Shifting borders and migrant workers’ im/mobility: The case of Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic intensified border control and disrupted international labor migration, but the complex consequences for migrant workers, including deepened marginalization and countervailing opportunities, have yet to receive sufficient scrutiny. Drawing on the case of Taiwan, this article examines how a host country reorganizes the multiple layers of physical and social borders for the purpose of sanitization, leading to an entanglement of mobilities and immobilities in migrant workers’ lives. I illustrate how bordering practices have had uneven impacts on Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers across different circumstances of risk management. The findings highlight the geographic scales and temporal changes of shifting borders, which involve the negotiation of social membership for migrant workers in relation to the public health crisis and labor market shortage.

Keywords
COVID-19, pandemic, border control, migrant workers, labor migration, Taiwan

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely hindered global travel and transnational movement. The measures of border closures to curb the spread of the virus have disrupted the guest worker system, which aims to deliver “just-in-time” and “to the point” labor migration (Xiang, 2012: 722). During the pandemic, migrant workers cannot be easily sent to employers, nor can they start working immediately upon arrival. Those who remain working overseas are vulnerable to the pandemic’s impact because of their lack of citizenship status and social connections in destination countries (Guadagno, 2020).

However, we have observed different images of migrant workers painted by the media and host societies in the shadow of the pandemic. On the one hand, overseas migrants who are waiting for new placements or have returned home for vacation are viewed as potentially contaminating outsiders; compared to professional migrants and business travelers, they are positioned lower in the hierarchies of “mobility deservingness” (Koh, 2022: 187). On the other hand, the labor of migrant workers, especially those in the social care and health industries, is recognized as indispensable; they are applauded as essential workers or even modern heroes (Humi, 2022). Labor shortages in some sectors, such as agriculture, are so severe that countries such as Canada and Germany have exempted farmworkers from border restrictions and have brought in migrants on chartered flights during harvest seasons (Triandafyllidou, 2022). In sum, although the COVID-19 crisis has deepened the structural vulnerability and marginalization of migrant workers, they may also gain countervailing opportunities and recognition in this unsettling time.

To examine the complex impact of COVID-19 upon migrant workers, this article turns to Taiwan, an island country that employs more than 700,000 migrant workers. It has closed its borders to most foreigners since March 2020 and successfully contained the virus for over a year, until May 2021, when the government imposed a 3-month Level 3 COVID-19 alert. Taiwan offers an ideal case to illustrate how bordering practices have had uneven impacts on migrant workers across different circumstances—before and during the Level 3 alert.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers, this article delves into their experiences and narratives that are entangled with mobilities and immobilities. I explore how they gained access to labor market mobility in contrast with immobility across borders, and how they deal with movement restrictions from employers and state authorities. I illustrate bordering practices and tactics in different forms and scales, including the external borders marking the national territory and the internal borders within it. I also examine the temporal dimension of the shifting borders: how the politics of sanitization expands but also curtails the social membership of transient residents across different circumstances of risk management.
Shifting borders and migrant im/mobility

Geographers of border studies have mapped out the complex topologies of political borders, including the blurring of inclusion and exclusion and the entanglement of internal and external spaces (Allen, 2016). From this perspective, political borders are no longer simple lines that demarcate the inside-outside division, but rather constitute a border regime that involves a network of “differential inclusion” to select, filter and channel migrants (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 67). The “shifting borders,” as called by Ayelet Shachar (2020), are no longer fixed in time and place, but consists of legal portals that manage migration and mobility.

Migration policies and migrant governance involve bordering practices and tactics at different scales. First, they determine who is eligible for entry into national territories or physical borders. Second, they stipulate who may be included within the symbolic boundaries of the nation or social membership, by regulating access to rights and benefits (Satzewich, 1991). Finally, labor migration regulations control the time and space of migrants’ access to the labor market and legal status. Allen and Axelsson (2019: 120–121) have argued that migrant guest workers face a condition of “indefinite exclusion” because their legal residency or contract duration is subjected to a maximum regulation and violating it renders them as overstayers that can lead to deportation and removal. Even those with access to permanent status experience a condition of “suspended inclusion” during the transient period of waiting. These regulations uphold a series of “internal borders” or “temporal borders” that permeate the everyday lives of migrants (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 151).

In addition, border controls and management, outside and inside the physical borders, may be outsourced to a variety of agents. The offshoring of detention facilities by the European Union exemplifies the externalization of border controls (Bialasiewicz, 2012). Commercial brokers, who serve as the receiving government’s arms and legs in the “co-production of the regulatory space of labor migration” (Axelsson et al., 2022), exemplify the internalization of border management. Tseng and Wang (2011) have described migrant governance in Taiwan as “governing at a distance”: The state outsources the management of migrant workers, especially concerning their whereabouts and departure at the end of their contracts, to commercial brokers and employers.

An emerging literature has started to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic created new forms of bordering practices and tactics that transcend national territories and public-private divides. The metaphors of “travel bubbles” and “corona corridors” offer concrete examples of borders as “time-specific spaces” that people can travel in and through despite the implementation of border closures in general (Koh, 2022: 184). Many governments, including those of Taiwan and Hong Kong, use electronic location-tracking devices, such as mobile phones or paper wristbands, to enforce home quarantine for entering
travelers, extending border technologies into private residences as a measure of “geofencing” (Liu and Bennett, 2020). In addition to geographic scales, the COVID-related bordering practices are also constantly changing in response to the context of “sporadic precarity,” which refers to “sporadic risks, uncertainty, and vulnerabilities amid the fast-changing and unpredictable situations in a pandemic crisis” (see Chan and Piper in this issue).

The pandemic and related bordering measures have produced a variety of shock effects in which different mobilities and immobilities are intensely entangled. Xiang and Sørensen (2020) identified the following: While middle-class families protect themselves by staying isolated at home or fencing off their communities (“reaction immobility”), or even moving to remote areas to avoid urban density and health risks (“reaction mobility”), less privileged migrants return home for economic or medical safety (“survival mobility”), and some become homeless due to inadequate preparation and suffer from “limbo mobility.”

Low-skilled guest workers are especially vulnerable to marginalization and stigmatization in a time of crisis because their capacity to enter, stay or move is largely constrained by migration policies. The images of migrant workers locked down in a cruise ship floating in the waters outside of Singapore vividly demonstrate that the pandemic has reproduced borders within the national territory as a “space of exception” (Agamben, 2020) subjected to “institutionalized neglect” (Yea, 2020). However, some scholars also view pandemic-era controlling measures as “a continuation of existing regimes” (Lin and Yeoh, 2021: 108), and migrant workers’ experience of constrained immobility as “the same old” rather than “the new normal” (Antona, 2022:146).

The COVID crisis also challenges our understanding of social membership as a set of concentric circles of internal borders. Triandafyllidou (2022) argues that the multi-layered boundaries of social membership are blurred and redrawn during the pandemic. Successful public health governance must include all residents, regardless of their citizenship status, by offering universal access to epidemic information, prevention materials, vaccines and medical treatment. In addition, many migrants are recognized for their roles as essential or frontline workers who perform “citizenship duty” even if they have no permanent residency or legal status. All of these circumstances render the notion of “effective membership” or jus domicile (the right to abode), even more important in a time of medical crisis and social solidarity (Triandafyllidou, 2022:5).

To further examine the complex and shifting impacts of COVID-19 upon labor migration, I use the case of Taiwan to explore the following questions that highlight the geographic scales and temporal dimension of bordering practices: How do migrant workers experience different forms of mobilities and immobilities across different circumstances of the pandemic? How do the host state and society enforce shifting border control and management at the intersection of the “inside” and “outside,” and reposition migrants in the
hierarchy of social membership? How do migrant workers enact strategies to seek mobility opportunities and develop narratives to make sense of constrained mobilities in this unsettling time?

Research methods

This article is informed by a broad range of policy documents, news reports, statistics, secondary literature and social media feeds. The research started with a broader project on the recruitment of migrant care workers, and then shifted the direction of inquiry during the pandemic. From May to October 2021, we (together with two female research assistants) conducted 27 interviews with migrant workers who had experience with labor market mobility or constrained physical movement during the pandemic. We recruited the interviewees through NGOs and online advertisements posted on migrant Facebook pages. Twenty-two interviews were conducted online via the platform of Facebook Messenger, because migrant workers are most familiar with this app. The other five interviews were conducted in person at a shelter run by a migrant NGO when few domestic cases of COVID-19 were reported in Taiwan. Both the interviewers and interviewees wore face masks for protection throughout the process.

We focused on Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers because they occupy the industrial or occupational sectors which were hit hard by COVID-19. At the end of 2021, three-quarters of domestic and care workers in Taiwan were Indonesian women, while more than 70 percent of migrants in the electronic industries were from the Philippines (Ministry of Labor, 2022). We conducted the interviews with Filipino workers in English and with Indonesian workers in Mandarin Chinese (translated into English by us when quoted below). We excluded Vietnamese migrants for two reasons: First, they were mostly employed in smaller factories in traditional manufacturing sectors, which reported fewer cases of COVID-19 outbreak. Second, we cannot communicate with Vietnamese factory workers in either Chinese or English, and it would be difficult to conduct online interviews via a translator.

The 27 interviewees include 23 women (16 from Indonesia and seven from the Philippines) and four men (three from the Philippines and one from Indonesia). At the time of the interviews, all of them had legal documents of residency; half of them (13) had stayed in Taiwan for a period of five to 10 years, while eight had stayed more than 10 years and six less than five years. At their current or most recent job, 18 were employed as caregivers (all female, 16 Indonesians and two Filipinas) and seven were factory workers (two women and four men from the Philippines, and one man from Indonesia). The majority of Indonesian informants (10) had finished junior high school, followed by high school (6) and elementary school (1). Filipino interviewees were more educated, including six with a bachelor’s degree, two attending some college and two
with a high school diploma. The majority of the interviewees were in their 30s (14) and 40s (9); just three were in their 20s, and only one was above 50 years old. In terms of marriages status, nine were single, 11 were married and six were divorced or widowed.

In addition, we interviewed two activists, one legislator and three recruitment agency staffers to gain a broader picture of institutional regulation and market dynamics during the pandemic.

Migrants as precarious residents and essential workers

Compared to local citizens, migrant workers have more exposure to COVID-19 because of their living and working conditions. By the end of 2021, among the 670,000 migrant workers in Taiwan, about 440,000 were factory workers while 230,000 were employed as caregivers in nursing facilities, hospitals or private homes (Ministry of Labor, 2022). For factory workers, who mostly live in dormitories provided by their employers or brokers, the living spaces are usually quite cramped and crowded. According to the report of migrant NGOs (Taiwan International Workers’ Association, 2021a), in better situations, four to eight workers share a room; in worse conditions, more than 10 people share a room. These living conditions render it difficult to maintain social distancing, and the potential for mass outbreaks is a constant threat. Although the Ministry of Labor (MOL) has adopted an International Labor Organization (ILO) standard that requires sleeping areas for migrant workers to provide at least 3.6 square meters of floor space per person, the rule is rarely followed by employers and brokers due to the lack of inspection and penalties. The MOL hires only 274 inspectors to monitor more than 50,000 migrant worker dormitories nationwide (Taiwan International Workers’ Association, 2021a).

For migrant caregivers, their close encounters with patients and wards put them under possible exposure to the virus, yet they generally have less protective equipment than medical professionals do. For instance, in February 2020, an undocumented Indonesian migrant caregiver was unknowingly infected when she was caring for a Taiwanese patient during his hospitalization. No doctors or nurses at this hospital were infected; only the caregiver fell ill (Wang et al., 2020).

The pandemic crisis reveals the critical status of migrants as essential workers who maintain the everyday functioning of the host society and economy. Moreover, public health governance must include everyone present in the territory since the virus makes no distinction between citizens and foreigners. In Taiwan, migrant workers with legal employment enjoy equal access to the National Health Insurance, and all medical expenses related to COVID-19 are covered by the public, regardless of nationality or insurance enrollment. Migrant workers also have access to protective equipment,
especially when the government established a rationing system to distribute face masks in 2020.\(^1\)

However, migrant workers’ access to COVID-prevention materials and information may be curtailed due to linguistic barriers and a shortage of social networks. In addition, some employers confiscate their migrant domestic workers' health insurance cards or restrict their movements. As a result, these workers may not be able to retrieve the preventive or medical care they need (Wong, 2020). To improve the awareness of prevention measures in migrant communities, both government and non-government organizations started to distribute four foreign-language (English, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Thai) versions of COVID-related information via social media and the Internet (Ministry of Labor, 2021a; One-Forty, 2021).

The pandemic also pressures the host state to extend COVID-prevention resources to irregular migrants. As of 2021, about 55,000 undocumented migrant workers have forfeited their legal status after absconding from their contract employers (National Immigration Agency, 2022). They are in high demand in the farming sector, in which the legal employment of migrant workers remains highly restricted. Care work is another common destination for “runaway” migrant women. Families who have a member requiring imminent hospital care or who are awaiting approval of employment documents for a documented caregiver may seek undocumented migrants as relief workers, who generally receive two or three times the amounts in wages that documented care workers do.

The media has frequently described undocumented migrants, whose employment and whereabouts are beyond the reach of the government, as an “infection control breach” (防疫破口). In an earlier phase of 2020, several local governments announced that they would start mass raids on undocumented workers. Scholars and NGOs quickly responded by advocating a program of reintegration instead of a crackdown (Wang et al., 2020). Starting from 1 April 2020, the National Immigration Agency (NIA) promoted the Expanded Overstayers Voluntary Departure Program, adopting penalty reprieves that include no detention, no entry ban, and reducing the amount of fines (from NTD 10,000 to NTD 1,000) to encourage overstayers to turn themselves in. The policy, however, has had a limited impact for several reasons. On the one hand, due to the shortage of flights and rising travel costs, those who surrender cannot return home easily but are often trapped in shelters. On the other hand, the demand for migrant labor, with or without legal documents, has further increased during the pandemic.

\(^1\)On 3 February 2020, the government announced a suite of measures to control the sale of face masks and to combat the shortage of preventive resources. Face masks were sold at a fixed price only by pharmacies that were chartered by the government. All citizens and foreign residents could purchase two face masks per week with their health insurance cards.
The government gradually turned to more open measures for undocumented migrants, including free testing and vaccines. On 14 May 2021, the NIA announced the Carefree COVID-19 Screening Program for all foreigners, including overstayers and runaway migrant workers. Those with COVID-19 symptoms can receive free screening at hospitals or screening stations. It is reported that about 13,000 foreigners have used the screening program to ensure their medical safety (Lin, 2021). In December 2021 and January 2022, after Taiwan had secured a sufficient stock of COVID-19 vaccines, the NIA set up inoculation stations at major migrant worker hangouts, such as the Taipei train station, to offer free shots on Saturdays and Sundays. Both programs promise that any personal data collected from undocumented migrants will not be provided to law enforcement agencies, nor will migrants be arrested during the process of screening, vaccination or medical treatment.

**Period I: Mobility within external borders**

My take on the pandemic is: for the caretakers, we have a big chance to get a salary increase or transfer to the factory. But for those who want to come work here, it's very hard (Nancy, Filipino, female, 45 years old, caregiver to factory).²

Nancy successfully transferred from care work to a factory job in 2020. Her observation pointed to the intersection between cross-border immobility and within-border mobility for migrant workers during the pandemic. Border closures and controls in both receiving and sending countries lead to many aspiring migrants being trapped in a condition of “involuntary immobility” (Carling, 2002), despite their aspiration to go overseas. Indirect factors such as economic impoverishment and unemployment also constrain people’s ability to move (Martin and Bergmann, 2021).

Border closure takes place through a series of measures and mechanisms. Starting from 19 March 2020, foreigners were barred from entering Taiwan, with some exceptions, such as diplomats, foreign students, business travelers and those holding valid Alien Resident Certificates. Migrant workers with MOL-sanctioned employment permits were still allowed to enter until 19 May 2021. However, migrant workers might not be able to acquire travel documents because the embassies had stopped releasing visas due to local pandemic outbreaks. Sending countries with high numbers of infected cases and listed as “key high-risk countries” by Taiwan’s Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) would be blocked from sending migrants. For instance, from 4 December 2020 to 11 November 2021, all migrant workers from Indonesia,

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²All the names of migrant workers used in this article are pseudonyms.
including new hires and those who had returned home for vacation, were not granted entry.

The sending governments may also close their borders or constrain the outmovements of their nationals. For instance, the Philippine government prohibited their nationals from going to “Greater China” (including the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) after the COVID outbreak in China in February 2020. Migrant workers with a job permit from the host country may also be trapped at home because their government stops processing travel documents during a lockdown.\(^3\) The administrative procedures of both sending and receiving governments were seriously delayed during the pandemic; Taiwan’s embassies in Vietnam and the Philippines placed a cap on the maximum number of migrant worker visa applications.

In addition, the operation of air travel, a critical apparatus of technological infrastructure for international movements, conditions the movements of migrant workers. Many airline companies canceled or reduced flights; direct air travel between Taiwan and Indonesia, and also between Taiwan and Vietnam, has been shut down, except for charter flights. International travelers have to spend twice as much money to transfer via longer routes. Even for those who manage to acquire the necessary employment and travel documents, the journey they must endure becomes longer and harder. All travelers from overseas, including foreigners and citizens, must complete a mandatory 14-day quarantine period in designated hotels or government facilities, and comply with a digital tracking system during the quarantine.\(^4\)

The above conditions not only obstruct the movements of new-hire migrants but also discourage migrants who are already working in Taiwan from returning home for vacation. Despite important family events such as their children’s graduations, siblings’ weddings or parents’ illnesses, most of them decided to stay in Taiwan, worrying that if they left, they might be trapped at home and lose the opportunity of returning to work.

*Increased labor demand and job transfers*

The decline in migrant labor supply became more critical because COVID further increased labor demand in some sectors, including manufacturing and

\(^3\)For example, on 18 March 2020, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration was shut down and stopped releasing overseas employment certificates (OEC) which departing migrant workers must present at the airport. The global closure of borders severely limited international travel.

\(^4\)The quarantine requirement was reduced to 10 days after 7 March 2022, seven days after 9 May 2022, and three days after 15 June 2022.
care work. In recent years, the government has relaxed regulations on employer qualifications for hiring migrant factory workers. The semiconductor and related industries, in particular, face a market boom thanks to the rising global demand for computer chips and other tech products during the pandemic. Hungry for labor, these factories are now willing to hire migrants who transfer from smaller factories, and even from the care work sector, despite their lack of relevant work experience or skills.

Meanwhile, migrant workers have gained some capacity for labor market mobility because of the relaxed regulations on visa duration and employer transfer before and during COVID-19. First, they can work longer. The maximum residency of migrant workers in Taiwan was originally three years in 1998 but was prolonged to six years in 2001 and to 12 years in 2012. Since 2015, the new law allows foreign care workers to stay as long as 14 years if they pass the review. During the pandemic, the MOL also allowed employers to extend the job permits for migrants who had reached the maximum duration of stay. Second, these workers are not forced to leave upon the end of their contract. Before 2016, a migrant worker had to leave Taiwan for at least one day at the end of a 3-year contract and then reenter to start another new contract. They usually had to pay the placement fees again to renew a contract. With the amendment of Employment Service Law Article 52, migrant workers can stay and switch to a new employer at the end of a contract.

Finally, the regulations on employer transfer have also been relaxed under the pressure of migrant NGOs and the international community. In the past, migrant workers could only transfer employers in exceptional conditions, such as the death of a ward under care, the closure of a company or factory or harassment or violence in the workplace. Since 2008, the government had opened the possibility for migrant workers to switch employers before the contract expires if both the employer and the worker agree to terminate the contract.

The media has reported on the increasing migrant shortages and job transfers under sensational headlines such as “Competing for Workers” (搶工人) and “The Flight of Foreign Maids” (女傭逃亡轉職潮) (Lan, 2021). From January 2020 to January 2021, the number of migrant manufacturing and construction workers increased from 450,866 to 459,429 (an increase of 8,527), while the number of migrant caregivers decreased from 262,877 to 250,426 (a decrease of 12,451) (Ministry of Labor, 2022). Employers’ associations also complained about migrant transfers as an intentional act of “washing jobs” (洗工)—that is, using a care work contract to come to Taiwan, only to transfer to a factory job later (Chang, 2021). The number of migrants who transferred successfully across

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5In 2010, the “3K five-tier system” was established to enlarge the proportion of migrant workers in a factory to as much as 40 percent. In 2013, the government further increased the quota of foreign workers for the new investment plans, including factories that relocated from China to Taiwan.
sectors was still limited, but the growth rate was substantial. From January 2021 to the end of August 2021, before the MOL placed a restriction on cross-sector job transfers (see later), a total of 2,404 caregivers (including 1,104 Filipinos and 959 Indonesians) had left their jobs in favor of factory work, compared to only 66 people in all of 2019 and 287 people in all of 2020.6

Migrants’ strategies for labor mobility

Migrant factory workers and caregivers have very uneven labor conditions in Taiwan. The former is covered by the Labor Standards Law and minimum wage protection (NTD 24,000 by September 2020), and thus earns higher salaries (NTD 30,000 on average, including overtime), receive additional days off and have more freedom of movement. By contrast, migrant caregivers suffer from longer hours, lower pay7 and lack of peer support when working and living in the employer’s private residence.

It is not surprising that many migrant caregivers are eager to transfer to factories when the market demand and legal framework open such possibilities. Those we interviewed said they were motivated to transfer to factories largely for the increase in wages and time off. Some also associated manufacturing jobs with better opportunities to explore the host country and accumulate work skills for their future careers. Many decided to leave care work because of the challenges of live-in caregiving, including communication difficulties with employers, cultural or religious friction (asked to walk dogs or cook pork, not allowed to worship regularly), and the intense demand for emotional labor, especially when caring for elders with dementia.

The demands of household employers are also pressing, especially when the ward needs urgent care. During the pandemic, those caregivers who asked for a transfer could quickly find a new employer without a waiting period. Tala described her experience of finding a new caregiver job at the government-run employment service center:

The agency said: “You sign it! Now! Now!” Very soon, I didn’t know my work yet, I didn’t try yet! I said let me try first, the employer said no, if you want to work, you need to go with me now. I didn’t prepare anything, even my clothes, nothing! They said it’s ok, we can wait here, you go and pack your things now. (Tala, Filipino, female, 53 years old, caregiver)

During the pandemic, migrant workers with residency in Taiwan gained increased bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers and brokers. They

6Unpublished statistics provided by the MOL.
7The minimum wage of migrant caregivers was NTD 17,000 at the time of the research and increased to NTD 20,000 for those who signed contracts after 10 August 2022.
developed a variety of strategies to seek labor market mobility or improve their work conditions, especially if they were veteran workers who had established some familiarity with the local society. Nancy, who had worked in Taiwan for eight years, got a pay raise in early 2020 by simply “trying and asking”:

> We should ask about (pay) increase especially now. It’s a pandemic, and it’s very hard to get workers from the Philippines or Indonesia. Instead of transferring to another boss or company, why not just talk to our boss and tell them things like this? … The caretaker only got 17,000 (before the pandemic). After, you can get at least 20,000. (Nancy, Filipino, female, 45 years old, caregiver to factory)

Taiwanese brokers and employers have widely held the nationality-based stereotypes that Filipina migrant workers are “smart but difficult” and Indonesian migrant workers are “stupid but obedient” (Lan, 2006: 77). Nevertheless, during the labor-short pandemic, Indonesian caregivers also became increasingly confident in negotiating with their employers or brokers. Some maneuvered the “exit” options, including legal transfer and absconding from the employer, to bargain for better working conditions. For example, Dewi, an Indonesian caregiver who had worked in Taiwan for 10 years, was assigned to take care of two bedridden elders in the same household. She decided to quit after two months. The employer asked her to pay back a NTD 35,000 “buy-worker fee” (買工人費), an amount paid by the employer to the broker to cover the expenses of recruitment. Dewi said yes, but the employer then tried to keep her by offering a raise. Dewi bargained for an increase of NTD 10,000, and the employer agreed to NTD 5,000. Her monthly salary now reaches NTD 24,000, close to the minimum wage. Two other Indonesian interviewees asked their brokers for an employer transfer; otherwise, they would “run away.” The brokers agreed to their requests, considering the grave consequence of losing precious labor power.

Some migrant workers used more assertive measures by inviting the host state to intervene in their negotiations with brokers or employers. With access to the Internet and mobile phones, migrant workers have become more conscious of their labor rights. Some called 1922, a hotline established by the MOL for migrant workers, to report situations such as when their brokers confiscated their passports or their employer did not allow them to take annual leave. Some took photos of their bodies with bruises after being pinched by their employers. Some video-recorded episodes when their elderly wards verbally abused or sexually harassed them.

In general, employers offering high-tech jobs prefer younger, more highly educated migrants, and English-speaking workers from the Philippines have more advantages than migrants of other nationalities. Among the 10 interviewees who sought job transfers, seven successfully obtained them. The four from the Philippines, including three female caregivers and one male factory
worker, all moved to factory jobs. The three Indonesian live-in caregivers took
different pathways: one to a factory, another to a nursing home and the other to
a new private household.

Despite the increased opportunities to transfer employers, migrant workers
are still burdened with significant financial costs. After the legal amendment in
2016, a migrant worker no longer must leave the country at the end of a 3-year
contract to transfer to a new employer. Instead of collecting payments from
overseas brokers, Taiwanese agencies have collected the so-called “buy-job
fees” (買工作費), an amount paid by migrant workers for transferring jobs in
Taiwan. If the new job is mediated by a different broker; part of the fees paid
now go to the previous broker as a “release fee” in exchange for releasing
documents necessary for processing the job transfer (Lan and Chien, 2022).

Since the pandemic broke out, the collection of “buy-job fees” from migrant
workers has continued, but the amount has decreased to some extent. Before
the pandemic, a migrant care worker would pay between NTD 15,000–20,000
for the transfer to another caregiving job; the higher-paying factory jobs would
cost as much as NTD 80,000-100,000. During the pandemic, the “buy-job fees”
for a transfer to factory decreased to NTD 60,000 or less. The most significant
change happened to transfers within the care sector: most workers do not have
to pay, but the employers give the new broker a “buy-worker fee” of NTD
25,000–30,000. Also, the “release fee” paid to the previous broker is often
covered by the employer rather than the migrant worker (Lan 2022).

**Period II: Immobility outside the internal borders**

Taiwan has successfully contained the virus with strict border controls, keeping
a record of more than 200 days with zero cases and a total of seven deaths in
2020. However, an outbreak starting with airline crew members led to a sharp
surge in Metropolitan Taipei in late April 2021, resulting in 14,157 new con-
firmed cases and 575 deaths by 23 July 2021 (Liu, 2022). On 19 May 2021, the
CECC raised the COVID-19 alert to Level 3 nationwide, after the country
recorded more than 100 locally transmitted cases for the fifth consecutive day.
Level 3 alert lasted until 27 July. During this period, people were required to
always wear masks when they left their homes, indoor gatherings of more than
five people were not allowed, and outdoor gatherings were limited to 10
people. The schools were shut down; working from home was encouraged but
not required.

Migrant factory workers became the center of the spotlight during the 2021
outbreak. A few cluster infections broke out at four electronic factories in Miaoli
County, where migrant workers at all four electronic factories lived in the same
dormitory block. The biggest plant among them is King Yuan Electronics
(KYEC), a semiconductor chip testing and packaging service provider. Among
the plant’s 7,000 employees (including 2,000 migrants) there were 342
confirmed cases, of which 85 percent were migrant workers. Despite this cluster of infection, the factory did not stop production until the CECC forced it to close on 6 June 2021 for 11 days (until 17 June 2021). The suspension of production led to enormous pressure from KYEC’s international buyers, as migrant workers are the essential labor force in the global supply chain.

Under the instructions of the CECC, the KYEC workers were divided into “high-risk,” “medium-risk” and “low-risk” groups. While those workers in the high-risk group (1,450 people) could go to the government’s collective quarantine facilities, employers and brokers were responsible for arranging the quarantine of workers exposed to medium risk (998 people) and low risk (384 people). The CECC also required that all migrant workers receive full wages while under quarantine.8

The ban on migrant workers’ movements

On 7 June 2021, the Miaoli County government announced a ban on migrant workers in the area leaving their factories and dormitories. Since Taiwan was not under a full lockdown at the time, human rights advocates criticized this restriction of movement as an act of discrimination against migrant workers (Taiwan International Workers’ Association, 2021b). The county commissioner Hsu Yao-chang refuted the accusation, saying, “You can’t talk about human rights when you’re COVID-positive and perhaps dead” (確診, 命都沒了, 哪來人權) (Central New Agency, 2021). Although this policy received much criticism in the international media, the CECC never formally asked the Miaoli government to rescind the order. This measure lasted until 27 June 2021 affecting more than 6,000 migrant workers.

After the number of confirmed cases decreased in Miaoli, the factories reopened, but the risk of infection remained high for migrant workers who lived in crowded dormitories. As early as April 2020, the MOL had released COVID prevention guidelines for employers, brokers and migrant workers to follow (Minstry of Labor, 2021b). In practice, the brokers we interviewed confessed that they mostly complied with the rules only in terms of paperwork because it was difficult to implement some of the regulations, especially concerning the size of dormitory space. During the Level 3 alert, some brokers illegally forced migrant workers to sign an affidavit and warned them that they would have to pay for their own medical care if they fell ill with COVID (Tseng 2021). This was a deliberate piece of misinformation that contradicted the policy that the National Health Insurance will cover all medical expenses related to COVID treatment, including those for uninsured foreigners and undocumented migrants.

8The government compensates wage loss for both citizens and migrants, due to quarantine measures, with NTD 1,000 per day.
In addition to the restriction on physical movement, migrant workers were deprived of labor market movement during the Level 3 alert. On 6 June 2021, the MOL placed a temporary ban on practically all transfers of migrant workers among employers, and employers were also not allowed to transfer migrant workers across the different branches of their factories. Migrant groups and NGOs criticized the government for curtailing migrant workers’ rights less for the purpose of COVID-prevention than for that of soothing the rising pressure from household employers (Taiwan International Workers’ Association, 2021a).

After the Level 3 alert was downgraded, the MOL lifted the ban on employer transfers for a brief period. On 28 August 2021, the MOL announced new rules that limit migrant workers’ ability to transfer to new jobs across sectors. Under the new policy, migrant workers must register for a transfer at a government-run employment center, which will advertise their services to employers in the current sector for 14 days. Only if no employers express interest in hiring them can they start seeking job opportunities in other industries (Wu and Mazzetta, 2021). With the significant labor shortage in care work, it is practically impossible for a migrant caregiver to transfer to a factory job today.

**Migrants’ narratives of immobility**

James, one of the KYEC workers who tested positive for COVID in June 2021, shared his thoughts on the restriction on migrant workers’ movements:

> All the reasons they did it in the Miaoli area were to protect the other people in Taiwan. I think the reason is to protect the other people outside. [Interviewer: what do you mean by “other people”?] I think the other Taiwanese people. I think it is reasonable. (James, Filipino, male, 38 years old, factory worker)

Recognizing the invisible internal border that divides Taiwanese and migrant workers, James did not see these measures as discriminatory but “reasonable.” Mark, a Filipino co-worker at KYEC, shared a similar opinion:

> I didn’t really encounter discrimination because we had many (COVID-)positive people here. Every corner, we saw a person positive.

During the quarantine, Mark was less worried about his health than he was frustrated about the hasty process of relocation:

> When I knew I was positive, I was not scared, I felt nothing. I [was] concerned more about my stuff, like how can I change my clothes? I only had one piece of

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9 Exceptions include migrant workers who are victims of violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault or human trafficking.
clothing (with me). I waited for three days before my clothes arrived. (Mark, Filipino, male, 29 years old, factory worker)

Perhaps because they were compensated during the quarantine and fully insured by the National Health Insurance, James and Mark placed much trust on the host country’s medical governance (see a similar situation in South Korea, Yoon et al., 2021) in comparison with the chaotic situation in their home country. While James seemed tolerant of the government’s order on migrant immobility, he became agitated when describing how the factory removed their luggage and belongings from the dormitory while they were in quarantine facilities. Many KYEC workers posted similar complaints on social media sites about the violation of their property during the hectic process of relocation for isolation.

The restrictions on migrant workers’ physical movements took different forms across factories. Based on our interviews, some migrants were prohibited from going out except to take the company shuttle to work. Some were given a maximum of two free hours per day. Some were only restricted from traveling to other cities or provinces. Some were prohibited from staying outside overnight or were asked to move back to the dormitory if they had rented a place on their own. Despite the different temporal-spatial configurations, these measures were all migrant-specific, that is, not applicable to local workers. These restrictions therefore built up an internal border that divides self-governing Taiwanese citizens from migrant workers, who are perceived as potential carriers of disease.

Although the internal border soothed the anxiety of the Taiwanese public, the migrant community outside this imaginary fence received only limited care for epidemic prevention. For example, some factories did not take effective measures to maintain social distancing among workers. It was reported that in one factory in Miaoli, workers could only wash their clothes between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., thus resulting in 30–40 people being in the laundry room at the same time (Apple Daily, 2021). The KYEC migrants in the “medium-risk” group, who were quarantined in dormitories-turned-temporary-shelters, complained on social media sites that the process of moving to quarantine facilities was chaotic; they were not separated into single rooms, and the living conditions were crowded and unsanitary.

Several other migrants we interviewed expressed more discontent about the differential regulations imposed on migrants and local workers. The unequal treatment is most visible to those who work side by side with local workers, as Indah, an Indonesian caregiver working in a nursing home, expressed a sense of resentment during her interview:

Since the lockdown, the boss asked us not to go outside, to stay in the dormitory all the time, even during our days off. I feel sad, every day, only work and dormitory,
work and dormitory. A lot of pressure, psychological burden. We Indonesians cannot go out, but Taiwanese, like the cook, can go out during the lunch break. But we cannot even buy something quickly. They can go out because they are Taiwanese. I think the lockdown is unfair to us foreigners. I feel really sad, it’s so unfair. We did nothing wrong. We are human beings, too. (Indah, Indonesian, female, 32 years old, caregiver)

Unlike migrant factory workers who feel bitter about not being permitted to take days off, most live-in caregivers we interviewed did not seem greatly bothered by the stay-at-home order from the government and their employers. The reason is that most of them took very few days off (one or two days per month on average) before the pandemic. Instead, they took opportunities for “micro-movements,” such as taking the garbage out or making grocery trips to chat with their co-ethnic friends living close by. But these micro-movements were curtailed during the pandemic because many employers purchased groceries online due to safety concerns. Some care workers also faced an increase in workload and surveillance after their employers started working from home. They ordinarily had the house to themselves on weekdays, but during this time, they felt like they were “being watched all the time,” especially if they did not have a bedroom of their own (Antona, 2022: 142). They also have to cook more often because their employers reduce their frequency of eating out.

Migrant workers also feel more tolerant of the restriction on physical mobility in Taiwan when comparing themselves with aspiring migrants who are deprived of access to cross-border mobility. Annisa, an Indonesian caregiver, shared her experience:

I think we’re doing quite good here. If you are waiting in an agency in Indonesia, who knows how long it will take? So, I think it is okay if we cannot go outside. There are many who suffer from more hardship and sorrow. (Annisa, Indonesian, female, 37 years old, caregiver)

In contrast to factory workers, the caregivers we interviewed are more sensitive to COVID-related health risks, both because many have to accompany their wards to hospitals frequently and because the elders or patients under their care belong to high-risk groups. Their employers also asked them to conduct extra work for the purpose of epidemic prevention, such as changing face masks, wearing gloves and using alcohol spray frequently, to protect their wards and also themselves.

For those who take care of patients who are confirmed or suspected cases of COVID, the care work is much more labor-intensive. Christina, a Filipina caregiver, was taking care of a frail man in his seventies. When he showed COVID-related symptoms, Christina was the only person staying in the hospital isolation room. She described her daily routine:
Every time I take care of the patient, even though I use gloves, I have to use another protection again before I touch the patient. I changed the PPE (gown) maybe twice a day, even though I am sleeping, I am still wearing that. It’s so hard to breathe! I sleep beside the patient. The wife goes home, just me staying. So scary, but of course it’s your work, so you have to do your job, you cannot say “No, I don’t like it.” (Christina, Filipino, female, 52 years old, caregiver)

The patient was negative for COVID but passed away for other medical reasons. After that, Christina was diagnosed with breast cancer. She could have had an earlier checkup for the lump in her breast, but it was delayed because her employer did not want her to go into virus-rich hospitals during the Level 3 alert. A silver lining in this dark cloud is that her female employer continued to sponsor Christina’s contract and took care of her during the cancer treatment. Christina also volunteered to pay her a modest stipend, reversing the caregiver–care-recipient relationship. Human kindness and social bonding allowed the two women to transgress the insider-outsider border to some extent.

**Conclusion**

A crisis like COVID-19 can cause more harm and constraints to structurally vulnerable foreigners than to local workers, but border closure can also bring market gains and opportunities for labor market mobility for migrant residents in a host country. This article compares two COVID periods in Taiwan—before and during a Level 3 alert—to examine how the host state and society enforce border management along with physical territories and social boundaries, and how migrant workers experience and negotiate a variety of mobilities and immobilities.

This article contributes to the discussion of border control and labor migration by highlighting both geographic scales and temporal changes of shifting borders. First, bordering practices and tactics operate in different forms and scales, including the external borders (visa regulation and quarantine requirement) and the internal borders (hierarchical access to civil, economic and social rights; risk management within the country). I further highlight bordering practices at the intersection of the “inside” and “outside,” concerning the relationship between the control of movement across borders and the control of movement within borders (Macklin, 2022). Aspiring migrants are trapped in a condition of “involuntary immobility” because of the disruption of migration infrastructure, including de facto border closure policies by receiving and sending states and the suspension or rerouting of air travel. As a result, migrants who are already within the territory gain opportunities for labor market mobility because their labor service is in short supply and becomes recognized as ever more essential in this unsettling time.
Second, the politics of sanitization produces time-sensitive bordering practices and tactics to mitigate sporadic risks and uncertainty in a pandemic crisis. In particular, I demonstrated the *temporal* changes of shifting bordering, which excludes and also includes migrant workers across different circumstances of risk management. Although the politics of sanitization reinforces an imaginary divide between a clean “national body” and a risky ethnic other, it also pressures the host state to include foreigners in residence, and to some extent irregular migrants as well, in its considerations regarding the governance of public health and social membership. Nevertheless, when the risk was heightened during the peak of the pandemic, the receiving society, driven by fear and anxiety, built up an internal border to isolate migrant factory workers and keep them at a distance. The duty of guarding the internal border was, however, outsourced to employers and brokers.

The disruption caused by the COVID pandemic has exposed the essential services of migrants in the care economy, social reproduction and global supply chains. It also reveals the injustice of the guest worker system and the broader regime of social exclusion and inequality grounded on external and internal, visible and invisible borders. It challenges us to face the limitations of a national scheme of social security and to prioritize the long-term goal of “systematic resilience” against external shocks and implicit risks (Anderson et al., 2021). The COVID-19 crisis may turn into an opportunity for achieving solidarity and enhancing resilience for us by recognizing migrant workers’ valuable contributions to and essential membership in the host community.

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