

On My Mind
2/19/99

The Chinese New Year was celebrated earlier this week. Very quietly. Almost inconspicuously. Only newspaper congratulatory messages seemed to pay attention. With a fairly large Chinese population on island, with the majority of those Chinese working in garment factories, and with the garment factories being the CNMI's main revenue resource at the moment, the CNMI's lack of attention to one of the most important of Chinese holidays strikes me as more than a little strange.

Where was the Marianas Visitors Authority? Why wasn't something planned that would appeal to, draw the attention of, the Chinese tourists the MVA is trying to attract? that the Chinese who are here might write home about?

Where were the retailers? Why weren't there sales to mark the Chinese New Year, as there are to mark all kinds of other holidays?

Where was the Chamber of Commerce?

Where was the standard congratulatory message from the governor and lieutenant governor? If Guam's governor and lieutenant governor can offer a congratulatory message, surely so can the CNMI?

Or various legislators?

The CNMI government wants more tourists, more investors, more developers and the private sector wants more customers - but not the Chinese? Is that the message?

Admittedly there are problems with illegal immigrants. With organized crime. With politics and humanitarianism. But at the very least, it seems to me, there should have been formal, official, recognition of all the Chinese workers in our midst. It isn't all that painful to be gracious.

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The question often arises, in discussions of what is perceived as federal intrusion in the CNMI, as to why the feds "pick on" the CNMI. It reminds me of the small federal agency I once worked for in Washington, D.C. It seemed like Congress was always going through our budget request with a fine-tooth comb - nit-picking about this or that minor proposed expenditure - when at the same time the very same members of Congress were approving, without any debate whatsoever, billions of dollars for defense, for the Pentagon.

We concluded that the amounts of money involved in Pentagon and other large agency budgets were so huge that the members of Congress simply could not grasp their significance. But since our budget was, by comparison, very small, it was easy for the members of Congress to find

items they could understand, and so they happily argued about days of travel, or the size of per diem allowances, or the costs of holding a meeting.

In much the same way, I would venture to say that one reason members of Congress take such an interest in the CNMI - once they find out what it is, and where - is that it's small enough to cope with. Big states have too many competing interests, too many lobbyists, too many conflicting needs, too many problems - and too many power players for Congress to have much hope of successfully exerting any significant or long-term influence.

But the CNMI is much more vulnerable. It doesn't take much effort, or money - relatively speaking - to bring about major changes in the way the CNMI might function. Even knowing that that is possible must give those members of Congress who have concerned themselves about the CNMI - as well as similarly-minded federal agency officials - a considerable sense of power. The possibility of actually bringing about such changes becomes very seductive - enough to keep them hammering at the CNMI year after year after year.

The small agency I worked for - the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science - could not afford a lobbyist, or public relations firm. We were forced to rely on whatever political power and connections our commission members could muster.

Perhaps, in addition to the CNMI's long-standing and very effective lobbyist in Washington - that is, the Washington Rep - the CNMI could benefit from the assistance of a public relations firm. But I would hope that whatever additional help is recruited, it is done in close collaboration with our Washington Rep, who, after all, already has the background, the knowledge, the information and the contacts any pr firm would require.

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Congresswoman Malua Peter's concern with pedestrian safety on the highways is well taken.

But I would submit that the solution she is proposing - to ban pedestrian traffic on major highways - is not the best answer. To state the obvious, people walk along the highway because they have a need, or a desire, to get from where they've come from to where they're going. And they are walking, presumably, because they have no other way of getting there.

Making it illegal for such people to go from where they've come from to where they want or need to go is punitive, plain and simple. They have as much right to conduct their business as does anyone else. They are, in fact, to be commended because they do it on foot. It's healthier, and it cuts down on pollution from cars, trucks, busses.

From the point of view of safety, the solution lies in providing sidewalks so they may continue to walk, or in providing public transportation, so they may reach their destination without having to walk there.

The focus, in other words, should be on providing safe ways of getting from here to there, not in preventing people from trying to do so.

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How interesting that the Congressional delegation led by Chairman Don Young is perceived as having snubbed Guam - despite the presence of Guam's delegate Robert Underwood in its midst - while, apparently, taking an active interest in the affairs of the CNMI. Does that mean notoriety has its good points?

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This will be the last column until March 19th - or possibly March 26 - since I will be on travel in the interim.