

WORKPLACE MEALS AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: TAIWANESE FACTORIES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

Vietnam is a nation in significant transition, characterised by a youthful, dynamic population with high literacy rates and substantial human capital potential for sustained economic growth. Since the implementation of the “Đổi Mới” economic reforms, Vietnam attracted significant foreign direct investment (FDI). However, the influx of FDI has presented both opportunities and challenges, including labour disputes and strikes, particularly in foreign-invested enterprises. This study explores the importance of meals at work as a focal point of labour strikes, examining the broader implications for industrial relations, Taiwanese factory management practices, and the role of trade unions in Vietnam. The study draws on data from in-depth interviews with 25 Vietnamese informants and 13 Taiwanese informants, who have been working in Binh Duong province. The study shows that, with changes in Vietnamese government policies, the context of globalisation, and the shortage of unskilled labour, industrial relations and the management policies of Taiwanese factories in Binh Duong province have changed. This research emphasises the need for improved meal quality for workers, urging factories to select better meal providers to help reduce strikes. It also recommends that government agencies strengthen grassroots trade unions by providing legal training and helping mediate between workers and employers to reduce conflicts and prevent strikes.

Keywords: *industrial relations, workplace meals, Binh Duong province, Taiwanese factory management, Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is a nation undergoing a significant transition, characterised by a large, youthful, and dynamic population with high literacy rates. The country possesses

substantial potential to harness its human capital to achieve sustained economic growth. In 1975, after the unification of Vietnam, the domestic economy declined due to years of war. However, Vietnam's economic transformation over the past several decades has been remarkable, marked by a transition from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented system. This process, known as "Đổi Mới" (Renovation), removed production quotas for farmers, enabling them to benefit from a more liberalised and unrestricted market (Khoa, 2024), and has driven rapid industrialisation and integration into the global economy (Gates, 1996; Kokko, 1998). In October 1988, the Vietnamese government promulgated a new "Law on Foreign Investment in Vietnam." Following the lifting of the US economic embargo in 1994, Vietnam emerged as an attractive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI) in export-oriented industries. This influx of FDI catalysed rapid industrial growth, beginning in the mid-1990s (Clarke et al., 2007).

In 1995, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and in 1998, it became a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). On November 1, 2007, Vietnam officially joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). As a result, Vietnam has increasingly expanded its international economic and trade cooperation. However, the influx of foreign investment into Vietnam has brought both opportunities and challenges for the Vietnamese government, such as economic growth, infrastructure development, resource exploitation, and labour disputes. Kerkvliet (2010) pointed out that while the political empowerment of industrial workers in Vietnam did not manifest itself immediately, primarily due to strict government surveillance and control, there were clearer signs of it over time.

Since the Labour Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam officially came into force in 1995, until 2011, there were a total of 3,402 collective work stoppages and spontaneous strikes by workers in Vietnam (VnEconomy, 2011). Foreign-invested enterprises were involved in 73.16% of these incidents (VnEconomy, 2011). Among these, Taiwanese companies were most involved in 128 incidents, accounting for 37.76% of the total incidents during this period (VnEconomy, 2011). The large-scale strike by Vietnamese workers on May 13, 2014, in particular, led to the destruction and severe damage of many foreign-invested factories. Taiwanese companies suffered the greatest losses, forcing some Taiwanese workers to return to Taiwan. The Vietnamese government was forced to take decisive action to remedy the consequences of this strike and restore stability. Many experts in Vietnamese labour politics have agreed that macroeconomic changes, including high inflation and fluctuating labour markets, have caused the labour disputes in Vietnam (Do, 2008).

The collective action of Vietnamese industrial workers increasingly

manifests itself in wildcat strikes, and their political discourse criticising the state's labour policies is becoming increasingly evident in everyday life. This change indicates a growing impatience among workers with their unfavourable living conditions. They are no longer willing to endure these conditions (Chae, 2017). The peak was in 2022, when Vietnam experienced 157 collective work stoppages nationwide due to industrial relations (*Lao Dong Newspaper*, 2023), with Taiwanese companies ranking second in the strikes. On November 9, 2012, 4,000 workers at FreeWell Company (100% Taiwanese-owned) walked off the job after discovering maggots in their food. The workers had repeatedly complained to the company about unsafe and poor-quality meals, but the company had not taken any action to solve the problem (VnExpress, 2012). Recently, on March 6, 2024, more than 1,700 workers at Timber Industries (100% Taiwanese-owned) went on strike due to the company's strict regulations and the poor quality of meals (*Lao Dong va Cong Doan News*, 2024). The workers' food strikes took place not only in Taiwanese factories but also in other foreign-invested enterprises.

On August 3, 2024, during the process of writing this research paper, I received a phone call from a female informant who had been interviewed six months earlier. She was crying and said: "This morning the factory owner fired me, which is illegal under Vietnamese law." She also told me that she had informed the factory's trade union but had not received any help because the factory only had about 70 workers, and the trade union's voice was therefore not effective. After reassuring her for a while, I advised her to contact the Binh Duong provincial trade union for help.

This case illustrates a scenario in which an employee was unlawfully dismissed for reporting substandard working conditions, particularly in relation to the quality of meals provided by the factory. The employer's actions not only violated Vietnamese labour laws, but also showed a lack of accountability and oversight in enforcing these laws. The incident also sheds light on the lack of support from trade unions in the workplace. This points to a systemic problem where smaller companies may not have robust union representation, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment. The ineffectiveness of the union in this context highlights a significant gap in the mechanisms to protect workers in the Vietnamese labour market.

Previous studies have mainly focused on investigating the causes of labour strikes or the management practices of foreign companies in Vietnam. Besides, the data from these previous studies is over a decade old. Since then, significant developments have occurred that may have influenced the management practices of foreign companies in Vietnam, particularly in Binh Duong province. This paper aims to discuss and explain why meals at work are so important to workers and

why they often become the target of labour strikes. Particularly in the context of globalisation, advances in information technology and the widespread use of smartphones have revolutionised communication and access to information, which can only have had an impact on industrial relations and management practices. In particular, after the May 13, 2014, riots in Binh Duong province, Vietnam's Trade Union Law was enacted and labour laws were significantly improved. Have industrial relations in Taiwanese factories improved? Are Taiwanese factories changing their management style? What role have Vietnamese trade unions played in labour disputes? What has the response of the Vietnamese government been? How has the Vietnamese government influenced industrial relations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workers' Workplace Meals and Strikes

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the first fundamental level of needs consists of physiological needs: water, food, air, and sleep. Once physiological needs are met, individuals seek safety and security, such as stable living conditions (Maslow, 1943). Nutrition plays a crucial role in a person's health and well-being, which in turn affects their productivity at work (Burton, 2010). For workers, the quality of meals eaten at work can have a significant impact on their health outcomes. Regular access to nutritious meals can help maintain energy levels throughout the day, prevent fatigue, and improve overall well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). The cost of food is another important factor influencing workplace eating habits. Healthier foods are often perceived as more expensive than less nutritious alternatives (French, 2003). Furthermore, Gibson (2006) argues that there is a clear link between food and mood before and after a meal. In addition, the quality of meals provided by factories can increase workers' loyalty to the factories. As we know, workers spend a large part of their day at their workplace and often have at least one meal there. In addition, workers in foreign factories in Vietnam often work in poor and challenging working conditions that require good health. Meals at work are therefore very important for workers, as they not only help them stay healthy, but also make them strong enough to do their work (*Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, 2016).

However, the quality of the meals is strongly influenced by the employer's attention and the food suppliers' integrity. Kerkvliet (2011) pointed out that although some companies provide free or subsidised meals, the food is often tasteless and has little nutritional value. Sometimes the food is also contaminated. Several companies prohibit employees from taking meal breaks elsewhere or

bringing their own food. This situation arises from the lack of Vietnamese regulations on food standards, so these issues have to be negotiated between parties in industrial relations. Many employers try to cut costs to maintain the employer's attention and the integrity of the food suppliers. In addition, some food suppliers are required to pay commissions to company managers.

To maximise profits, suppliers may use expired food and substandard ingredients (*Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, 2016). According to a survey conducted by the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour in 2012, 37.5% of employees in FDI companies stated that their meals were often inadequate and of poor quality (Vietnamnet, 2012). As a result, workers have repeatedly held strikes over the poor quality of meals, such as on the morning of August 16, 2013, when nearly 2,000 On Accessories workers went on strike to protest the company's inadequate response to the maggot-ridden food problem reported the previous week. According to the workers, a foreign manager allegedly choked a male worker during an exchange of words, causing distress to other workers and leading to an altercation and the subsequent strike. Due to the complexity of the situation, the Tien Giang provincial police stepped in to resolve the matter (*Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, 2013); On August 16, 2016, 1,600 workers at CheeWah - Vietnam went on a collective work stoppage to protest the inadequate nutritional quality and sanitary conditions of their meals, as well as the discriminatory differences in food portions between office workers and production workers. The workers also discovered maggots in their food (*Lao Dong Newspaper*, 2016). More recently, on the afternoon of May 14, 2024, hundreds of workers at Shinwon Ebenezer Vietnam had to be hospitalised for observation and emergency treatment due to suspected food poisoning, which resulted in an investigation by the police (*Nguoi Lao Dong Newspaper*, 2024).

The repeated strikes by workers, related to the poor quality of meals, have attracted the attention of society and the media, forcing the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour to issue Decision 07c/NQ-BCH on February 25, 2016 to improve the quality of meals for workers. The decision highlighted several issues: the quality of shift meals was not meeting the requirements for labour recovery and the quality of food and preparation conditions was poor, which in turn led to a high risk of food poisoning. The decision also pointed out that, during collective bargaining, some grassroots trade unions neglected to include meal quality as a discussion point. As a result, there were several instances of collective work stoppages due to inadequate meal quality. The decision concluded that grassroots trade unions must proactively work with employers to enforce legal regulations on food safety strictly, and must prioritise the health and meal quality of workers (Thu Vien Phap Luat, n.d.).

Industrial Relations in Vietnam

Industrial relations refer to the complex web of interactions and dynamics between employees and management (Teper, 1949). This field of research has evolved over the years, with different scholars and perspectives shaping the understanding. The systems approach, as outlined in Dunlop's seminal work "Industrial Relations Systems," is the predominant theory in the field. Dunlop (1958) pointed out that an industrial relations system consists of three groups of actors: workers and their organisations, managers and their organisations, and government agencies. Members of the industrial relations system share some of the same ideas and beliefs, and face some constraints or influences imposed by the environment. After interaction and negotiation, some rules are established. These rules appear in the form of contracts, laws, decrees, orders, policies, and rewards that are the result of the system. Simply put, industrial relations are a two-way relationship between workers and management.

Dunlop also recognises that industrial relations involve both conflict and cooperation between workers and management. The state can play a crucial role in shaping economic and industrial relations systems (Black, 2001). The role and organisation of the state influence the range of choices available to social groups, including organised labour and management (Jeong, 2010). The role of the state is as a third regulator. It promotes a legal framework that establishes general ground rules for collective bargaining, regulates the use of union and management sanctions, and uses alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to overcome or avoid impasses in collective bargaining (Jeong, 2010). Hyman (2008, 2018) examined the role of the state in the industrial relations field, highlighting the interplay between three key state functions: legitimation, accumulation, and pacification. "Legitimation" involves maintaining public consent through social equity, enhancing government legitimacy by including "social partners" in socio-economic policymaking. "Accumulation" focuses on fostering economic performance, productivity, and competitiveness, raising debates about the state's role in market intervention versus market freedom. "Pacification" refers to maintaining social order by managing or suppressing conflicts, often blurring lines between labour disputes and broader social unrest.

The Vietnamese state and its agencies play a central role in industrial relations. In general, the role of the state in this regard has received comparatively little attention in academic research even though its social and political importance has long been recognised. Most commentators point out that heavy state intervention in labour relations by trade unions and other actors reflects the political and, more importantly, social contract between the state, employers, and workers. However, the role of the Vietnamese state and its

agencies, such as the General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), in establishing and regulating industrial relations has changed significantly since the adoption of “Đổi Mới”. The state partly assumes the function of supervising and controlling industrial relations through the regulations and guidelines set by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and different government agencies. At the same time, the state also takes an active role in facilitating and stimulating the functioning and behaviour of social partners.

However, Kerkvliet (2019) identified Vietnam as a “responsive–repressive party-state,” illustrating the VCP’s strategic balance between meeting enough public demands to maintain legitimacy and employing repressive tactics to quash any potential threats to its rule. This dual approach helps the VCP navigate the complexities of governance in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape while ensuring its continued hold on power. Xuan (2017) pointed out in a case study in Vietnam that the system of policies and laws for Vietnamese industrial workers is out of sync. Some unreasonable social policies have been exposed but not changed over time, affecting workers’ lives and leading to social injustices. For example, local state authorities have not paid much attention to organising the implementation of unemployment prevention measures to prevent labour disputes and illegal strikes.

The development of industrial relations in Vietnam has been marked by significant legislative and institutional changes, reflecting the country’s transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. This evolution has been facilitated by the introduction of legal frameworks and policies that aimed to regulate labour relations and support the growth of both state and private sectors (Lee, 2006). Regulations have frequently and promptly been revised based on practical experience (Gates, 1996).

In 1994, the Labour Code was enacted, providing a comprehensive legal framework that addressed the emerging dynamics of the socialist market economy in Vietnam. This code was a cornerstone in establishing the rules governing employment relations, including the rights and responsibilities of workers and employers, and the mechanisms for resolving labour disputes. The introduction of the Labour Code marked a significant shift toward formalising industrial relations in a manner consistent with the new economic context. One point of view presented by the Law Commission regarding the Labour Code was that the role of trade unions might need to be redefined to emphasise protecting labour rights, including the right to strike (Bo Lao Dong Thuong Binh va Xa Hoi [Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs], 2018).

In the end, the right to strike was included in the code. The labour legal system was continuously revised and improved during the implementation

process to align with societal development. Consequently, the Labour Code of 1994 was amended and supplemented in the years 2002, 2006, 2007, and 2012 (Bo Lao Dong Thuong Binh va Xa Hoi [Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs], 2018). In 2000, the new enterprise law was introduced, which created a more favourable environment for private sector development (Lee, 2006). This legislation was instrumental in stimulating private investment and entrepreneurship, contributing to the rapid growth of the non-state sector. The law underscored the government's recognition of the private sector's role in economic development and job creation. During its National Congress in 2003, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour initiated a campaign to recruit one million new members from the non-state sector. This initiative marked a strategic shift aimed at enhancing the union's capacity to effectively represent workers in this expanding segment of the economy (Lee, 2006).

The presence of a grassroots trade union in each company characterises the Vietnamese model of industrial relations. The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour is the only legal trade union organisation for workers and is tasked with protecting their legitimate rights and interests. According to the law on trade unions, this organisation operates within a comprehensive system that extends from the central level to the grassroots. At the enterprise level, grassroots trade unions are established and operate within the framework of the enterprise (Bo Lao Dong Thuong Binh va Xa Hoi [Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs], 2018). Over the past ten years, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour has resolved 5,037 collective work stoppages and strikes and provided consultation for 446,179 individual labour disputes. However, grassroots trade unions face difficulties in building strength in collective bargaining due to a lack of specialised personnel and knowledge. (To Chuc Lao Dong Quoc Te, 2021).

Industrial relations between Taiwanese companies and Vietnamese workers represent a crucial dimension of Vietnam's economic development and its integration into global supply chains. Since the early 1990s, Taiwan has been an important source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam, following President Lee Teng-Hui's "Go South" policy. Between 1991 and 2015, registered FDI from Taiwan in Vietnam increased 86-fold, from just USD 17 million in 1991 to USD 1,468 million in 2015 (Son & Phuong, 2016). To deviate from President Ma's policy of rapprochement with China and to promote Taiwan's engagement with Southeast Asia and other southern Indo-Pacific countries, President Tsai Ing-Wen announced the New Southbound Policy in 2016. After Tsai took office, many Taiwanese companies came to invest in Vietnam. By 2023, Taiwan was the fourth largest investor in Vietnam among 105 countries with nearly 3,200 projects and a total registered capital of

over USD 39.5 billion (VnEconomy, 2024). In addition, Taiwan has risen to become Vietnam's fifth-largest trading partner, with an annual bilateral trade turnover currently reaching USD 25 billion, marking an important milestone in the economic partnership (VnEconomy, 2024).

Taiwanese Factories' Management Practices in Vietnam

Most Taiwanese factories in Vietnam are small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the reputation of Taiwanese factory management is not very good and widespread human rights concerns have been raised (Chan & Wang, 2005). The management style is often authoritarian. The most common management technique Taiwanese companies use is the practice of masculine management (Wang, 2004). Workers are punished for countless reasons, such as going to the restroom for more than five minutes, sewing clothes that cannot be repaired, counting out the wrong amounts, not showing up at the company on time, and talking during working hours (Wang, 2004). In addition, Chan & Hongzen (2003) pointed out that physical punishment is one of the methods used by some Taiwanese managers in overseas assignments, such as in China. On the other hand, although Vietnamese labour laws prescribe standard working hours and overtime rates, Taiwanese companies have been criticised for imposing excessive working hours to meet production targets, leading to employee fatigue and workplace stress, and pushing them to strike or quit their job (Vietnamnet, 2018). In addition, many of the strikes have occurred due to communication problems with Taiwanese managers (Glantz & Nguyen, 2006). For example, on July 10, 2018, 11 workers from the Sang Feng company were punished by a Taiwanese manager for standing in the sun, after which many workers went on strike (*Thanh Nien Newspaper*, 2008). Or on November 26, 2011, when a manager of the Taiwanese shoe company Hong Fu inspected the production stages and saw that some glued shoe soles were exposed. He then shouted and cursed and forced a Vietnamese worker to pour glue on her hands and to glue her hands together so that the worker fainted from fear and had to be taken to the emergency room (*Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, 2011). However, Chan & Hongzen (2003), in the meantime, have pointed out that Taiwanese investors are actually less likely to resort to abusive labour practices in Vietnam than they are, for example, in China.

METHODOLOGY

Study site and field survey

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Binh Duong province, one of the

fastest-growing industrial park areas in Vietnam. In 2023, Binh Duong province had a population of 2.8 million people (*Binh Duong Newspaper*, 2024). Before the construction of the first industrial park in 1996, Binh Duong was a rubber-growing area, and people worked as farmers. After more than 20 years of development, Binh Duong has 29 industrial parks with a total area of 12,000 hectares. The province is planning 15 more industrial parks with a total area of around 10,200 hectares (VnEconomy, 2023). Besides, according to the resolution of the National Assembly, starting from July 1, 2025, Binh Duong, Ho Chi Minh City, and Ba Ria - Vung Tau will officially be merged into a new Ho Chi Minh City.

According to statistics from the National Foreign Investment Information System, there were 4,001 cumulative valid projects in Binh Duong province from January 1, 1988, to October 20, 2021. These FDI projects are still valid, with a total investment capital of nearly USD 36.95 billion (Ministry of Planning and Investment News, 2021). Binh Duong province currently ranks second in Vietnam in attracting foreign direct investment. There are 65 countries and territories with FDI projects in Binh Duong. Taiwan leads with 853 projects and a total registered investment capital of USD 6.21 billion (accounting for 16.8% of total registered investment capital). The foreign companies in this sector are small and medium-sized enterprises employing migrant workers from other regions (Chae, 2017).

Binh Duong province was selected for this study because it has been the leading province in Vietnam for labour disputes in recent years, with an increasing trend (*Lao Dong Newspaper*, 2022). Labour disputes are not only increasing in number, but they are also becoming more complex. Many strikes took place on a large scale, lasted many days, and led to significant production delays. Notably, the strike of more than 6,000 workers at Chi Hung Co., Ltd (Taiwan) in Tan Uyen district (specialising in the production of leather shoes) lasted eight consecutive days and caused severe damage to production and business (*Phap Luat Viet Nam Newspaper*, 2011).

Most strikes were related to the quality of meals in the workplace (Luat Dai Viet, 2011). According to a 2011 survey in Binh Duong province, 47.7% of workers thought that company meals were not filling, and 51% of workers thought that the food was not tasty. The strikes in Binh Duong also reflect the general characteristics of strikes in Vietnam, highlighting the instability of industrial relations. This indicates that Vietnam has not established harmonious and sustainable industrial relations and that the working environment is not favourable.

Additionally, Taiwanese companies were chosen as the research subjects for this paper for several reasons: First, Taiwanese companies have experienced the most strikes in recent years; second, I could use both the ten years of experience

I have built up while working for Taiwanese companies in Vietnam and my fluent Chinese, which I could use to communicate fluently with Taiwanese individuals; third, I have lived and worked in Taiwan for more than 15 years and understands Taiwanese culture well; finally, I have built up a network of relationships with Taiwanese managers, students, relatives, and friends working in Taiwanese companies in Binh Duong.

Data Collection

The study covers the period from December 2023 to August 2024, during which primary data was collected through fieldwork trips and in-depth interviews with 25 Vietnamese informants (VN) – 10 males and 15 females – who have worked at Taiwanese factories in Binh Duong for at least three years. They are migrants from other parts of Vietnam who have lived and worked in Binh Duong for over five years. The age of the Vietnamese informants ranges from 25 to 35 years old. The interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language. Most of the informants worked in garment, shoe, and textile factories. Only three of them were production line supervisors, the rest were factory workers. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 Taiwanese informants (TW) – eight males and five females – who have worked in Binh Duong for at least two years. The age of the Taiwanese informants ranges from 26 to 63 years old. These interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted with the participants' informed consent, and their identities have been rigorously protected through the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. A semi-structured questionnaire guide was used, and the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The questions for Vietnamese workers covered their feelings about factory meals, working conditions, factory policies, management by Taiwanese managers, satisfaction with the company, salary, etc. For Taiwanese managers, the questions addressed how they manage Vietnamese workers, worker meals, management style, factory policies, and how they integrate with their workers. All participants were provided with detailed information regarding the objectives of the study, the research procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. All data collected was treated with strict confidentiality, securely stored, and used exclusively for academic purposes. Throughout the research process, fundamental ethical principles—such as respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, and beneficence—were rigorously observed to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants.

In addition, this research paper compiles secondary data from government

reports, existing research papers, media reports, and annual reports from the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL). This data was organised, summarised, and comprehensively analysed to form the theoretical basis for this study.

Ethics considerations

All participants were fully informed of the objectives of the study, the research procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. All data were handled with strict confidentiality, securely stored, and used solely for academic purposes. Throughout the research process, fundamental ethical principles such as respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, and beneficence were rigorously upheld to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Workers' Workplace Meals in Taiwanese Factories and Strikes

The expansion of Taiwanese manufacturing operations in Vietnam has brought with it a complex set of challenges, particularly in the area of workforce provisioning. Among the critical components of this provisioning is the provision of meals, which plays a pivotal role in maintaining the health, well-being, and productivity of workers. As these factories grow, the scale and impact of meal provision on employee welfare become increasingly significant. The workforce in these factories often consists of individuals who spend a substantial portion of their day engaged in physically demanding tasks. The energy expended during such activities requires adequate nutritional intake to maintain optimal health and productivity. In this context, the quality and nutritional value of meals provided by the factories are not merely a matter of convenience but a critical factor influencing workers' overall well-being. Poor nutrition can lead to a range of health issues, from immediate concerns such as fatigue and decreased concentration to long-term problems like chronic diseases, which can significantly impact productivity and labour discipline.

This reminds the researcher of the importance of meal provisioning, about 17–18 years ago, when I worked in a Taiwanese electronics factory. During the monthly morning meetings held throughout the factory, all workers had to stand. Some female workers fainted during these meetings. This not only had an impact

on individual workers but also on overall productivity and morale. It was widely understood that they fainted due to excessive overtime work and due to skipping breakfast in order to survive on their low wages. Workers might only have a boiled egg or a glass of soy milk before starting their working day. Consequently, many workers looked forward to the lunch provided by the company as it was an important part of their daily diet. The reliance on company-provided meals, particularly lunch, became a significant aspect of workers' daily nutrition and well-being.

This is consistent with the survey results. Most informants reported that the rising cost of living, combined with slow wage growth, had led them to cut back on breakfast. They often resorted to instant noodles, boiled corn, or boiled sweet potatoes before going to work. By 10–11 am, they felt hungry and tired. Therefore, they relied heavily on the lunch provided by the company to replenish their energy, as they explained:

As you know, the rising cost of living has made life increasingly difficult for workers. Although we work hard, we often struggle to make ends meet, making strict budgeting a necessity. Breakfast is usually minimal as we rely mainly on the company lunch to feed us. On days when lunch is particularly good, we eat more to make up for the lack of a full breakfast. Even if the food is not to our liking, we still eat enough to have the energy to keep working. (VN 5)

After the COVID-19 pandemic, prices for everything have risen, while opportunities to work overtime have decreased, leading to a reduction in our monthly income. We have to cope with the ever-increasing cost of living. It has become expensive to eat out for breakfast, so our family usually prepares breakfast at home for everyone before heading off to work or school. The meals are simple and usually consist of porridge or egg sandwiches. I often rely on the company lunch. (VN 9)

Most Taiwanese factories have kitchens and dining rooms for catering to workers. They usually invite outside food suppliers to cook on-site, while a few have meals prepared at the supplier's location and then brought to the factories. According to these Vietnamese workers, the quality of the meals is influenced by several factors; one of the most important determinants is the factory's welfare policy. Factories with good welfare policies usually work with reputable food suppliers to ensure that the meals are nutritious and well-prepared. If the factories do not have good welfare policies, the meals at the workplace are terrible. Another crucial factor in the quality of the meals is the commitment and professionalism of

the food suppliers themselves. They also stated that the cost of meals at their factories ranged from VND 17,000 to VND 25,000. In the informants' words:

The quality of the meal depends on the company's welfare policy. If the company has a good welfare policy, the meal will be good. Otherwise, it will be very simple and consist of white rice, a few vegetables, and a little meat. (VN 2)

Since the government has no specific regulations for the meals, large companies organise the cooking on-site, while small companies provide cash. The quality of the meals is a matter of luck and depends on the company and the suppliers of the meals. (VN 23)

The above information aligns with interviews conducted with Taiwanese managers and factory owners, with most Taiwanese managers indicating that the cost of a meal for workers generally ranges from VND 17,000 to VND 25,000. However, there are instances where meal costs deviate from this standard range. For example, one Taiwanese manager reported that the meals provided in their factory are priced at VND 35,000. This variation indicates that while there may be a general benchmark for meal costs, individual factory policies and practices can significantly influence workplace meal pricing. In the informants' words:

As far as I know, the Vietnamese government encourages companies to provide workplace meals for workers that cost VND 17,000 and up. One year ago, our company provided a meal for workers that cost VND 18,000, but now it costs VND 25,000. (TW 2)

Some Taiwanese factories in Binh Duong provide a workplace meal for workers from VND 20,000–VND 25,000. But our factory provides a meal of VND 35,000. (TW 7)

However, one Vietnamese informant reported that the meals at her factory cost only VND 15,000, that the rice was not good, and that there was little food, so many workers did not eat the meals provided by the factory. Also, research found two factories with a smaller production scale that employ around 70–120 workers and do not use external food suppliers to provide meals. In these companies, the workers prepare their meals or can go out to eat lunch. The factories offer cash subsidies for meals, ranging from VND 20,000 to VND 25,000 per meal, which are paid together with the workers' monthly salaries. As we know, the cost of meals is not just a financial figure, but also reflects broader considerations such as the company's commitment to employee welfare and the quality of life of the

workforce. In some factories, the decision to offer more expensive meals may be due to a recognition of the benefits of better nutrition for employee health, productivity, and overall satisfaction. In contrast, factories with lower meal costs may focus more on cost containment, possibly due to budget constraints or other business priorities.

In the interviews with Vietnamese workers, two Vietnamese informants reported that many years ago, due to poor quality and unhygienic meals, workers often complained to the factory's trade union and their leaders, but the issues were not properly resolved, leading to a large-scale strike, as they explained:

In 2018, my company went on strike because the quality of the meals was very poor, not hygienic. For example, not enough food, often eating rice with rotten fish and rotten meat. This caused anger among the workers because the company did not care about the workers' lives while we had to work in a hot environment and were pressured about productivity. (VN13)

Our company produces shoes for big brands, but at that time the company did not care about the lives and opinions of the workers. We repeatedly complained about the quality of the meals not ensuring the health of the workers, but there was no improvement, so there was a collective strike for many days in 2017. After that, the Binh Duong province's trade union had to negotiate with the factory to improve the quality of meals for workers. (VN 16)

When asked whether there were differences in the quality of meals between production workers and office workers, all Vietnamese informants stated that there was no difference: both groups ate the same quality of meals. The main difference was in the timing of meals. Some informants noted that meal times were staggered between different departments due to the large number of employees, with each group having one hour for meals and rest periods. This answer is consistent with interviews conducted with Taiwanese managers, who confirmed that all Vietnamese employees receive the same meal portions and have a one-hour meal break.

In a discussion, two Taiwanese managers also emphasised the workplace meal system in their factory in Vietnam. They emphasised that no distinction is made between foreign officials and Vietnamese workers when it comes to meals. Instead, the distinction is made based on the employee's position in the company. One of them explained: "The factory has been operating in Vietnam for over two decades. During this time, some Vietnamese employees have risen to high-ranking

positions such as deputy managers and managers. These employees are therefore entitled to the same benefits as their foreign counterparts who hold similar positions, including meal privileges.” This finding contrasts with the findings of Kung & Kuei (2023), who reported that workers only had a half-hour to one-hour meal break and that there was a difference in the quality of meals between Vietnamese production workers and office workers. As the Taiwanese managers explained:

Due to differences in culinary culture and welfare, foreign officials and Vietnamese employees eat separately. Of course, the quality of the meals of the two groups will also be different. However, the meal time is the same: one hour. (TW 10)

All Vietnamese employees eat together, with no distinction in meal quality between production workers and office workers, while foreign staff eat according to the expert welfare regime. (TW 9)

Overall, the interviews highlight the complexity and diversity of meal provision practices in Taiwanese factories in Binh Duong province. Meals typically range in cost from VND 17,000 to VND 25,000, reflecting varying managerial philosophies, economic conditions, and competitive strategies. These variations are essential for analysing industrial welfare practices, particularly regarding worker satisfaction and productivity. For Vietnamese workers, who often face economic challenges and rely heavily on factory-provided lunches, meal quality significantly impacts their daily lives. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, physiological needs such as food, water, air, and rest constitute the most fundamental level of human motivation and must be satisfied before individuals can address higher-order needs, including safety and stability (Maslow, 1943). In this context, inadequate meal quality may result in dissatisfaction, reduced productivity, and workplace tensions. Conversely, the provision of nutritious and appealing meals not only fulfills essential physiological needs but also contributes to enhanced worker morale, organisational commitment, and overall industrial harmony.

Taiwanese Factories’ Management Practices in Vietnam

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are known as the biggest group of businesses globally and can be considered essential in global economic development. Most Taiwanese factories in Vietnam are small and medium-sized enterprises. Taiwan is one of the largest foreign investors in Vietnam and most of the companies are manufacturers of motorcycles, bicycles, textiles, garments,

shoes, and furniture. Running a business in a foreign environment presents a multitude of challenges for entrepreneurs. Taiwanese business owners in Vietnam face significant cross-cultural management issues due to differences in social structures, religion, language, education, economic philosophy, and political philosophy. These differences can create complex scenarios that require careful navigation and sensitive handling to maintain harmonious and productive work environments. In recent years, some of the most significant challenges have been manifested in labour disputes and strikes, particularly in Taiwanese-invested textile, garment, and footwear enterprises. These disputes often stem from violations of labour codes, dissatisfaction with salaries, workplace meals and bonuses, issues with social insurance, overwork, and unsafe working conditions. One of the critical areas of contention has been the violation of labour codes by some Taiwanese-invested companies in Vietnam (Wang, 2004; Glantz & Nguyen, 2006; Chan & Wang, 2005; Kerkvliet, 2011; Kung & Liu, 2023).

In the context of globalisation, advances in information technology and the widespread use of smartphones have revolutionised communication and access to information, impacting industrial relations and management practices. Notably, after the riots of May 13, 2014 in Binh Duong province, the Vietnamese trade union law was enacted, and labour laws were significantly improved. Given these changes, the research for this paper investigated whether the management of Taiwanese factories in Vietnam, particularly in Binh Duong, has changed. The focus was on whether these changes have led to improved industrial relations, greater compliance with labour laws, and better working conditions for workers in Taiwanese factories.

Most Vietnamese informants reported that the working environments and conditions in Taiwanese factories have improved. Among 25 Vietnamese informants, three stated that their companies still required wearing a toilet card to go to the toilet, but there were no restrictions on the time or number of visits. Two informants reported that their companies still required wearing a toilet card to go to the toilet and limited the time to five minutes per visit, which made them feel uncomfortable. The remaining informants noted that their factories abolished such toilet regulations many years ago, as they explained:

Previously, each production line had a toilet card. When you wanted to go to the toilet, you had to inform the production line leader. They would give you a toilet card, and each time you went, it would not last more than five minutes. But three years ago, these regulations were abolished. (VN 25)

Some previous inappropriate regulations have been removed, according to company management, because these regulations put pressure on workers. (VN 21)

This survey result is fully in line with most of the responses by the Taiwanese managers, who also emphasised that their factories had abolished toilet regulations. However, one Taiwanese manager said that his shoe factory still asks workers to wear a toilet card when they go to the toilet, that the toilet time does not exceed five minutes, and that there is even a camera outside each toilet door. He explained that it was: "At the request of customers because they are afraid that workers might faint when going to the toilet." However, when other Taiwanese managers who also work in the shoe factory were asked, they said that their customers had not requested this and that it was the first time they had heard of such a thing.

In addition, a Taiwanese manager also said, "In the past, when they invested in China, Taiwanese directors applied militarised management methods to Chinese employees and found them effective. However, this harsh management method has led to strikes by workers in Vietnam and has become less and less effective in recent years." This shows that the ineffectiveness of such management methods in Vietnam is due to several factors. The cultural and social differences between China and Vietnam play a major role. Management practices that are effective in one country do not necessarily translate well to another country due to different social norms, values, and expectations in the workplace. Another Taiwanese manager also pointed out that: "Factories often have young workers aged 20–40 who do not like stressful, hard-working environments and are comfortable with mobile technology. If the factory does not follow the work rules correctly, they record videos, take photos, and send letters of complaint to the trade union. And if they feel pressured, they voluntarily quit their jobs, which can lead to the factory being fined or to a shortage of workers."

Furthermore, the labour shortage in industrial zones has led to changes in management methods at Taiwanese manufacturing plants in Binh Duong. Most Taiwanese managers reported that their factories are currently facing difficulties in recruiting unskilled workers. If management is too strict, workers will quit. They even have to implement a reward system for employees who successfully refer workers to the factory, as they explained:

Currently, almost all factories are facing difficulties in recruiting employees. Young people prefer freelance work and do not like working in a factory environment, or they have factories in their hometowns. If the factory management is too strict, they will quit. (TW 3)

Education in Vietnam has improved, providing young people with more options. Our company offers a reward system for employees who successfully refer workers to the factory. The referrer will receive a reward of VND one million when the new worker signs a labour contract with the factory. (TW 5)

When asked about the role of the grassroots trade union in the factory, most Vietnamese informants reported that the grassroots trade union provides relatively good support in the factory due to the large number of workers. When workers complain about poor food quality or inappropriate sanctions from the factory, they report these problems to the grassroots trade union, which then forwards them to the factory manager. Generally, all workers' complaints are recorded and, if deemed appropriate, improvements are made. For example, the factory has changed food suppliers and lifted the rules on toilet times. The grassroots trade union also offers gifts on holidays. The monthly grassroots trade union fee is between VND 35,000 and 50,000. However, two informants reported that the grassroots trade union operates ineffectively in their factory due to its small size and the limited number of workers, making it difficult to claim rights when workers are unlawfully dismissed.

This is consistent with interviews with Taiwanese directors or owners who explained that the factory negotiates with the factory trade union to find an amicable solution to labour disputes and that disputes rarely escalate to the Binh Duong provincial trade union or to strikes. One Taiwanese manager explained: "As our factory produces for big brands that care about workers' rights, we negotiate with the factory trade union to avoid complaints being brought to the Binh Duong provincial trade union and to prevent collective strikes." In the case of the Vietnamese worker who had been unlawfully dismissed, on August 5, 2024, she reported that the factory had agreed to pay compensation equivalent to three months' basic salary after she mentioned that she would approach the Binh Duong provincial trade union.

Overall, the role of factory trade unions in mitigating labour disputes is closely aligned with Dunlop's (1958) industrial relations framework, which identifies three principal actors: workers and their organisations, management and their representatives, and government agencies. Within Taiwanese factories, trade unions act as a vital intermediary between employees and management, enabling negotiation and dialogue to address workplace concerns before they escalate. This supports Dunlop's assertion that industrial relations are shaped by shared ideologies, environmental constraints, and formalised rules such as contracts and policies. The relative strength of trade unions, particularly in larger

factories with greater institutional capacity, underscores the impact of organisational scale on industrial relations dynamics.

DISCUSSION

The expansion of Taiwanese manufacturing operations in Vietnam has introduced both opportunities and complex challenges, fostering economic development and creating jobs for workers to support their families. However, it has also led to labour disputes, particularly in smaller factories. These disputes often revolve around wages, meal quality, and working conditions. The workforce in these factories typically consists of individuals who spend a significant portion of their day engaged in physically demanding tasks. In this context, the quality and nutritional value of the workplace meals provided by the factories are not merely matters of convenience but critical factors affecting the overall health of the workers.

The quality of meals provided in Taiwanese factories is influenced by several factors, including the factory's welfare policies and the professionalism of food suppliers. Factories with robust welfare policies usually collaborate with reputable food suppliers to ensure that the meals are nutritious and well-prepared. Conversely, factories with poor welfare policies provide substandard meals, leading to worker dissatisfaction and health issues, which have resulted in collective strikes over the years. Interviews with Taiwanese managers and factory owners corroborate these findings. While the average cost of meals for workers ranges from VND 17,000 to VND 25,000, there are variations, with some factories spending more to ensure better meal quality, and others spending less, resulting in many workers skipping the provided lunches. This disparity highlights the impact of individual factory policies on meal quality and, consequently, on worker satisfaction and productivity.

Industrial relations in Taiwanese factories in Vietnam are also evolving. Most Vietnamese informants reported improvements in working conditions and labour relations, although some issues persist. The role of grassroots trade unions is particularly crucial in supporting workers and addressing their grievances. In factories with a large workforce, trade unions are relatively effective in voicing workers' concerns about meal quality and other issues, leading to tangible improvements. However, in smaller factories with fewer workers, trade unions often struggle to operate effectively, making it difficult for workers to claim their rights when facing unlawful dismissal or other issues. This disparity in trade union effectiveness underscores the challenges in ensuring consistent labour standards across different factory sizes and contexts.

Management practices in Taiwanese factories have also changed significantly, particularly in response to factors such as labour shortages, the need to improve industrial relations, Vietnamese labour law, and the improvement of trade unions. Taiwanese managers reported that the strict management practices that used to be effective in China were less successful in Vietnam. The cultural and social differences between the two countries require a more nuanced approach to management. In addition, labour shortages in industrial areas have forced Taiwanese factories in Vietnam to adopt more flexible and worker-friendly management practices. This includes the introduction of reward systems for employees who successfully recruit new workers and the relaxation of strict management policies to retain employees.

The role of the Vietnamese state and its agencies such as the VGCL in establishing and regulating industrial relations has changed significantly since the adoption of “Đổi Mới”. The state partly assumes the function of supervising and controlling industrial relations through the regulations and guidelines set by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and different government agencies. At the same time, the state also takes an active role in facilitating and stimulating the functioning and behaviour of the social partners. Additionally, the state plays a proactive role in fostering cooperation among social partners, including employers, workers, and trade unions. Through various initiatives and policies, the government encourages dialogue and negotiation, aiming to create a harmonious and productive industrial environment. However, the study also reveals that the role of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour and grassroots-level trade unions has not been effectively utilised in protecting the rights and supporting the welfare of workers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions above, this article draws from interviews with Vietnamese and Taiwanese workers employed in Taiwanese-invested factories in Vietnam post-reform, particularly in the context of globalisation and the post-COVID-19 era. The study reveals that workers’ meals are entirely dependent on the factory’s welfare policies and meal providers. However, workers have leveraged collective strength and grassroots unions to voice their opinions on unreasonable company regulations, often achieving improvements in meal quality and working conditions. In smaller factories, however, the influence of workers and grassroots unions is less effective.

Additionally, the study identifies changes in labour management practices. Managers have shifted toward more flexible and adaptive methods, replacing harsh, militarised, and subservient management styles to retain workers. Workers

have also resorted to collective strikes to prompt government agencies to amend labour laws.

This research highlights the importance of meal quality for workers, suggesting that factories should prioritise better meal providers. Factories must comply with Vietnamese labour laws. Government agencies should support the development of grassroots trade unions and train union staff in legal matters to bridge the gap between workers and employers, thereby preventing collective strikes. These grassroots trade unions can serve as a critical liaison between workers and employers, ensuring that the workers' voices are heard and their needs met.

Proactive measures by factories and government agencies can significantly reduce the likelihood of collective strikes, which are often the result of unmet needs and unresolved grievances among workers. By ensuring workplace meal quality and supporting strong, knowledgeable grassroots trade unions, factories can create a more harmonious and productive work environment. This approach not only benefits the workers but also enhances the reputation and operational efficiency of the factories. In the long term, such measures contribute to a stable industrial climate, fostering economic growth and social development.

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List of Vietnamese informants

Name	Gender	Age	Title of position	Time of working
VN 1	Male	32	Worker	8 years
VN 2	Male	31	Worker	10 years
VN 3	Female	27	Worker	7 years
VN 4	Male	26	Officer	3 years
VN 5	Female	25	Worker	4 years
VN 6	Male	31	Worker	8 years
VN 7	Female	29	Worker	10 years
VN 8	Female	27	Worker	6 years
VN 9	Female	26	Worker	6 years
VN 10	Female	35	Officer	10 years
VN 11	Male	25	Worker	5 years
VN 12	Female	29	Worker	8 years
VN 13	Male	31	Worker	10 years
VN 14	Female	32	Officer	8 years
VN 15	Female	28	Worker	7 years
VN 16	Male	28	Worker	8 years
VN 17	Female	32	Worker	10 years
VN 18	Female	31	Worker	8 years
VN 19	Male	25	Worker	3 years
VN 20	Male	27	Worker	7 years
VN 21	Female	26	Worker	7 years
VN 22	Female	30	Worker	9 years
VN 23	Female	31	Worker	8 years
VN 24	Female	32	Worker	10 years
VN 25	Male	33	Officer	9 years

List of Taiwanese informants

Name	Gender	Age	Title of position	Time of working in Vietnam
TW 1	Female	26	Worker	2 years
TW 2	Female	48	Worker	7 years
TW 3	Female	37	Worker	5 years
TW 4	Female	41	Officer	6 years
TW 5	Male	52	Worker	10 years
TW 6	Male	39	Worker	6 years
TW 7	Male	47	Worker	12 years
TW 8	Male	48	Worker	15 years
TW 9	Male	63	Worker	20 years
TW10	Female	35	Officer	3 years
TW11	Male	55	Worker	12 years
TW 12	Male	38	Worker	5 years
TW 13	Male	46	Worker	9 years

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