

Uncle Ga Ong's lagoon

The fight over the Binnan industrial complex on the Chiku Lagoon in Taiwan was a tug-of-war between conservation and development

This is a story of an old fisherman, a story about how fisher people fought against two big industrial groups to protect their rights, a story that our descendants on this land will not forget.

Early in the morning on a day like any other ordinary day, Uncle Ga Ong (Chia-Wan Chen in Mandarin), a 64 year-old life-long resident of Chiku, arrived at the Chiku Coastal Protection Association, a self-help fishworkers' organization, where he has voluntarily worked since its inception. He takes care of the association. Wherever there is a mess, Uncle Ga Ong would clean it up; wherever there is trash, he would pick it up.

Not only is Uncle Ga Ong a respected elder in his village, but he is also well known among environmentalists in Taiwan. Like all other fisher people in Chiku, he has, since very young, made a living from the Chiku Lagoon, the largest remaining lagoon in Taiwan.

In the peaceful coast of Chiku, the rhythm of nature dictates when to collect fish fry, when to farm oysters, and when the seasons and tides change. Likewise, the wintering black-faced spoonbills (*Platalea minor*) in the nearby estuary follow the rhythm of seasonal migration.

However, since the Binnan Industrial Complex was proposed to be built on the Chiku Lagoon, Uncle Ga Ong, the endangered black-faced spoonbill and the Chikuan fisherfolk have been swept into a tug-of-war between the forces of conservation and development.

The Binnan project was proposed jointly by the Tuntex Group and the Yiehloong Group in July 1993. A steel and

petrochemical complex was planned to be built in a 3,000-hectare site. The developers claimed that this project would contribute to economic development locally and nationally by creating 30,000 jobs, \$37.6 bn NT (US\$1.1 bn) in annual tax revenue and \$410 bn NT (US\$12.1 bn) in annual production value.

The reaction to the proposed project was mixed. The local fishworkers and environmental groups adamantly opposed it. The fisherfolk believed that the promised jobs would mostly go to imported foreign labour, and the development would severely impact on the quality of water and the ecosystem of the lagoon. They vowed to fight the project to the end.

On the other hand, local township officials, representatives and absentee landowners thought the industrial project would bring prosperity to the poor and backward coastal community. They welcomed the project with open arms. Frustrated by the opposition of the fishworkers, some even threatened them with physical violence. Many volunteers and local fishworkers in the anti-Binnan movement were beaten up and severely injured. The violence has cast a dark cloud over the movement.

"Why can't we determine our own way of life?" Uncle Ga Ong asks in what is both a question and a modest wish of the Chikuan fisherfolk. All they ever want is to choose a peaceful and self-sufficient way of life on their own land.

Self-help organization

Seven years ago, Uncle Ga Ong called on the fishworkers in his village to form a self-help organization to defend their way of life and thus began their long fight against the two corporations proposing

the Binnan project. Uncle Ga Ong himself took up the burden of becoming the organization's general secretary and virtually stopped his fish-pond and oyster-farming work. To support his family, he even had to borrow money from an insurance company. However, he insisted on accepting no pay from the organization or from others.

With the growth of the anti-Binnan movement, the little-known township of Chiku became the focus of national and even international attention, and Uncle Ga Ong became the designated tour guide for all sorts of incoming visitors, ranging from research institutes to the media. He is always enthusiastic about taking visitors around so that more people can witness the beauty of the lagoon and hear the voice of the fisherfolk. Uncle Ga Ong's selfless devotion emboldened the fishworkers to fight for their survival, and the small fishing village of Lungsan, adjacent to the Chiku Lagoon, has won the respect and assistance of people outside.

There are only 500 households in Lungsan, and over 90 per cent of the residents have worked as fishers for generations. The high productivity of the Chiku Lagoon and the surrounding shore not only supports the residents of Lungsan but is also important for the livelihoods of thousands of people who

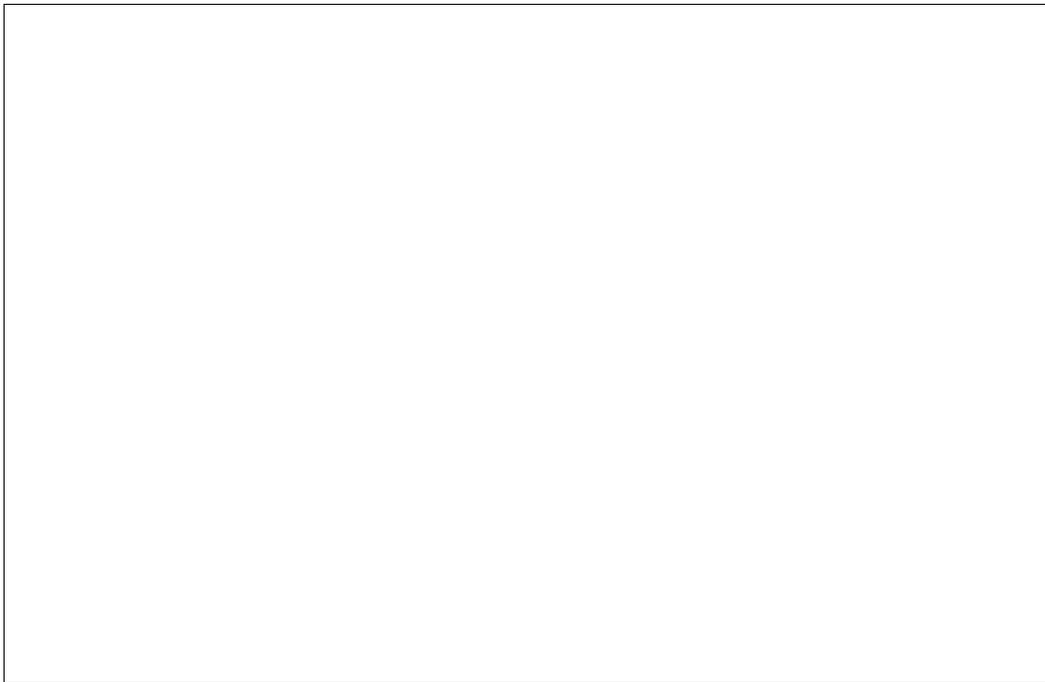
depend on the lagoon, which is also a habitat for important species of wildlife, including the endangered black-faced spoonbill. The Chiku Lagoon and the surrounding wetlands are critically essential to the ecosystems of southern Taiwan.

According to a study funded by the National Science Council of Taiwan, the productivity of the Chiku Lagoon is 45 times that of tropical coral reefs and four times that of a tropical estuary. The lagoon is free of heavy-metal contamination; thus, there is no health and safety concern about consuming the fish and shellfish caught in this area.

For hundreds of years, the wetland has been like a mother to the residents of Chiku. It is also the most important wintering ground for the globally endangered black-faced spoonbill. A study by the Wild Bird Society of Tainan City indicates that the vast extent of fish ponds and wetlands in Chiku provides important sources of food and an undisturbed habitat for the spoonbill. The habitat is important for the nesting success of the spoonbills after they return north and is critical for the conservation of this endangered species.

Water exchange

The Chiku Lagoon exchanges water with the ocean once a day through two inlets at its northern and southern ends. The



exchange is critical for maintaining water quality in the lagoon.

The Binnan project proposes to fill the northern inlet and will, therefore, have a severe impact on the functioning of the lagoon ecosystem, particularly on its self-cleansing mechanism.

It will threaten the fishing and oyster farming activities that support the local community. It will also impact on the food sources of the spoonbills. Though the spoonbill has long been known to the local people, no one paid particular attention to the species until the Binnan development was proposed.

The project made the fishworkers realize that their survival is tied to the birds that share the coastal ecosystem. The birds, which regularly forage in their fish ponds, in fact, became their guardian angels.

In May 1996, in the midst of local violence and conflicts, the Binnan project began the second phase of its environmental impact assessment. The battlefield thus moved from the local community to Taipei, where the project was reviewed by a committee.

Since then, Uncle Ga Ong has begun his frequent trips between Chiku and Taipei to represent the voice of local fisherfolk before experts and committee members. Equipped with only elementary school education, Uncle Ga Ong diligently studied the relevant materials and consulted visiting scholars and experts.

In explaining why he fought against the proposed project, Uncle Ga Ong exhibits the modesty and innocence of a fisherman and a firm belief in truth. He says that he is not simply against industrial development. Rather, he believes that the government needs to provide a convincing industrial policy and planning methodology for land use.

In fact, the mild-tempered Uncle Ga Ong has played a rational and mediating role within the anti-Binnan movement. He believes everyone should have a right to express their opinion even in a highly contentious situation. He always reminds his fellow activists to persuade and

TEPUT

For years, the Taiwan Environmental Protection Union, Tainan Branch (TEPUTNBR) has been devoting its efforts to conserve the Chiku wetlands and the black-faced spoonbills, and resist polluting industries, that is, the steel mill and petrochemical plants proposed in the Chiku area.

TEPUTNBR co-operated with scholars and the local fishermen in the environmental impact assessment process for the plants, to provide to the relevant authorities scientific evidence and grassroots opinions. Public campaigns for this issue, including field trips and training camps, were held regularly.

TEPUTNBR also helped local fishworkers to organize themselves to fight against the polluting plants. The training programmes on ecotourism and recreational fishery aim to help the fisherfolk preserve their ways of living and improve their economic status.

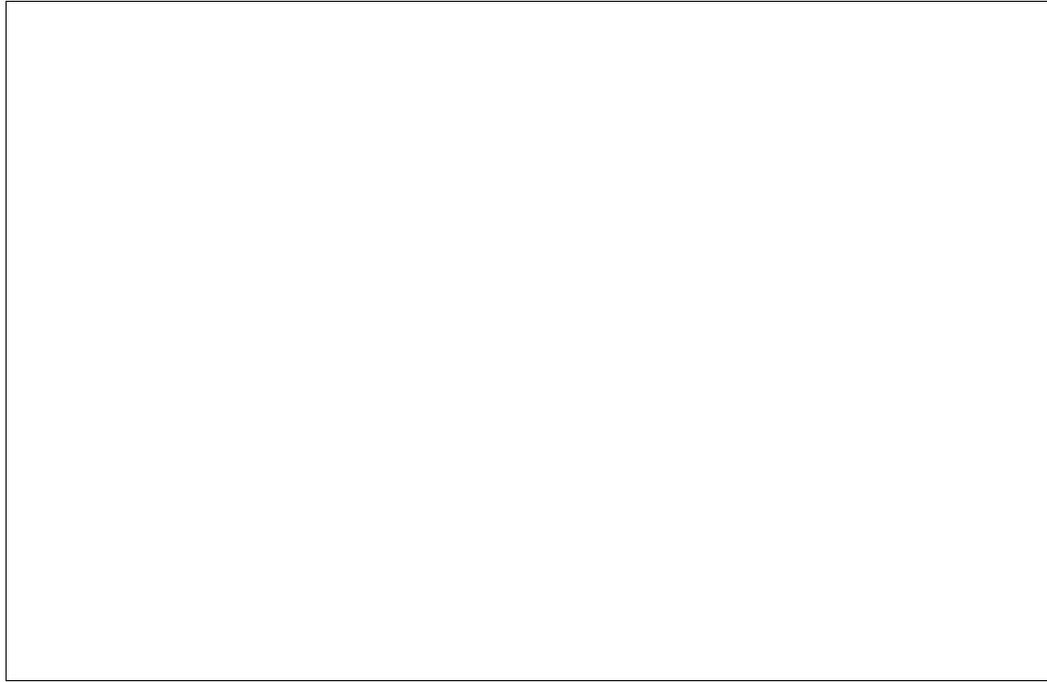
From the collaboration with the Chiku fishworkers, TEPUTNBR has learned important lessons on sustainable development.

communicate with their opponents in rational and peaceful ways. However, reflecting on the movement, Uncle Ga Ong has much to say about the frustrations of a humble fisherman fighting against large corporations, particularly about the violence that the fishworkers were subjected to.

During the days of intense confrontations, he told his family that if he were killed, he would like to be cremated, and he would like to have his ashes scattered over the lagoon that has accompanied him all his life.

Last sanctuary

“Chiku Lagoon is the last sanctuary on the west coast of Taiwan,” says Uncle Ga Ong. Despite lacking any in-depth knowledge of ecological science, he knows that the clean and rich lagoon, handed down by ancestors, needs to be kept intact for future generations. This modest hope is not just Uncle Ga Ong’s but is what is longed for by those who are generally concerned about social justice and well-being of the Earth.



After nine years of struggle, on 22 August 2002, just before the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the President of Taiwan, Chen Shuibian, came to Chiku and announced that the Chiku Lagoon would be a paragon of ecotourism, as well as sustainable development in Taiwan. This implies that the Binnan project is likely to be scrapped.

Chiku's fisherfolk appear to have won the tough battle. 

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