

Pride shows with working holiday flap

October 7, 2012 By Daniel J. Bauer

Several weeks have zoomed by since a magazine article about a former student's working holiday in Australia stirred the waters in Taiwan. A variety of aspects about these "holidays" (and not only in Australia) have concerned many of us for a long time.

Ten years ago, when students first approached me for counsel as they prepared to participate in "study - travel," "home stay - travel," or "work - holiday" programs, the "pater" in me leapt to its feet and urged caution before signing on the dotted line. "Pater" is of course the Latin term for "father." I don't condemn myself even now for a natural desire to protect my students. As a priest ("shen-fu"), I don't have children of my own. That doesn't mean I lack fatherly feelings for them.

As time passed, I learned to be more trusting of my students and of these overseas junkets of theirs. I still worry, and I am aware some close calls do occur, but overall, students I know who have said yes to work or study holidays abroad have come back satisfied and happy. The exceptions are rare.

The former student who drew such attention as a worker in Australia rather than a vacationer had graduated from National Tsing Hua University. A website called Focus Taiwan News Channel says he had taken out NT \$ 300,000 (US \$ 10,136) in student loans and set out for Australia with the intention of earning a million Taiwan dollars. The report stopped short of saying the enterprising gentleman had despaired of finding a job to meet his needs here, but some politicians made that claim. And the report did not touch on his apparent wink and grin at visa regulations. A working holiday visa is granted primarily for a holiday, not for making a bundle of loot.

Even a dolt at math like myself notices the fellow hoped to do more than pay off his college loans. He appears then to have wound up, willy-nilly, as a migrant worker in Australia, taking advantage of an opportunity he was unable to get at home.

It was rough, even brutal hands-on work he found. He labored long hours in a slaughterhouse to accomplish his goal. He cut carcasses, he got bloodied up with raw meat, he butchered.

How many college graduates would be up to a job like that? How many college graduates have been in a butcher's shop and know what it smells like? I have, and it's pretty overwhelming. How many of us (I'm a college graduate too, so I must ask) have the psychological, not to mention the physical resources for such a job?

Within days of the magazine article, critics were carping about a local economy so weak that it had to export its educated youth as "foreign workers." Some argued about nomenclature. Did the fellow deserve the term "foreign laborer"? Some wondered if the incident reflected badly on Taiwan as a country. Has our national lot come to this? Suddenly, Taiwan's dignity as a people seemed to be up for grabs.

Enough of the hue and cry, I say.

Through the numerous more or less knee-jerk reactions I saw to the college graduate turned slaughterhouse employee report, there drifted an odor of elitism and false pride that should bother us all.

For starters, what in the world is wrong with foreign workers? Are not many of us foreign workers in one way or the other? As for the usual use of the term, where would we be today without the precious contributions of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in the last decades, constructing our high-rises, building our MRT system, working in our factories, and caring for our sick and elderly?

Much of the refrain I heard was that college graduates are somehow above working with their hands. They should not need to exercise their sweat glands. They ought to be "better than this." We need to challenge such attitudes.

Let there be no shame or lack of respect to anyone in our communities who earns his or her rice by the sweat of their brow. No one is better as a human being than anyone else simply because of the work they do.

Taiwan is not exporting its people to support its families here at home. But even if we were, what wrong is there in that? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points

- 1) Have you ever taken a holiday of any kind in a foreign country? What have you learned from this experience about yourself, your culture, or human nature?
- 2) This column says that foreign workers have done many positive things for Taiwan, and that there is nothing wrong with being a foreign worker. What are some "popular" attitudes about foreign workers in Taiwan?
- 3) Is there something wrong about a country that sends some of its people out to work abroad?