“A Documentary of the Undocumented”
Seoul, South Korea | New York University | Kyle Kim (USA, NYU)
migrantstradeunion.com

Section I: Narrative
A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project:
Through the documentation of the Migrants’ Trade Union’s (MTU) history and the many unknown histories and actions of migrant workers in The Republic of Korea (ROK), my project aim to propagate information about the issues of migrant workers in the ROK with the hope of connecting the MTU with labor unions outside of the Korean Peninsula. The medium of documentation for my project, a noncommercial, online English zine, combines graphics with history, information, and activism in an attempt to make the viewing experience of the zine more enjoyable and engaging.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
My project did not receive external funding.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had an opportunity to reexamine my initial project idea and change it. Initially, I intended to create a video documentary about the MTU and migrant workers in the ROK because there seemed to be very little information about the struggles of migrant workers in Korea. However, after engaged with the migrant workers on the ground and the people in the labor union office, I realized that there was a wealth of information. The problem was that very little of it was published. So I made it my job to compile and publish as much of the information available.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?
As the ROK becomes more advanced as a post-industrial civilization, like other post-industrial countries, the ROK is experiencing a labor shortage in construction, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors. In order to substitute this shortage, the ROK, as a prosperous country, must import workers from poorer, peripheral nations. While it is a complex problem, one of the main reasons for the unequal treatment, discrimination, abuse, and exploitation of these workers occurs because the Korean business class is given legal power over these migrant workers who are placed in a government system called the Employment Permit System (EPS) which is designed to continue recycling workers from a list of poor countries, treating these people as disposable labor.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?
As an undergraduate, I discovered the plight of migrant workers in the ROK while writing a paper on international labor. As a Korean-American, I was disturbed by the irony of the ROK, a historically oppressed and exploited country, oppressing and exploiting people of poor nations, much like how many Korean were treated by powerful nations, like Imperial Japan, in the past. This motivated me learn more about the issue and search for opportunities in which I could go to the ROK and study the situation on the ground.

What was it like to work in your host site?
Learning about the issue of migrant workers in the ROK was completely different from studying the issue from my desk at home. By meeting and talking with migrant workers, I was able to hear various real life experiences from migrant workers and gain a deeper understanding about their situation: why they came to the ROK, what they think and feel about working in the ROK, what they think they can do to improve their situation. So while I was able to gain a macro perspective about the issue of migrant workers in the ROK from my home desk, I was able to gain a micro understanding of the migrant workers’ situation via interpersonal experiences by working in my host site.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?
While creating the zine, I, at times, questioned whether this project would have any impact in changing the situation of migrant workers in the ROK. As a form of media, a zine, while it has its unique qualities, isn’t the most effective at reaching a wide audience. So I was apprehensive that the form of media I was creating was not the optimal medium for instigating change. A zine, in fact, doesn't propagate like social
media posts. But as an online publication, I do think that the medium will be able to be viewed more easily than a traditional print zine, which assuages my worries to an extent.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?
One of the major challenges with communicating with the migrant workers was language and cultural differences. Most of the migrant workers in Korea come from countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Cambodian, Indonesia, etc. The migrant workers, among themselves, had trouble communicating with each other due to the differences in language. This is an obstacle that makes organizing workers extremely difficult for the MTU. Additionally, since the migrant workers come from a vast array of cultures, there’s a clear level of separation, a cultural barrier, between people who are not of the same culture. Thus, in order to communicate with migrant workers, I had to use Korean, which limited the range and depth of topics I could talk about with the migrant workers.

How do you define peace?
Peace, in the context of migrant workers in the ROK, is treating migrant workers fairly, without discrimination, and as humans who are guaranteed all of their human and labor rights under the law. Peace is changing the Employment Permit System (EPS) which treats migrant workers as disposable laborers to the Work Permit System (WPS) which gives migrant workers the power to work freely with equal rights.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?
My project, both short-term and long-term, is intended and designed to have the same function. My online English zine is made with the intention of being a resource that people can use to learn about the issue of migrant workers in the ROK, contribute to its archives, and connect with the Migrants’ Trade Union in Seoul. My project is the resource that I couldn’t find online when I first started researching migrant workers in Korea. And I hope that someone somewhere will use my project as a resource to create or do something else that will progress the movement towards peace for migrant workers in the ROK. In that sense, my project is a building block towards peace.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer?
I think my project created or enforced a consciousness among people in the Migrants’ Trade Union that their history and activism should be documented, archived, and published. For example, the Work Permit System (WPS), which is an alternative system to the current Employment Permit System (EPS), created by the Migrants’ Trade Union demands a list of things from the government. However, these demands were written down on paper and published for the first time in my project.

Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the project.
While I cannot know what tangible changes my project may influence, since my project is an educational resource, I anticipate that more people will start to study the phenomenon of migrant labor as an international economic trend. And I hope that my project will be something that people can use when learning about this serious issue.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?
Working with migrant workers on the ground changed the way I understand how change is made in the world. Progress towards a more equal, open, free, and better world happens in small increments and these small steps forwards are made because of the tireless work, organizing, and activism of many unknown humans. I learned this from watching migrant workers organize and learning about how it took 10 years of protests for migrant workers to gain the legal right to form and join a union. The experiences I’ve had while working on my project has made me more humble and made me realize the power and value of collective action.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my original idea to film a documentary with a film crew and actors became difficult to execute. When I arrived in Seoul in the summer, the number of COVID-19 cases began to peak and the ROK government imposed extremely strict COVID-19 restrictions, making it hard to go outside or meet with multiple people at a time. Given this situation, I decided that it would be too risky, dangerous, and difficult to continue with my original plan. There were also unforeseen extra
expenses that came with being in a foreign country in a global pandemic, which made me restructure my budget. However, while the pandemic interfered with my specific plan, it did not interfere with my general project goals, which were to document the history and activism of migrant workers in the ROK. I just had to find another medium to use. That new medium was a zine. The zine, as I’ve found out, is a flexible and comprehensive medium in the sense that one can include anything. I was able to put forms of media such as podcasts, texts, art, films, and links into my zine, something that wouldn’t have been possible with a video documentary. Thus, my advice to future PIP grantees who experience pandemic-related challenges is to be flexible. Have a strong, general project goal(s), but have a flexible plan.

Please provide one to two-sentence personal statement, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result. Even as they are beaten, exploited, and oppressed, migrant workers in South Korea choose to unite in solidarity and struggle together to resist inequality and imagine a better world. In our increasingly fragmented world, it’s more important than ever to listen to the voices of the oppressed; since their words may be the beacons of hope that may guide us out of the darkness of violence, greed, and fear.
Section II: Photographs

2021 MTU Leadership Education & Training

2021. 9. 5 (Sun), Incheon Wang}