitable and disposable labour to serve the market's interests. Joining the vibrant debate about the migration industry

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1. and the commodification of migrant labour and migrant workers’ bodies (Kyle  
2. 2000; Kyle et al. 2011), we propose that the employment of foreign farm  
3. workers in Taiwan offers a critical lens through which we can understand  
4. how mobility becomes a commodity entwined with the commodification of  
5. labour, while nation states attempt to rein in foreign workers’ border-crossing  
6. mobility.

7. Nevertheless, little is known about how the employment of Southeast  
8. Asian irregular farm workers came into being in Taiwan and how such employ-  
9. ment contributes to our understanding of (im)mobility. To fill this gap, this article  
10. asks two fundamental questions: how does the employment of Southeast  
11. Asian irregular farm workers in the informal labour market of Taiwan inform  
12. us of the conceptualization of mobility? What is the relationship between the  
13. Taiwanese state’s regulation of foreign labour and its mobility? Foregrounding  
14. physical/geographical movement, and the resultant occupational transi-  
15. tion and unstable socio-economic shift, this article proposes to conceptual-  
16. ize frequent movement as ‘fettered mobility’ that is constrained by structural  
17. precarity in the informal market as well as by eventual repatriation in the legal  
18. system. Our investigation suggests that the mobility of foreign farm labour in  
19. rural Taiwan, and its incorporation into the informal labour market, is *discur-*  
20. *sively* facilitated by the unintentional and adverse convergence of marriage  
21. and labour migration, courtesy of the state’s mobility regime. This fettered  
22. mobility, underlined by illegality, irregularity and precarity, defies the state’s  
23. strict regulation at the expense of enduring the state’s threat of repatriation.  
24. Following the ‘infrastructural turn’ in migration and mobilities studies (Collins  
25. 2013; Xiang and Lindquist 2014), this article aims at capturing the complex  
26. interplay of such multi-layered and multidimensional forces, i.e. the assem-  
27. blages of human and non-human actors at play in the migratory industry  
28. which shape the often-unpredictable outcomes of migration (Lin et al. 2017;  
29. Allen and Vollmer 2018; Xiang and Ma 2019). Contributing to the debate on  
30. mobility and immobility, our findings deepen the understanding of the *assem-*  
31. *blage* of workers’ multi-layered mobility, the commodification of migrant  
32. labour, and of state regulation.

### 34. **THE MOBILITY OF LABOUR IN THE MOBILITY REGIME AND IN THE** 35. **INFORMAL MARKET**

36. Examining workers’ mobility both domestically and internationally, migra-  
37. tion scholarship pays critical attention to how national legislations set social,  
38. spatial, economic and legal barriers to migrants’ access to national territories  
39. (Shamir 2005; Turner 2007). These bring about specific socio-administrative  
40. designations and legal categories of temporary/permanent and documented/  
41. undocumented migrants – to name just a few.

42. Examining the processes that draw distinctions between citizens and aliens  
43. (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), this strand of research captures host states’  
44. ‘categories of difference’ (Bakewell 2008), which differentiate migrants’ rights  
45. to settle and work, dividing them into ‘arbitrary categories’ of migrants, refu-  
46. gees, asylum seekers, temporary workers, visa-holders, tourists and nomads,  
47. as argued by Noel Salazar (2017). Scholarship on the state’s mobility regime  
48. is insightful in showing how the mobility of foreign workers is slotted into a  
49. hierarchy that favours some but disadvantages others. In other words, mobil-  
50. ity regimes create categories which encompass both state powers and a global  
51. political economy. A hierarchy of mobility translates to another hierarchy  
52.

of border-crossing freedom, residency and labour rights (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) that separates migrants from citizens. Both groups of people are measured against the desirability of their skills and are stratified accordingly by their conferred legal status. The stress on the rigidity of the state's categorization falls short of considering the possibility of human agency that may transgress the state's restriction. In tandem with this Special Issue's call to address the relationship between mobility and immobility, this article looks at how, against the nationalist backdrop of a static conceptualization of migrants and citizens as two discrete categories, the socio-economic paths of migrants and citizens criss-cross and their employment and everyday life also overlap.

Another challenge to take into account is the market force. That is, host states' mobility regimes go against the market's desire for the mobility of labour, particularly in the informal economy (Castles 2016). As paradoxical as it may seem, despite an increased demand for foreign labour on local, regional and global scales as a consequence of global neoliberalism, migratory policies and restrictive mobility regimes growingly prevent or even bar migrants' employment in the formal sectors of local economies. Individuals' spatial and economic mobilities thus take new orientations; novel employment sectors and peripheral migration hubs appear, requiring us to reconsider and reframe our traditional understanding of what migration looks like and is rooted into. Specifically, the 'informal spheres' of the economy represent important sources of employment for migrants, especially when the rigidity of migratory regimes and the consequent obstacles to legal status attribution make them undocumented or irregular (Castells and Portes 1989; Kloosterman et al. 1998; Williams and Windebank 2002; Bommers and Sciortino 2011; Triandafyllidou and Bartolini 2020). The 'informalization' of employment (Sassen 1998) and the 'informal sphere' can be defined as 'all productive activities which are unregistered by or hidden from the state and/or tax, social security and/or labour law purposes, but which are legal in all other respects' (Williams and Windebank 1998: 4). Informal spheres mostly develop in fishing, farming, manufacturing, construction, care and hospitality industries, with workers being employed in 'the shadows of national economies' (Ambrosini 1999) without legal contracts and the rights derived from them, such as social, labour and legal protection (Papademetriou et al. 2010).

In this vein, scholarship on neoliberal informality provides a route by which to investigate the mobility of migrant labour as a result of the trade-off between state regulation and market forces. In other words, the informality challenges the premise of the effectiveness of the state's mobility regime. However, the actual formation of mobility in the labour market cannot be realized without the explanatory power of transnationalism. Critically, the functioning of informal markets that purchase mobility is lubricated by transnational networking, where multiple players both in the receiving and the sending society are active in recruiting labour and channelling it into specific sectors of the market. When considering cost-benefit calculations, neoclassical and development theories of migration (Massey et al. 1993; Cassarino 2004) appear to be limited in their ability to explain how migrants make use of their mobility behind or beyond state borders and how they seek opportunities in the societies of arrival's labour markets, both formal and informal. As an established theoretical paradigm in migration studies (Glick Schiller et al. 1992), transnationalism corrects this by shedding light on how migrants' mobility is complicated by their frequent crossing of 'transnational social fields' (Basch et al. 1994; Levitt 2001). Migrants' transnational life and work experiences are

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1. thus composed of ‘back and forth’ movements between the societies of arrival  
 2. and of departure (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), with individuals calling upon  
 3. multi-sited social networks (Portes et al. 1999) to live across borders (Vertovec  
 4. 2009). They develop socio-economic activities in association with ethnic  
 5. communities that are made up of co-ethnic and familial ties (Portes and Zhou  
 6. 1993), kinship, clan, same-place, same-school or same-name associations (Al-  
 7. Ali and Koser 2003; Faist 2013).

8. To comprehend the multi-layered complexity of Southeast Asian work-  
 9. ers’ transnational mobility, it is necessary to consider co-ethnic transnational  
 10. connections forged by migrants at both ends of the migration. In this light,  
 11. we utilize the notion of ‘translocality’ (Ong 1999; Calhoun 2007) to capture  
 12. the dynamic and ever-evolving co-ethnic and inter-ethnic connections within  
 13. migrant communities in the receiving society, where migrants’ socio-economic  
 14. paths criss-cross.

15. Building on this concept of translocality, we coin the term ‘fettered mobil-  
 16. ity’ to represent the multi-layered mobility that arises from the lived experi-  
 17. ences of Southeast Asian workers in Taiwan. ‘Fettered mobility’ might help  
 18. us grasp the ongoing transformations, in terms of challenges, obstacles  
 19. and bars, of today’s global migration. It aims to apprehend the novel shape  
 20. of individuals’ contemporary movements, and the emerging contradic-  
 21. tions of our traditional understanding of labour migration. In other words,  
 22. Southeast Asian migrant workers’ ‘fettered mobility’ is a purposely paradoxical  
 23. and almost antinomic term. When migrants’ mobility becomes ‘fettered’,  
 24. the very notion of ‘migrant’ and ‘migration’, as we conventionally mobilized  
 25. in our analyses, comes to an end and urgently calls for a heuristic rethink-  
 26. ing. Practically put, in the Taiwanese state’s mobility regime, these migrants  
 27. are undocumented workers absconding their contracts; in the labour market,  
 28. they are irregular workers hired by individuals, small business owners or  
 29. family farmers. Unlike ‘hypermobility’, which is concerned with workers’  
 30. frequent moves across state borders (for professional workers, see Bauman  
 31. [2007] and Urry [2007]; for seasonal agricultural workers, see Bruzelius and  
 32. Seeleib-Kaiser [2023]), fettered mobility is an act of ‘transnationalism from  
 33. below’ (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), a survival strategy that grows out of the  
 34. spectrum that workers perceive between fluctuating degrees of freedom and  
 35. unfreedom that are structured by mobility regimes (Lerche 2007; Barrientos  
 36. et al. 2013; Hoang 2020; Crane et al. 2022; Cockel et al. 2023). Dialectically  
 37. derived in this way from state mobility regimes, fettered mobility defines a  
 38. situation where absconders frequently take up casual employment in an infor-  
 39. mal labour market and consequentially increase their physical, geographical,  
 40. occupational and socio-economic movement. The mobility regime’s depri-  
 41. vation of their right to family reunion in Taiwan make them de facto single,  
 42. living without the company of their family. Becoming *atomized* as such, they  
 43. are free from the physical burden of caring for their family members, which,  
 44. otherwise, is usually the cause of lower mobility for local workers. Because  
 45. they are not governed by a contract, they are free from the mobility regime’s  
 46. surveillance of and limitation on their physical, geographical, occupational  
 47. and socio-economic movement. Therefore, they are free to move to wher-  
 48. ever employment is available. Fettered mobility is resourced by co-ethnic  
 49. networking with the translocal migrant community and inter-ethnic network-  
 50. ing with Taiwanese brokers and farmers, which develops over time (Baas and  
 51. Yeoh 2019). However, fettered mobility is exercised with a cost, including the  
 52. prices paid for receiving employment information from nodes in the network



and workers' payment for their transport and accommodation. While fettered mobility occurs in all industries, this research is only concerned with its occurrence in small family farming.

In all, fettered mobility is, by default, made by the mobility regime. Yet it defies, circumscribes and utilizes the regime's categorization of citizens and migrants and its restriction on their physical, geographical, occupational and socio-economic mobility. Fettered mobility thrives on the vitality of translocality. Nonetheless, it is highly volatile and unstable, because anyone who knows about fettered mobility can easily cripple it by turning an irregular worker in to the state: the state's power to repatriate can terminate fettered mobility.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In early April 2014, we first observed the employment of four Indonesian irregular workers on a vegetable farm in Taichung. From this starting point, our research developed until November 2022 when we interviewed 39 farmers and workers in Pingtung, Nantou and Taichung, and carried out observations of their daily work on the farm.

Farmers in these three counties are among those who suffer from a chronic shortage of seasonal labour (MoL 2019), and we particularly focused on Pingtung for its roles in agricultural production, in the settlement of immigrant women from Vietnam and Indonesia after marriage, and in its hosting of Indonesian fishermen in its offshore fishing industry. The confluence of economy (agriculture, fishing) and migration (marriage, labour) nurtures Vietnamese and Indonesian communities in Pingtung, which become reliable socio-economic resources for translocal networking and for the informal employment of visa overstayers or absconding workers. In spite of taking different routes to enter informal employment, their migration and work experiences are similarly underlined by the 'precarious legal status' (Goldring and Landolt 2013) that is at core of their fettered mobility.

In addition, to understand the experiences of migrant spouses in Pingtung, we interviewed five female farmers from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, whose marriages with local men brought them into cash crop farming. In Nantou and Taichung, we interviewed one Vietnamese farmer in each location; we also met two Taiwanese farmers and ten irregular Vietnamese workers at their places of employment. To discover how the labour shortage was eased by irregular migrant labour, we interviewed eleven male and female Indonesian workers in Pingtung. All of the female workers had left contracted domestic work and had become irregular workers in the informal labour market, whereas the men were either working on farms or had been farm workers between periods when they were employed as fishermen. To gain a better understanding of their relationship with brokers and law enforcement agents, we interviewed an interpreter who worked for a brokering agency and a police officer who had rich experience in handling migrant workers in his jurisdiction.

We interviewed all the migrant spouses in Mandarin, a language they were fluent in and spoke every day. We interviewed all the Indonesian workers in Indonesian and transcribed the interviews into English. To protect our interviewees' privacy, all the interviewees are presented pseudonymously; their pseudonyms were rendered in Vietnamese, Indonesian and Cantonese (one of the dialects spoken by ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia). Since migrant workers' irregular employment in the informal employment market is

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1. illegal, as stipulated by the Employment Service Act (ESA), we withhold some  
 2. details about interviewed farmers and workers in order to ensure their safety.  
 3.

#### 4. **MIGRANT SPOUSE FARMERS AND THEIR OVERSTAYING FAMILY** 5. **MEMBERS**

6. As a major destination for feminized marriage migration, Taiwan has been  
 7. adopted as home by women from Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines,  
 8. Thailand and Cambodia. Since 1987, the number of female foreign spouses  
 9. residing in Taiwan has risen to 173,366 as of February 2023. With a modest  
 10. number of non-Southeast Asians, the two largest groups are those from  
 11. Vietnam and Indonesia (National Immigration Agency [NIA] n.d.). Aligned  
 12. with the findings that their employment is affected by their husband’s employ-  
 13. ment (Chuang et al. 2010), those who married Taiwanese farmers joined their  
 14. husband’s family farms. Their participation in family farming, as a result of  
 15. their cross-border mobility, was acknowledged by the Council of Agriculture  
 16. (CoA), which adheres to the traditional view that the unpaid labour of farm-  
 17. ers’ wives is *supplementary* to its production. Heavily lobbying the Ministry of  
 18. Labour to open the agricultural labour market to Southeast Asian workers, the  
 19. CoA mentioned several times that migrant spouses provided labour on family  
 20. farms, but their labour was not sufficient to sustain the farmers’ production  
 21. (MoL 2015). The CoA warned that ‘if [we] continued to expect foreign spouses  
 22. to fill the labour shortage, then as soon as they hear [that they would move to]  
 23. a farming village, they would decline to get married [to Taiwanese farmers]’  
 24. (MoL 2015: 15). However, as our analysis found, these migrant women were  
 25. to all intents and purposes farmers and seasonal workers in the local family  
 26. farming economy.

27. The seven farmers from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia we  
 28. interviewed all grew up in agricultural households. Except for Lin’s family  
 29. in Malaysia growing cocoa for the international market, the women’s family  
 30. farming was chiefly for household consumption, with surpluses sold at neigh-  
 31. bourhood retail markets. After becoming farmers in Taiwan, they all dealt with  
 32. the challenges commonly encountered by small-scale family farming in order  
 33. to survive in a highly volatile domestic market, in which an army of small  
 34. farmers are assessed by wholesalers and consumers for their produce’s quality,  
 35. freshness and timely delivery.

36. As stressed earlier, the mobility of their (unpaid) labour was regarded by  
 37. the CoA as a solution to labour shortages on their husband’s family farm. This  
 38. is typified by the experiences of Zan Zyu from Indonesia. Zan Zyu’s husband  
 39. did not want her to do any work outside the family sphere, since this ‘mobil-  
 40. ity’ would mean reducing the labour available for her extended family to farm  
 41. vegetables for decades. While her parents-in-law were in charge of the farm,  
 42. Zan Zyu, her husband, her brother-in-law and sister-in-law all worked in their  
 43. vegetable fields, with her parents-in-law paying her brother- and sister-in-law.  
 44. Continuing this ‘no-mobility outside’ practice to this day after her parents-in-  
 45. law retired, she and her husband also give their produce to her in-laws to sell  
 46. in the market, and share the profit. Similar to this practice of mobilizing all  
 47. the available labour within the family, Lam’s school-age children helped her  
 48. to sort mangoes according to their size, weight and quality, whereas Dương’s  
 49. teenage son worked in her pineapple field after school till 9 p.m.

50. Family labour, paid or unpaid, is not sufficient when farmers need addi-  
 51. tional labour for weeding, ploughing, planting, cutting, pruning, fertilizing,  
 52.



applying pesticide or herbicide, wrapping and harvesting. While some of these *time-sensitive* tasks are carried out by specialized workers who are non-family members paid a daily rate, others are seasonal work that requires punctual labour input in order to ensure timely production and delivery. This is particularly the case when crops are of a very short growth cycle, such as Zan Zyu's pricy leaf vegetables. Such additional and punctual labour can be partially provided by farmers themselves, thanks to alternate cropping. Alternate cropping generates incomes from different crops, since farmers grow different crops for different seasons, and are able to switch to an alternative crop when they are hit by unfavourable weather conditions, such as typhoons.

Alternate cropping is related to *huan gong* ('labour exchange', 換工) a common practice long established among agricultural households that creates the mobility of family-bound labour (see Giest et al. [2009] about labour exchange in tobacco farming in Taiwan). The core of it is the formation of a *gong ban* ('work team', 工班) by farmers of several families who support each other's seasonal work. In practice, this means that farmers become mobile seasonal workers on other farms and receive payment for the mobility of their labour. All the interviewed farmers, except for Lin, were also seasonal workers during their crops' slack season or when their crops did not need their full-time attention, such as when Vân was waiting for her field to be ploughed and irrigated or when Phương was waiting for her orchards to be fertilized. In Pingtung, the cross-family mobility was additionally coordinated by a local women's organization in order to help migrant farmers pool of available labour. Kanlaya from Thailand considered the labour exchange practice a moral act of sisterhood, since the labour shortage problem was acute and well known, and affected all the migrant farmers, who noted with frustration the contrast in the high mobility of 'young people having gone for jobs in town' and the immobility of 'old men and women staying in the villages but [who] can't work'.

A solution to labour shortage is mechanization. However, as mentioned repeatedly by the CoA, mechanization is not achievable for family farmers in the labour-intensive vegetable and fruit sectors (MoL 2022). For Dương, even small-scale mechanization, such as a pineapple-sorting machine, was out of the question since she could not afford the cost, although funding for this purchase was available from the local government. As we observed on the ground, some crucial repetitive and labour-intensive tasks cannot be mechanized. For example, at dawn, workers in their waders planted individual water bamboo shoots into waterlogged fields. Similarly, on Sunday evening, in a warehouse close to mountainous orchards, women cut individual tree branches into pieces and dipped the tip of each piece into melted wax in order to seal in the moisture so each of them could be later grafted to tree branches. Only when labour-intensive tasks such as these are accomplished punctually can farmers sell their produce to regional wholesale markets, to smaller retail markets on the street and to individual 'click and order' consumers in urban areas. Securing the mobility of labour is therefore essential to secure their profit.

Since locally mobile labour for the farmers was limited, they had to resort to labour mobility outside their locality. As evidenced in our interviews and acknowledged by the CoA, this additional mobile labour, external to the farmer's locality, was provided by irregular migrant workers (MoL 2015). One group of such irregular workers was migrant farmers' family members, whose cross-border mobility in the local informal market was brought about

1. by translocal networking. Being ‘visitors’ who are not permitted to work, their  
 2. illegal employment flouts the categorization of foreign nationals’ visa status.  
 3. As a ‘migration state’ (Hollifield 2004) that seeks the economic gains of labour  
 4. migration but aims to rid itself of the sociopolitical liability of accommodat-  
 5. ing foreign nationals, Taiwan forestalls potential chain migration in the form  
 6. of foreign residents or naturalized citizens sponsoring their family members’  
 7. residency, unless these foreign residents or naturalized citizens are profes-  
 8. sional workers – and the issuance of such sponsored residency is controlled by  
 9. an annual cap (Cheng 2021a). Although discriminated against by this regime,  
 10. migrant spouses can sponsor their family to enter Taiwan on a visitor visa,  
 11. often with submission of proof of financial self-sufficiency. With restricted  
 12. border-crossing mobility that does not permit employment, visitors may stay  
 13. for between 60 and 90 days on a single-entry visa, or up to 180 days on a  
 14. multiple-entry visa issued to parents who are caring for their pregnant daugh-  
 15. ters. Confining family members to the visitor status is a tool forestalling the  
 16. mobility of the family between the two countries and preventing chain migra-  
 17. tion caused by family reunion. Aiming to boost short-lived and consumption-  
 18. oriented mobility of tourism from Southeast Asia to Taiwan (Black 2019), in  
 19. August 2016, the government moderated visitor visa requirements, particu-  
 20. larly for those who had previously received visas from Taiwan or the states in  
 21. the Global North. However, this excludes those who have been employed in  
 22. Taiwan as migrant workers (Cheng 2021b).

23. Working with a visitor visa meant that these visitors’ employment was ille-  
 24. gal. Some only worked briefly in Taiwan, departing before their visa expired.  
 25. However, our interviews found that it is not uncommon for them to overstay  
 26. their visa for several years. In other words, mobility ensued and they earned  
 27. cash incomes at the same rate as local workers. Although wages varied accord-  
 28. ing to task, sector and location, they might be paid at a daily rate of between  
 29. USD 25.60 and USD 51.20 or a monthly salary between USD 672 and USD  
 30. 800, with the Taiwanese statutory minimum wage in 2023 being USD 5.38 per  
 31. hour or USD 844.80 per month.<sup>1</sup> As this is irregular employment in an infor-  
 32. mal market without a legally endorsed contract, workers are not entitled to  
 33. any protection, and they have the ever-present threat of raids by law enforce-  
 34. ment agents and subsequent repatriation, leading to the end of their mobility.

### 35. **ABSCONDERS AND THEIR FETTERED MOBILITY**

36. This interlocking of irregular work, illegal employment, translocal network-  
 37. ing and labour mobility was more evident among absconders. Required by  
 38. the ESA, the embodiment of the mobility regime, migrant workers’ employ-  
 39. ment in Taiwan has to be processed by both licensed brokers in Taiwan and  
 40. in their home country, whose placement and service charge can be so high  
 41. that they put workers into debt (Lan 2007; Wang and Bélanger 2011; Tseng  
 42. and Wang 2013; Hoang 2020), an exorbitant cost imposed on prospective  
 43. workers for their cross-border mobility. Categorized as low-skilled and suit-  
 44. able only for dirty, dangerous and difficult work that has been rejected by the  
 45. locals, migrant workers are exclusively contracted for government-permitted  
 46. employment in specified sectors. Such employment is the sole condition for  
 47. their residency; losing a legally verified contract nullifies it and subjects them  
 48. to repatriation. The fact that they are not eligible for naturalization or spon-  
 49. soring their families’ visits means that they are utilized as a temporary and  
 50. disposable workforce and are deemed unfit to belong (Tierney 2011; Cheng  
 51.  
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1. We used the exchange rate of 1 New Taiwan Dollar converted to USD 0.032 (as of 5 January 2023) in this research.

2020), since the regime is only interested in utilizing their border-crossing mobility. This regime has applied to the employment of migrant workers in the construction, manufacturing and care industries since the adoption of ESA in 1992. From April 2019 onwards, it also began to apply to the employment of migrant workers in the agricultural industry. Albeit restricted to a very small number in comparison to the reported shortage of seasonal labour, this newly opened employment was a result of the CoA's six-year-long lobbying campaign towards the MoL, in response to the 'open secret' of the recruitment of undocumented migrant farm labour (Cockel et al. 2023).

This outright exclusion is enhanced by limiting their geographical, physical and occupational mobility. That is, in the interests of security and public health, migrant workers are required to reside at an address registered with the government, often a work dormitory or an employer's residential or business premises. They are not allowed to change their employer without this being administered via a broker; if the change occurs in Taiwan, it has to be completed within two months (Cheng 2020, 2022). Escaping from debt, difficult working conditions or abusive employers, and therefore absconding from their contract or being missing from their registered address, means that workers are released from brokers' fees and employers' monthly salary deductions for food, lodging and insurance, which may be as much as USD 192. While this makes it possible for them to earn more, absconding also violates the ESA and this violation mandates law enforcement agencies to apprehend and deport them. As analysed later, absconders frequently moved from location to location and obtained a wage higher than that of their contracted employment. This physical, geographical, occupational and economic movement constituted their fettered mobility, which was structurally constrained by the imposed criminality.

In the rural farming economy, fettered mobility is manifested by the frequent movement of irregular workers whose absconding generates the possibility that they can move between casualized employment without contracts. Fettered mobility is the lived experiences of the eleven interviewed Indonesian workers who had previously absconded or were on the run at the time of interview. Most of them grew up in rice farming families in rural areas. Five women entered Taiwan to work as domestic workers; their six male counterparts worked as fishermen on longliners and shrimp trawlers. Their gathering together and access to farm work testified to their translocal networking, since their job hunting relied on the help of families and friends of friends, who were farmers or farm workers in Taiwan. Indeed, to increase the availability of mobile labour, one employer encouraged them to bring along friends so they could work together, a similar practice also undertaken by agricultural cooperatives, which, as one of the institutional employers permitted by the government to recruit farm workers, preferred to hire siblings (MoL 2022). Irregular workers were also included in labour exchange practices to enlarge the pool of available labour in their locality (Cockel et al. 2023). Bringing friends to their worksite and being integrated into the labour exchange practice means that absconders not only become the nodes of the co-ethnic network but also the nodes of the inter-ethnic network. The expansion of networks increases the scope of dissemination of employment information within the network, and, in turn, potentially facilitates the mobility of labour.

In spite of their rural origins, these workers did not intend to work in the field. Their fettered mobility in rural Taiwan was unexpected or disliked at best. At worst, as happened to Adit's four co-workers, agricultural work was a result

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1. of being deceived by unscrupulous brokers in Indonesia, who arranged for  
 2. them to work on a farm with a visitor visa (for Indonesian brokers, see Azis et  
 3. al. [2020]). Absconding and the subsequent farm work took them to numer-  
 4. ous villages in Taoyuan, Taichung, Chganhua, Nantou, Tainan and Pingtung  
 5. in the west of Taiwan, as well as in Yilan and Taitung in the east, often in hard-  
 6. to-reach areas or remote mountains where ‘there’s no one else but migrant  
 7. workers’. Without a contract, their employment was highly flexible and lasted  
 8. as little as weeks or months, or as long as one or two years, since farm work  
 9. ‘filled the gap’ before they found more favourable employment. However, in  
 10. contrast to these frequent movements, there were also those such as Adit,  
 11. who, after absconding from a distant fishing vessel in 2016 became perennial  
 12. resident workers in the mountains for years.

13. Fettered mobility led to upward economic mobility. For most interviewees,  
 14. labouring from dawn to dusk with one or two hours off for lunch and rest, in  
 15. a remote place in all weather conditions and often with only Sunday off, was  
 16. physically demanding and socially isolating. Nevertheless, it was also economi-  
 17. cally beneficial because in those remote areas there were limited opportunities  
 18. to spend money and it was thus easier to save, particularly if food and lodg-  
 19. ing were provided for nothing. Moreover, it was possible to receive a pay rise  
 20. after a long period of employment, or to bargain for higher pay, such as Idah  
 21. and her fellow workers, a strategy perceived as threatening to be ‘on strike’  
 22. by the CoA (MoL 2022). For Tika, farm work was an escape from demeaning  
 23. domestic work, described as *makan hati* in Indonesian – her heart ‘eaten up’ by  
 24. her employer’s disrespect and demands. Farm work was illegal, but for Tika,  
 25. ‘every day is a new day. Instead of getting up every hour during the night and  
 26. checking on our old patients, we now rest during the night and can get rid of  
 27. our tiredness before we start a fresh day’. In this light, it was the possibility  
 28. for physical recuperation and the likelihood of better mental health that made  
 29. farm work more attractive than other work.

30. Fettered mobility and the frequent movements involved were facilitated  
 31. by nodes of translocal networking. While overstayers were most likely to work  
 32. and stay with family members (migrant spouses), absconders called on their  
 33. friends or siblings in the hunt for jobs, often being taken by a taxi driver to a  
 34. locality the same as that of their networking contacts, or to a different place  
 35. altogether. The clandestine nature of workers’ escape and their remote desti-  
 36. nations were well served by a swift and ‘customized’ taxi ride. For example,  
 37. the siblings of Dita and Adit were farm workers and arranged for them to  
 38. pick up jobs on their farms. Such co-ethnic networking enables the pass-  
 39. ing of information around when networking nodes (farmers, siblings) are  
 40. knowledgeable about vacancies or shortages. However, effective job hunting  
 41. needs inter-ethnic networking, which is beyond the migrant community and  
 42. involves unlicensed Taiwanese brokers. Described by Imam as *agent kaburan*  
 43. (‘escape agents’), these brokers charge a one-off fee to workers or farmers  
 44. as a commission for their placements, known as *bang mang* (‘help’, 幫忙).  
 45. Unlicensed brokers often worked with taxi drivers, whereas some taxi drivers  
 46. were unlicensed brokers themselves (Parhusip 2021). Charged by meter or an  
 47. agreed sum, the ‘escape’ rides, which crucially render them mobile workers,  
 48. cost our interviewees between USD 170 and USD 352, several days’ wages.  
 49. Such costs are the price to pay for fettered mobility by absconders themselves.  
 50. On the other hand, the working relationship between drivers and unlicensed  
 51. brokers, or the dual identity of drivers-cum-brokers, signified the intri-  
 52. cate relationship between physical/geographical mobility and occupational/

economic mobility when the change of employment locality led to a higher wage in another locality.

Another cost of this meshed mobility is accommodation. Although absconding may release workers from employers' food and lodging charges, they have to pay for their accommodation out of their own pocket. A difference is that having their own accommodation and enjoying the associated socio-economic and physical freedom *humanizes* their work-defined residency, and improves their social life. Otherwise, as migrant workers deprived of the right to live a family life because of lacking the right to family reunion as a residency or a temporary holiday, they are *de facto* single and childless, regardless of their actual marital and parental status. On the other hand, being *de facto* single and childless also makes them highly mobile, or more mobile than the locals. That is, not physically residing with their family, they are absent parents or spouses providing transnational care via remittance and online contact with families in Indonesia. For some workers, not living a family life together with spouses, children, siblings or other members of the extended family may feel, in effect, 'care-less' or 'child-less', i.e. temporarily released from physically performing a caring duty for family members. This 'release' may somehow also mean to feel 'root-less' in Taiwan, since, *away from Indonesia*, they were not bound by conventional family life or engaging in the family-oriented, locality-specific socio-economic activities that would occur in Indonesia. *De facto* rootlessness as such thus enables workers to somehow become economic nomads who are frequently hunting for employment opportunities.

In contrast, for farmers, fettered mobility is a double-edged sword: highly mobilized and individualized workers may come, but they may also go. To rein in this nomadic mobility and secure labour supply, employers may need to create or facilitate social bonds among workers that may stabilize their attachment to their locality, and thus prevent their mobility being obtained by other farmers. In practice, this saw Idaho's two employers preferring to hire couples or pairing men and women to work together on their tomato and cabbage farms in remote mountainous areas, hoping that relationships would be conducive to a commitment to work and would improve work performance. In this light, it is ironic that while the state's mobility regimes are designed to deprive workers of sociality in order to raise productivity and ensure law and order, employers may opt for the opposite and accommodate sociality or even intimacy in order to secure their labour supply, and thus prevent others from benefiting from their mobility.

The multifaceted benefits of fettered mobility notwithstanding, it is unstable for employers and workers and is stipulated as criminal by the state. In addition to losing their entitlements to government-funded healthcare and labour insurance (not applicable to domestic workers), absconding is criminalized by the ESA; so is the unauthorized employment of overstayers. The ESA mandates law enforcement agencies to apprehend and repatriate overstayers and absconding workers, and offending employers and workers are subject to prosecution, including imprisonment and fines. However, interviewed farmers, workers and police officers throughout our research beginning in 2014 consistently informed us that law enforcement agents 'turned a blind eye' to irregular employment known to them in their jurisdiction (Cockel et al. 2023). In some other instances, law enforcement agents took advantage of their knowledge about workers' fettered mobility. For example, Dini mentioned a police officer hiring an absconding carer to look after his ailing father; Adit



1. mentioned that his employer bribed law enforcement agents in order to  
 2. receive tip-offs before their inspections.

3. Regardless of individual law enforcement agents’ discretion or corruption  
 4. towards fettered mobility, the state has the power to terminate it altogether.  
 5. To enhance the regime’s effectiveness, a bounty is provided for informants,  
 6. individual agents and law enforcement agencies when irregular workers are  
 7. arrested. This legal power, strengthened by the provision of monetary rewards,  
 8. puts workers in a precarious situation where anyone who holds information  
 9. about fettered mobility can turn workers in and benefit from the reward. Our  
 10. fieldwork suggested that irregular workers may lose their fettered mobility to  
 11. a wide range of individuals. These individuals included ‘jealous’ migrant work-  
 12. ers who fell out with their fellow workers, revengeful farmers who lost out  
 13. in the competition of securing their mobility because they offered a lower  
 14. wage, resentful Taiwanese workers who had a difficult relationship with their  
 15. employers who hired migrant workers, intolerant Taiwanese neighbours who  
 16. were disturbed by the noise of workers’ social gatherings, and opportunistic  
 17. taxi drivers who gave a ride to an absconder and reported them to the police  
 18. after their ride.

19. In sum, the precarity of workers’ fettered mobility is underlined by the  
 20. ubiquitous informants whose socio-economic paths cross theirs in every-  
 21. day life. Knowing how fettered mobility was facilitated by co-ethnic, trans-  
 22. local networking, law enforcement agents also encouraged migrant spouses  
 23. and interpreters working for brokering agencies to become informants, and  
 24. some migrant spouses were known among workers to have succumbed (also  
 25. see Hoang 2016, 2017). Countering this ‘big brother’ effect, Imam planned  
 26. his escape alone so he would not be compromised by others, whereas Idah  
 27. was ‘always trying to be ready for [my] escape’. The state’s termination of  
 28. fettered mobility is to ‘frame a socio-economic issue as a security issue’, in  
 29. the eye of the interviewed police officer who raided irregular workers in his  
 30. jurisdiction.

### 31. CONCLUSION

32. This article investigates how Southeast Asian irregular workers became  
 33. mobile and available to the informal market in rural Taiwan in spite of the  
 34. strict mobility regime that constrains their physical, geographical, occupa-  
 35. tional and socio-economic mobility. Delving deep into their work experiences  
 36. and socio-economic life, we argue that they became ‘fettered mobile’, thanks  
 37. to the translocal migrant community and their relationship with small farm-  
 38. ers. Our findings show that the confluence of marriage and labour migra-  
 39. tion formed a migrant community living on the labour-intensive vegetable  
 40. and fruit sector in rural or remote villages. The border-crossing mobility of  
 41. Vietnamese and Indonesian spouses rendered them additional labour to the  
 42. local farming economy before they became farmers in their own right. Chronic  
 43. labour shortages gave birth to an informal farm labour market participated in  
 44. by their family members and absconders. Their socio-economic paths inter-  
 45. sect in this translocal community that partially sustained the rural farm-  
 46. ing economy in a competitive market. In this light, the holistic and temporal  
 47. insight of transnationalism allows us to grasp the dynamics of cross-border  
 48. labour mobility over time (Baas and Yeoh 2019) and presents the informal  
 49. farm labour market in rural Taiwan as a place where migrants of distinct cate-  
 50. gories meet and mingle (e.g. Baas et al. 2020).  
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As our delineation has shown, the informal farm labour market is *discursively*, unintentionally and adversely constituted by the categorization of foreign nationals' visa status and the derived mobility regimes that restrict the mobility and rights conferred on migrant spouses (as residents or naturalized citizens), visitors and migrant workers. Not being professional workers, migrant spouses can only sponsor their family members' visits rather than their residency. As visitors, these family members can only be employed as irregular workers who are stripped of labour protection. Migrant workers are under intensive surveillance, and strict limitations are laid on their physical, geographical, occupational and socio-economic mobility until they abscond and regain their mobility. Although the regime conceptualizes citizens, migrant spouses and migrant workers as discrete categories, they encountered each other in the informal labour market. Ironically, their mobility is enhanced by the very mobility regimes that make them de facto single, childless, care-less and root-less, and thus easily able to move to grasp employment opportunities.

To conclude, fettered mobility brings to the fore the opposition between the state and the market. The former reduces workers to atomized beings without sociality, whereas the market accommodates workers' sociality in order to induce productivity. The 'return' of sociality to mobility epistemology uncovers how mobility is scaffolded by emotion derived from relationships, intimacy or kinship (e.g. Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020). The discursive formation of fettered mobility renders it an *assemblage* (McFarlane 2011), where the state, market, citizens (farmers), non-citizens (migrant workers) and those in between (migrant farmers) amalgamate, leading to a networked, mobile, irregular and precarious labour force in villages. Migration, and its spatial patterns, actors, infrastructures and regulations do not correspond anymore to our traditional understandings. Fettered mobility exposes these unprotected workers to an omnipresent threat whereby anyone who knows of their fettered mobility can put an end to their migration. The antinomic term of 'fettered mobility' we employed illuminates the new shapes, pathways of labour and work, and spatial geographies of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Taiwan. It aligns with the urgent call by this Special Issue to actualize the debate around the theoretical and epistemological approaches, as much as methodological tools and empirical cases of study in migration studies. Presenting fettered mobility as an assemblage, this article enriches the ongoing debate on the relationship between mobility and immobility, and underlines its conditionality and instability. Far from being exhaustive, migrant workers' 'fettered mobility' across Taiwanese translocalities – farms, small villages and crops – points out the ongoing transformations in terms of actors, infrastructures and spatial and economic hubs. It also invites future scholarship to challenge the contradictions that characterize migration today and investigates the paradoxes between the logics of the states and the market, the fluidity migrants' legal categories and the futility of the attempt to categorize migrants, and the reconfigurations of labour and work regimes.

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