

A Critical Genealogy of the Forced Migratory Labor in the Asian Mediterranean Sea: Trajectory, Logistic, and a Few Halting Points Today

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Abstract

A recent report by the independent Taiwanese media, The Reporter, “Taiwanese Sold by Taiwanese—Escape from the Scam Industrial Park. A Confession of a Human Trafficking Victim” (August 10, 2022), exposed the stories of Taiwanese people trapped in Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, Cambodia, by human-smuggling groups. These young people mostly have a high school or college degree in education. They lost their job during the pandemic and were lured by the fraud advertisements on FB that promised high salaries and good jobs. They went through in-person interviews in Taiwan and flew to Cambodia, hoping for a great future. The moment they landed at the airports, their passports were confiscated, and they were sold to various companies. Most people were tortured with electric batons, and some were raped if they did not comply.

Sihanoukville is a port city famous for its role as a gateway to international sea trade, casinos, and organized crimes. Today it is one of the major cities in China’s One Belt One Road Initiative, and more than 80,000 Chinese live in this city. Chinese entrepreneurs run the organized scam industries with Cambodian elites, assisted by Taiwanese gangs to recruit people. In Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, there are dozens of industrial parks exist. Each industrial park consists of hundreds and thousands of scam gangs, run mainly by the Chinese. In previous decades most victims were from China, but now Taiwanese also fell into their trap through the assistance of local gangs. They call the victims of the human smuggling gangs “pigs,” while the victims of the cyber scam are also addressed as “pigs,” together, it is a “pig slaughtering” business. Pig is the term used for the coolies in the 19th and 20th centuries.

According to Al Jazeera’s documentary on July 15, 2022, “Forced to Scam: Cambodia’s Cyber Slaves,” thousands of victims have to work 15 hours a day on a cryptocurrency romance scam or a cryptocurrency investment scam. The victims are from China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thai, Vietnam, and Burma. The criminal enterprises of the Global Scam operations involve massive corruption of high-level officials, both the Cambodian elites and the Chinese entrepreneurs. The sites of the cyber scam enterprises scatter around various places, from the port cities to Phnom Penh and the northern borders of Myanmar, Vietnam, and China.

This essay intends to trace the genealogy of the sea route of forced migration that links Northeast and Southeast Asia through the Asian Mediterranean Sea. The core research question is about the nature of forced labor’s institutionalized logistics that persist throughout history. My argument is that the logistics facilitating the flow of forced migrant labor date back to the feudal tribute system over thousands of years, from the pre-modern era to the 21st century. The institution and technology of the logistics went through a long history of metamorphosis, but the nature of the mediating institution remains unchanged. Pig is the term used for the coolies in the 19th and 20th centuries, through cheating or kidnapping poor people in the rural

villages, the labor force that cost nothing, operated by the broker system to ship the indentured laborers to Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. The pig of the 21st century serves different kinds of labor but is still in the same mode of slavery, with torture and unaccounted death. The objective of this study is to propose a perspective of critical legal study that challenges the persistence of the legalized institutions that legitimate and rationalize the extraction of labor and ignore the fundamental equality of all human lives.

This talk will end with a case study of the possible route of the halting points to fix this vicious circle of labor exploitation. Jonathan Parhusip, a doctoral student at SRCS-NYCU, has worked in the port cities in southern Taiwan where migrant fishers rested between their fishing jobs. He will offer a brief report of several projects he has engaged in his fieldwork to enable migrant fishers' capacity for space-making and self-protection.
