

## On My Mind

4/17/09

Not everyone may have come across the title, *Chicken Feathers and Garlic Skin*, a relatively short newly-published paperback available at the Bestseller bookstore. But it's worth paying attention to. It is a first-person account by the author, Wang Chun Yu, of her experiences in working in six different garment factories on Saipan over a period of eight years.

She doesn't get dramatic; she doesn't get maudlin (self-pitying) either; she just tells her story, in very straight-forward fashion: what is involved in getting a job, how the politics work inside the factory, what life in barracks is like, how she survived. It's quite a fascinating, eye-opening read.

It's also rather revealing in regard to the outlook that many of the Chinese garment factory workers apparently had. There's a degree of stoicism (the ability to endure "pain or hardship without a display of feelings and without complaint," according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2d edition) not usually found in Western - or at least American - circles. The reader can only admire her and her fellow workers for all the hours of over-time they put in so consistently, the abuses they endured so meekly.

One might think that since garment factories are no longer operating here, the issues don't matter any more - it's all past history. But as stated in the epilogue, "As long as there is a quest for higher profits, a need for cheap labor in order to satisfy an insatiable demand for consumer goods, then the roar of planes carrying hopeful workers, the hum of the sewing machines, the din of voices on factory floors and inside barracks and cafeterias continues [sic]. The triumph, the pain, the fear and hope.....do[es] not end happily ever after...but in reality, and in a real life lived by millions of real girls every single day," they do, "in fact, continue." A very sobering thought.

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Sobering - and dismaying - is the stubbornness (to put it kindly) with which members of our legislature continue to pursue their own greedy interests at the expense of everyone else in the CNMI. The move to allow pachinko machines just as support increases to isolate if not remove poker machines from Saipan is but the latest example. The old tired arguments that it isn't the machine that is harmful, but the people who can't resist the addiction, totally ignores the many findings over the years that poker machines are played not by tourists but by locals, that they have bankrupted families and harmed children, that their net benefit goes only to the owners of the machines.

And yet some legislators insist that pachinko will be played by tourists, not the locals. How blind, how stubborn, can one get?

The damage done the anti-smoking legislation being worked on in the legislature is another example. The Senate amendments - to decrease the distance from a permissible smoking area to possible smoke intake sources, to allow establishments to pay for exemp-

tions - again only reveal the greediness and ignorance of those who support the amendments. There is no doubt that smoking causes cancer. Would the senators condemn us all to shortened lives?

Let us hope that there are lots of new names on the ballot in November, names of people concerned about more than their own self-interests.

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A *Variety* headline on a recent story says it all: "Remote Saipan area to have \$12M road." Can someone please explain to me why, if the area is so remote, a road is needed?

At a cost of \$12 million, at that? Aren't there dozens of road projects for which those \$12 million could be put to better use?

The road is to go from the Bird Island lookout to the Kingfisher golf course. It cuts right through an untouched area of Marpi, and would have to cross two major gullies.

Earlier bridges built over those gullies collapsed due to lack of maintenance, according to the coconut wireless - do we have any assurance that this time will be different?

The Marpi area involved is not pristine - not much of Saipan is, anymore - but it has been left mostly untouched since World War II, and has become a significant habitat for a variety of birds not to mention a wide range of other forest creatures. Opening a road through there will destroy habitat not only where the road and shoulders are, but for a considerable distance into the forest on either side as well.

The CNMI is different from Guam. It is not yet all built up and barren hills. In fact, it's been identified as a preferred place for "R&R" by Guam's military - presumably because it is more rural, peaceful, green. Why would anyone deliberately ruin the very thing that makes Saipan so attractive?

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Short takes:

It's not clear who writes the headlines for its stories - the story's reporter or someone else - but whoever wrote the headline to the story on page 4 of today's *Tribune* committed a serious *faux pas* ("an embarrassing, or tactless act or remark..." according to the same dictionary cited above). The headline reads, "Judge denies mayor son's motion to suppress evidence."

OK. We know it's the mayor's son. Earlier stories told us so. But to continue to refer to the person by his relationship to someone else rather than by his or her own name and thereby gratuitously calling attention to the relationship is, I would argue, unacceptable. The alleged crime was not committed by the father, nor is he accused of playing any part in the alleged crime. So what's the point? Shouldn't the person on trial be held responsible for his acts in his own name?

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Choosing from among the many candidates for governor seems particularly difficult this year. I'm tempted to vote for the one who has a reputation for getting things

done - even though the getting them done may have cut some corners, ignored some rules. After all, is there any one of the candidates who, though less effective, has not done likewise?

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Whether it's deliberate or not, the date and place chosen for the public hearing on developing Kalabera Cave would seem to be chosen to discourage attendance. It's on a Friday evening, it's way up north at the San Roque public school, and what's worst of all, it is right in the middle of the Flame Tree Festival. Yet public input is important, especially for this site - which involves significant cultural artifacts - since it is already being trashed. The hearing is scheduled for 6:30 p.m., Friday the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, at the San Roque School. Those who care about preservation of the island's culture need to be there!

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Question of the week: if a position is federally funded, how can the local government cut the salary? That seems to have been the case with Saipan's only nephrologist (kidney doctor), who was required to accept a new contract at a 20% reduction from his existing one, and decided not to do so, leaving the CNMI - with so many diabetic patients! - without an expert in the field.

The dilemma of competing with mainland salaries when local salaries aren't anywhere near the same range creates major problems. In some cases, I would think that the exemption from federal income tax might reduce the difference somewhat, but particularly when it comes to medical care, where the only alternative is to send people off-island, can anyone argue that the higher salary saves the CNMI money? Especially if its funded by the federal government?