

# Unveiling the dark web of chinese syndicates: Methods of trafficking laborers and their impact on victims' well-being



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**Abstract** This research reveals the strategies employed by Chinese organised crime groups in the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of Thai labourers, highlighting practices such as human trafficking and forced labour within call center scamming operations across Southeast Asia. It also seeks to develop policy recommendations for preventing and addressing new threats posed by human trafficking networks linked to grey Chinese capital. The research adopts a qualitative approach, including group discussions to gain a comprehensive understanding of trafficking tactics used by Chinese criminals and their multifaceted impact on the wellbeing of victims. The findings demonstrate that human trafficking frequently begins with the creation of companies that recruit job seekers and screen victims through fake job advertisements and fraudulent employment agencies, both within and outside Southeast Asia. Once the targeted victims are selected, they are transported to labour sites where their work does not align with the initially agreed-upon conditions. Additionally, traffickers provide monetary compensation to individuals who play a role in deceiving the victims. Should the victims fail to meet job expectations, they face coercion, punishment, resale for labour exploitation elsewhere, and even organ trafficking. The research explores how criminal operations are organised in multi-layered networks that involve cross-border engagement, including corrupt officials and smuggler agents. Victims are, in some cases, rescued through police and military interventions. However, the impact can be severe, ranging from psychological trauma and physical health deterioration to social stigma, which further affects the victims' ability to reintegrate into their community. This situation, in turn, reproduces more traffickers, as victims who face barriers to reintegration often turn to criminal activities. The study concludes with several policy recommendations, including addressing key pain points through the intensive application of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), enhancing officials' capabilities to keep up with the evolving tactics of human traffickers, strengthening international cooperation, improving coordination with local law enforcement to track criminal activities, and increasing the efficiency of the screening and identification process for victims.

**Keywords:** grey capital, transnational chinese companies, organised crime, human trafficking

## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking remains a significant challenge for Southeast Asian countries. According to Interpol's estimation, human trafficking networks generate over \$50 billion annually (CNN, 2024; Kurmanbekova, & Rahut, 2021). Thailand is reported to be a major global point of origin, transit point, and destination for human trafficking routes, with the Global Slavery Index highlighting that there are almost 4 million victims of forced labor in the country (ECPAT, 2024; Yang, 2016). In response to the severity of the situation, the Thai government has taken necessary actions to prevent and combat human trafficking while seeking solutions to improve the conditions surrounding this issue (Broadhurst, et. al., 2017). In 2022, authorities arrested and prosecuted 35 cases of human traffickers. The government has also implemented the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to combat human trafficking and prevent related crimes. Nevertheless, Thailand still struggles to solve the fundamental issues that hinder tangible progress (Bunyavejchewin, et al., 2022). As a result, Thailand has been ranked in Tier 2 in the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report by the United States. The report also reveals the prevalence of government officials' corruption facilitating transnational organized crime groups (Ministry of Labor, 2024; Thailand TIP Report, 2023). A recent study revealed a proliferation of cybercrime scams, where individuals are forced into working in call centers. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reports that more than 220,000 victims in Thailand are forced to join online scamming and human trafficking networks in neighboring countries (Today, (2024). Furthermore, the OHCHR reveals that Chinese criminals are the leaders of these organized crime rings, luring Thai citizens and their neighbors to work in Cambodia. The number of victims increased significantly from 231 in 2020 to 414 in 2021 (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2022). In terms of crime operations, Chinese criminals operate as large crime organizations. This finding is in accordance with a report conducted by



the Royal Thai Police, which highlights the emergence of a new form of organized crime during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics show an increasing trend of transnational human trafficking, with many Thai citizens and neighbors becoming victims. Once individuals fall victim to these criminal networks, they are forced to scam people across many countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, the US, and some other European countries (Today, 2024), through phone calls in online centers. Notably, Cambodia is often identified as the headquarters of these crime organizations. Thai victims forced into scamming operations are controlled by Chinese criminal organizations to defraud fellow Thai citizens (Thai Health Report, 2024). Scammers employ various methods, including enticing victims with gambling and investment opportunities or engaging in “vishing” (voice phishing) by creating fabricated scenarios, often impersonating police officers or government officials. In these cases, scammers call potential victims, accusing them of involvement in illegal activities such as the shipment of illicit goods (Jakobsson and Myers, 2006). The scammers then request the victims’ bank account information. Fearing legal repercussions, victims frequently comply, providing their bank account details, disclosing personal information, or making transactions to prove their innocence. Once the transaction is completed, the scammers serve all the communication and disappear (Prachathai, 2024). According to the Global State of Scam Report in 2022, there were over 293 million cases of online scamming, resulting in a total financial loss of \$55,300 million (Thairath, 2023). In fact, Thailand is identified as a destination for money laundering, particularly in connection with illegal activities such as the exploitation of Thai surrogate mothers for Chinese nationals, the operation of illegal entertainment complexes targeting Chinese tourists, and the distribution of drugs in entertainment districts frequented by Chinese visitors (BBC NES, 2022; Thai PBS, 2023). Businesses specifically established to cater to Chinese clientele have also been implicated in these unlawful activities. The revenue generated from these ventures is often laundered and eventually repatriated to Chinese criminal organizations (Thai PBS, 2023). Currently, many human trafficking and forced labor victims are being exploited in online scamming operations, particularly through call centers. In Cambodia, there are over 100,000 Cambodian victims, whereas there are approximately 120,000 victims in Myanmar (BBC NEWS, 2023). The victims of forced labor are reported to be males from several regions, including Asia, Africa, and South America (BBC NEWS, 2023). Additionally, in 2024, over 40,000 legal cases related to call center scams were reported on the online complaint platform, leading to total financial losses amounting to 5 billion THB (AIS, 2024; Boonkong & O’Connor, 2022). According to testimonies from victims rescued from forced labor in call center scams, they were subjected to physical abuse and torture if they failed to meet a certain financial target set by the Chinese criminals. In some cases, these victims were trafficked to other locations and forced to continue scamming until they generated an amount of money deemed satisfactory by their Chinese crime bosses (PhishMe, 2017). Most of the victims originated from Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, ethnic minority groups, and even Nigeria (The Nation, 2023). In 2023, records revealed that 116 Thai citizens were exploited in call center scams in Cambodia operated by Chinese criminal organizations, with 65 males and 46 females among the victims (Thairath, 2023). In response, civil society and other sectors have called for urgent action from the Thai government to combat these Chinese criminal networks that target Thai citizens for human trafficking and forced labor. Given the detrimental effects on the economy, national security, and societal stability, the government must take decisive measures to protect the country’s international reputation and long-term credibility in the global community. Accordingly, this research reveals the strategies employed by Chinese organized crime groups in the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of Thai laborers. This study aims to analyze the physical and psychological impacts of victims of human trafficking and proposes recommendations on laws and regulations to empower victims, enabling them to cope with these challenges more effectively.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Scope of Work

This research aims to study the methods employed to recruit, transport, and exploit Thai laborers who are deceived into becoming forced laborers in online crime in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. This research focuses on the role of Chinese criminals. It also discusses the conditions that trafficked individuals face, which impact their overall well-being. This research focuses on studying patterns of deception to develop policy recommendations and addresses the issue of human trafficking for forced labor in call center scams by Chinese criminals.

### 2.2. Data collection and participants

The research collects both primary and secondary data. Primary data are gathered through focus groups and in-depth interviews on topics such as the methods used to recruit, transport, and exploit Thai laborers who are deceived into becoming forced laborers in online crime in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, as well as the role of Chinese criminals. It also covers the conditions that victims face, which impact their overall well-being. The secondary sources include news reports, statistical data, and other relevant documents, such as annual reports from the Thai government on anti-trafficking efforts and reports from Thailand’s Anti-Trafficking Department. This study draws on primary data via the randomization method and the respondent-driven sampling approach. This approach is effective when participants are hard to reach. This approach is therefore suitable for a study where the participants were victims of human trafficking and often remained hidden from society (Rahman & Haque, 2011). The researchers contacted the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) to reach out to

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) so that the MFA would contact NGOs and international NGOs in the field. Among these, 3 organizations collaborate with the Royal Thai Embassy and MSDHS to combat human trafficking. These organizations are key actors in reaching out to participants. Ultimately, 11 participants who were victims participated in the in-depth interviews.

The criterion for selecting participants was that they are Thai and identified by local NGOs or international NGOs as people who were rescued from being trafficked and forced into labor in Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Additionally, the participants are reported to receive support from clinics and other organizations as victims. The interviews were conducted at the offices of partner organizations in Thailand. The main author was the main interviewer, while the coordinators were responsible for arranging the meetings and interviews. However, 2 participants declined to join the group discussion and were requested to give the interviews at a hotel instead. Each interview took 1–2 hours. Notably, the set of questions was guided by a committee comprising 3 professors to ensure their appropriateness.

There was no recording made on the interviewing day. Instead, the researchers took notes during the interviews. Consent was requested verbally before the interviews were conducted. The participants were informed that they had the right to stop the interview if they felt uncomfortable. There were 11 individual interviews with 7 group discussions. Each group discussion comprised 2–3 participants, and the NGO staff and social workers were always present and observing the interviews. The report did not include the personal information or characteristics of the participants. Additionally, the author applied a cross-checking method to verify accuracy, a common method for research that utilizes different sources of data (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). The data from secondary sources and reports from interviews were reviewed rigorously. This process was conducted to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and sufficiency of the information before analysis.

### 2.3. Participants

The study involved 11 participants who were victims of human trafficking. The participants' ages ranged from 17–35 years, with an average age of 27.4 years. Their experiences of being exploited through human trafficking varied from less than one year to two years, with an average duration of exploitation across the three countries of 10.3 months. The participants' nationalities included Lao ( $n = 1$ ), Cambodia ( $n = 6$ ), Pakistan ( $n = 1$ ), Vietnam ( $n = 1$ ), and Myanmar ( $n = 2$ ). All the victims managed to escape their situations, with the destinations being Laos ( $n = 1$ ), Cambodia ( $n = 8$ ), and Myanmar ( $n = 2$ ). Assistance in their escape was provided by police officers and NGOs ( $n = 11$ ).

### 2.4. Data analysis

This study utilized content analysis and thematic analysis, following the methods of Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves six clear steps. First, the researcher became familiar with the data collected from the victims to understand the content and develop a preliminary understanding of the context, particularly regarding their experiences. Second, codes were generated to categorize the data into relevant parts, such as trafficking patterns, providing a structure for analysis. Third, these codes were used to search for themes within the data, especially in relation to criminal elements and exploitation. Fourth, the themes were defined and named to ensure clarity and coherence. Finally, in cases of overlapping themes, adjustments were made to refine the data into a single theme or concept that accurately captured the essence of the information. The results of the analysis were then presented in the report, summarizing the main findings.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Key Findings

A study involving group discussions and individual interviews revealed the following:

#### 3.1.1. Methods of Trafficking

##### 3.1.1.1. Establishment of Fake Recruitment Companies and Search for Vulnerable Individuals

As social media platforms are currently easily accessible and widely used, criminals have exploited this as a tool to reach their potential victims. Typically, criminals assess whether their victims face financial difficulties by working with Thai agencies. These agencies look at victims' posts on social media accounts. For example, a victim from Myanmar who was deceived and forced to work in Laukkai explained that,

*"I was forced to work in a call center scam in Laukkai for two years. Since Myanmar fell under military rule following the coup, ethnic armed groups have taken control of many regions. During this turmoil, millions of students, who often share personal details on social media, have been deceived into working in the online scamming industry. Scammers exploit the information available on social media to target and manipulate these individuals, drawing them into their operations." (Myanmar victim from Kachin State deceived into human trafficking in Laukkai, Shan State, 3/20/2024)*

As the agents from a fake recruitment company review the social media profiles of potential victims, they gather insights into the victim's interests and difficulties. They then initiate contact by sending messages, engaging in conversations, and expressing sympathy for the victims' difficulties. Over time, they build relationships and gradually gain victims' trust. This

strategy was especially effective during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many companies shut down, reduced their working hours, transitioned to remote work, or laid off employees, replacing them with technology. Individuals working from home spend more time at home and often look for additional income to compensate for lost earnings. Similarly, many unemployed people spend more time searching online for new jobs since they experience financial difficulties or are in debt. Pressured to find new employment, they also look for job opportunities abroad in the belief that they would earn higher wages. As one victim from Taiwan tricked into working in Phnom Penh, Cambodia shares,

*"I was working at a massage spa, and I lost my job when COVID-19 emerged. I had to find a new job, so I looked up online and found an online selling job in Cambodia. I was promised that working abroad would give me a higher income and free accommodation in a luxury hotel with a personal trainer. (Victims from Taiwan deceived into human trafficking in Cambodia, 4/20/2024)*

Another method that deceives victims is through Facebook pages, which claim to be recruitment agencies. These agencies ask the targets to send their national ID cards for identity verification and invite them to work in border areas between Thailand and Cambodia. After initial discussions on the Facebook page, victims are asked to provide their Line contact details. Many victims were deceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they faced financial hardship and unemployment. A Thai victim shared,

*"I was a barista before the outbreak. During the pandemic, I was looking for a barista job in Chiang Mai until I saw an advertisement looking for a barista to work in a casino. The page was only informed about the income rate and work benefits but did not disclose the location. Therefore, I decided to message them via the Line account of the Thai agency." (Thai victim deceived into human trafficking in Cambodia, 7/21/2024)*

Additionally, there was a case where the individual was deceived to become a mule account for criminals. This case involves the deception of a young woman who was initially lured to donate eggs to a Chinese family. However, she was tricked into becoming a mule account for criminals, where her role was to scan faces for identity verification whenever a victim transferred more than 50,000 Thai baht into the account. The money was then converted into digital currency and transferred to the crime boss in China. This woman had been deceived into working at a call center in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and explained,

*"I was in financial distress after losing my job during the COVID-19 pandemic. I found a job posting on social media advertising egg donation for a Chinese family, which required travel to China. When I applied, the Thai agent requested a copy of my ID card and bank book, claiming that they needed it to set up an account for compensation. However, I was driven by van to Cambodia instead of being taken to China. There, I was forced to scan faces for money transfers in a fraudulent call center in Phnom Penh." (Thai victim deceived into human trafficking in Cambodia, 4/15/2024).*

Human traffickers often post online job offers for various positions, such as online sales representatives, barista, croupers, translators, receptionists, and egg donors. They often target young individuals with higher education, computer skills, and the ability to speak multiple languages. Compared with other human trafficking victims, this group of victims tends to be more educated and knowledgeable, as they often hold bachelor's or master's degrees and are proficient in Chinese and/or English. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people were searching for additional income or new job opportunities. Criminals regard these skills as valuable for different types of online scams, such as investment fraud, love scams, and fraudulent transactions, tricking people into giving up their money. Most victims are from Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, South Asia, Southern Africa, and East Africa. They are often promised that they are going to work in Thailand but are later trafficked to Myanmar, Cambodia, or Laos instead.

### 3.2. The transportation of victims to remote areas and routes without phone signals makes it impossible for them to escape or seek help

Once victims are deceived by agreeing to work, traffickers do not disclose the exact location of the workplace. Instead, they often purchase bus or plane tickets for victims without providing the exact location of their destination. The traffickers instruct the victims on specific checkpoints they need to reach and who will meet them at these points, carefully avoiding giving away the real location of the workplace. This is a method of preventing victims from alerting authorities or requesting assistance.

The criminals arrange for people to pick up the victims at various intervals, ensuring that the victims cannot pinpoint the exact location. The motivation for victims to comply is the promise of a high salary, free accommodation, and the assurance that they will not have to cover travel expenses or go through a job interview. A Thai victim who was deceived into working in a call center in Cambodia explained that,

*"I had to travel to Bangkok first, even though I was living in Chiang Mai. They asked me to go to Mo Chit (bus terminal), where someone would be waiting to guide me from Mo Chit to Aranyaprathet. Then, there was another vehicle to pick me up. When I arrived at Rong Kluea Market, a truck came to pick us up. During the journey, two more female victims entered the truck. We drove for approximately two more hours until we reached a place with signs in multiple languages—English, Thai, Cambodian, and Chinese. That's when I started to get suspicious. I quickly checked my phone and tried to contact my family,*

*but there was no signal. My messages wouldn't send, I couldn't share my location, and there was no internet signal." )Thai victim deceived into human trafficking in Cambodia, 7/21/2024).*

### 3.3. Job Offers that Do Not Match the Conditions Stated in the Job Advertisement

Often, once the victims arrived at the destination, they realized that it was not the place they initially agreed upon. Moreover, instead of working for a Thai employer, they discovered that the operation is run by Chinese owners with Thai employees. The working conditions and wages are not what they were promised in the job advertisement. The criminals would deceive the victims that the job they initially wanted was in another location and would require them to travel. They trick the victims into thinking that they will work in Thailand, not in Cambodia or Myanmar. However, the victims are trafficked to Cambodia and Myanmar. With respect to working conditions in Cambodia, victims reported that they were working in abandoned casino complexes. Moreover, those who were trafficked to work in Myanmar reported that they were working in the territory under Karen armed group control.

Moreover, a Thai victim who deceived into working in Myanmar revealed that there were three victims along the journey, with 2 females and 1 male aged between 25 and 30. However, those three victims were sent to Poi Pet, Cambodia. For this Thai victim, he later discovered that he was sent to Myanmar, where ten victims already worked. Furthermore, there were Karen soldiers with guns patrolling around the building to prevent the victims from escaping. The Thai victim, who was deceived into working in Myawaddy, Myanmar, further explained,

*"When I arrived at the destination, I was taken to eat with the navigator. Then, I saw a Chinese individual coming in and offering me a cell phone. The person on the phone was the one who recruited me, and they informed me that I was now in Myanmar. They told me many guards were surrounding the building, so I could not escape. There were already ten other victims working here. As I walked into the building, it looked like a shophouse, with many tables and phones, each occupied by a person making scam calls. Once I entered, I was regrouped with the other victims. The Chinese boss came in and told us that we were all in debt of 300,000 THB, which was the cost of our transportation. To repay this debt, we had to work as scammers, calling people and tricking them into making transactions." (Thai victim deceived into human trafficking in Myawaddy, Myanmar, 7/21/2024).*

### 3.4. Setting a Debt Bond for Victims

All victims are subjected to a form of ransom in which they must repay a debt. Thai agents who deceive victims through online platforms and Line will set a debt amount for each victim, with these amounts being collected by Chinese groups involved in organized crime. Each victim has a debt ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 THB that they are required to repay to the Chinese owners of the call center. One of the victims shared,

*"There are hundreds of people working here calling other people and tricking them into making transactions. They are known as "the call center." Meanwhile, 10 people were sitting on the floor as if they were newcomers. I was told to sit with them, too. Then, the Chinese boss told me that I was selling 100,000 THB and that I had to scam people so that I could pay them back. (Thai victim from Tak Province, deceived into human trafficking in Myawaddy, Myanmar, 7/21/2024).*

The victims working as call center scammers receive a 10--20% commission, as they can scam people and reach the financial target. Ultimately, this commission is intended to pay back their debts. Failure to meet financial targets results in threats of further ransom. One victim from Pakistan, deceived into working in Laos, was forced to participate in a romance scam, which typically aims to deceive women into making transactions. A victim is forced to reach the goals set by the crime bosses, which include a specific number of victims and monetary goals. According to the victim's experience working in Laos as a scammer,

*"I was forced to find more people for online gambling and lotto. The target was set to be 15 people visiting the website per day and at least asking 5 people to invest in these online gambling websites." (Pakistani victim deceived into human trafficking in Laos, 6/20/2024).*

### 3.5. Coercing the Victims to Scam Others

Victims' passports are confiscated, and they are forced to work as scammers in call centers located along the Cambodia-Myanmar-Laos-Thailand border. Within the workplace, each table consists of two people and, overall, 50--60 tables in one room, depending on size. In terms of working conditions, the crime boss often sets a daily target of scamming 1 million THB per table, resulting in a total goal of 70 million THB per day. This rapid influx of money has contributed to the rapid growth of these call center operations. This information was gathered from a Thai victim from Chiang Mai, who was deceived into working in Laukkai, Myanmar, and who shared their experience on January 13, 2024.

They also ensure that they can transfer money earned from scamming to other countries quickly and effectively. This can be achieved by deceiving victims to invest in digital currencies through phone calls. The scammers often convince potential victims that investment in digital currencies would bring enormous returns in the future, as one Myanmar victim explained:

*"After I have built a rapport with the potential victims and gained their necessary information, I will introduce them to cryptocurrency. If they have never been deceived before, I will try to deceive them. Even those who were deceived before, I will also do that again because we are instructed to take every single thing from them. We have to follow orders from the Chinese boss." (Myanmar victim from Kachin State deceived into working in Laukkaj, Shan State, Myanmar, 3/20/2024).*

Additionally, digital currencies such as Bitcoin and Oncovin have become safe havens among Chinese criminal networks. Notably, these digital currencies are built on blockchain technology and are often not regulated by financial institutions. As a result, criminals utilize the legal loophole to conduct transactions via blockchain. This emerging system enables them to bypass oversight from financial institutions and authorities. Blockchain allows for transactions without identity verification, making it easier for those involved in illegal activities, including human trafficking, to move money discreetly. As a result, this method has become a common tool for laundering money in criminal enterprises.

Moreover, scam manuals are made for the victims. These manuals provide a step-by-step process, scamming methods, and strategies on how to deceive victims into transferring money such as romance scams and phishing. Victims are forced to study manuals and receive training and must follow instructions to successfully manipulate people to send money. Once the victims are tricked into transferring money, Chinese criminals then convert the funds from the victim's country into ULD (Universal Ledger Dollars) or other digital currencies to further obscure the transaction trail. Additionally, victims are taken for further training until they become more skilled. For example, there is a call center base in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which is used to deceive people in Cambodia and Myanmar. The report suggests that these criminal networks use abandoned hospitals to set up training schools. If workers are unable to meet their targets, there are clear and severe punishments, such as confinement, physical abuse, or threats to create fear and force them to continue working.

### 3.6. Trafficking and Transferring to Criminals in Other Places

The Vietnamese victim explained that after being transferred, they ended up at another online scam center that operates in the same way as the previous one, suggesting a broader network of similar scam operations. This includes online gambling deceiving people into transferring their funds to engage in gambling but without the option to withdraw this transaction. Another scamming activity is deceiving people into investing in Bitcoin. The victims are convinced that this investment would provide an enormous return with a high interest rate. Like gambling scams, victims will never be able to withdraw their funds. A Thai victim deceived into working in Cambodia expresses that,

*"I failed to reach the monetary goal. One day, when I was about to sleep, someone told me to pack my bag and took me to the car. I was traveling for 5--6 hours, and then I saw a Vietnamese flag. I realized I was at the border of Vietnam. I was taken to a building called the "Dragon Building." It was a complex consisting of 3 buildings. The first building had 9 floors with working offices inside. The other two buildings were connected in a U shape; both buildings had 13 floors, which were used for accommodation. There were not only Thai people but also people from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Most of them were tricked into being there." (Thai victim deceived into working in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, and trafficked to Vietnam, 7/2/2024).*

Finally, if victims are still unable to scam and reach those targets set by criminals despite being transferred to another place, traffickers resort to exploiting their bodies. They may force victims into organ harvesting for trafficking purposes. One of the victims shared that some of their fellow victims were also subjected to organ trafficking. A Thai victim, deceived into human trafficking in Cambodia and transferred to Vietnam, explained that,

*"Actually, Cambodia is often the last stop before people are moved on. If we fail to scam, they force us to harvest organs, such as the kidneys. Some of my colleagues were also victims of organ trafficking. One person told me to stay focused on work and not to fall asleep. Then, they showed me a scar on their ribs. Many people here bear similar scars" (Thai victim deceived into working in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, and trafficked to Vietnam, 7/21/2024).*

In the interviews, the victim suggested that thousands of people were forced into organ harvesting, with approximately 200 Thai people in this place. If the victims threatened to visit the police or try to escape, they would be killed. Some people even resort to suicide to escape unbearable pressure. In one severe case, a murder took place, and someone took a picture and posted it online. This led to the rescue of all the victims in this scam center. A Thai victim, deceived into working in Cambodia, reveals that,

*"The zone I lived in was surrounded by barbed wires. It was not so different from the prison. Every corner of the building was guarded for 24 hours. There was an incident that led to our rescue. One day, there was a Vietnamese couple, who was also deceived to work here, who threatened the Chinese boss that they would report them to the police. It was during the night-time. Later, we heard loud noise, and then, approximately 10 guards cornered the couple. They were stabbed to death. It was intentional." (Thai victim deceived into working in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, and trafficked to Vietnam, 7/21/2024).*

Another incident involved a Vietnamese victim who was brutally assaulted, thrown from the eighth floor and killed. This horrific incident ignited outrage among the Vietnamese victims in the complex, leading them to protest and attempt to destroy the barriers. Approximately 400 Vietnamese individuals tried to escape the river but were met with severe violence from guards. Those who could not escape were beaten to death or left with serious injuries. This unrest eventually attracted media attention, prompting police intervention and rescue efforts.

### 3.7. Rescuing Victims

Victims of labor trafficking in call centers and cyber scams often seek assistance from NGOs through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the rescue process in countries facing political conflicts, such as Myanmar and Cambodia, often faces a significant challenge in accessing these areas. For example, Thai workers who deceived into working at a call center in Laukkai faced this challenge because of the political complexities of Myanmar's internal conflict. Geographically, Laukkai does not share a border with Thailand; instead, it is situated in northern Myanmar, near the Chinese border. Moreover, Laukkai is under the control of ethnic armed groups, specifically the Wa National Army. Owing to these circumstances, rescue efforts require involvement from the Deputy Commissioner of the Royal Thai Police, as negotiations for international cooperation are essential under these difficult conditions. A Thai victim who deceived working in Cambodia and transferred to Vietnam explained that,

*"The Deputy Commissioner of the Royal Thai Police discussed the situation with Myanmar authorities in Yangon. However, the process of rescuing victims in some areas of Myanmar is difficult. While Myanmar authorities are willing to assist, some areas are not under their control due to ongoing political conflict. For instance, there are resistance groups and armed forces along the route to Laukkai. Typically, if the rescue is successful, victims are sent to Yangon or Myawaddy before being flown back to Thailand. Therefore, the rescue process requires close collaboration with Chinese authorities and Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In certain cases, we request transferring victims to China first before sending them back to Thailand. China has cooperated by opening borders in special cases to facilitate these rescues. The victims are not only Thai nationals but also include individuals from other countries who have been saved during these )"operationsAn Officer from the Anti-Trafficking In-Person Division, 7/18/2024).*

There are also cases where victims are reluctant to return to Thailand because their passports and national ID cards have been seized by Chinese human traffickers and because their bank accounts are used for mule activities. When victims report to the police, they are often prosecuted for being involved in money laundering and operating mule accounts. As a result, many victims are afraid of prosecution and choose to remain hidden instead of seeking help.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Chinese Criminal Network's Role and Syndicates

The operation of Chinese criminal networks, which force victims into online scamming in call centers in Cambodia and Laos, demonstrates their transnational reach. These networks have a well-structured and complex organizational system, allowing them to continuously conduct illegal activities. Their primary objective is to gain profits from activities such as human trafficking, money laundering, and debt bonding. Furthermore, these criminal organizations have a clear division of labor, with specific responsibilities assigned to different roles within the network (UNODC, 2004).

According to the study, Chinese criminal networks involved in labor trafficking in Myanmar and Cambodia often have a hierarchical structure. As Chin (2014) claims, the organization typically consists of a leader or "kingpin," who holds the highest position and wields the most power. The kingpin controls and manages all activities within the network and formulates strategies for operating scams. They often maintain strong relationships with local officials, facilitating illegal activities, particularly transnational human trafficking. For example, the kingpin is responsible for setting ransom prices for victims in Poipet, Cambodia. If victims want to return to Thailand safely, the ransom typically ranges from 7,000 to 100,000 THB, while returning to Cambodia or Myanmar might require relatives to pay between 100,000 and 500,000 THB.

The findings of this study align with those of Zhang & Chin (2002), who emphasize that organized crime syndicates often include a manager. This individual oversees and coordinates illegal operations and acts as a mediator between the kingpin and lower-level employees, many of whom are Thai nationals. These Thai employees are responsible for deceiving potential victims, transporting them to scam centers, and monitoring their work. In some cases, they even represent the kingpin in planning trafficking routes to avoid detection by authorities. Moreover, these employees manage operational budgets, covering expenses such as food, transportation, ransom payments, and mule accounts. They frequently use victims' personal information to open these accounts and then transfer funds to the kingpin. These employees also collaborate closely with the kingpin to develop strategies for increasing profits, a practice that is consistent with Chin's (2014) findings. For example, when victims fail to meet monetary targets or their mule accounts are frozen by Thai authorities, managers work with the kingpin to relocate the victims to new scam centers to minimize risk and maximize profit for the organization. The study indicates that Chinese criminal networks also include recruiters and transporters, who are responsible for deceiving and transferring victims to the exploitation site. This demonstrates the complexity of their networks, covering the deceiving process, finding accommodations, and transporting victims to destinations. This finding reflects the findings of Zhang & Chin (2002), who emphasized the role of recruiters, Thai nationals, who often target victims who are in poverty and face debt resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruiters often target young people, as they can use computers and speak multiple languages. The targets also do not have background knowledge about their working destinations, as they typically focus on alleviating their financial difficulties. The victims are promised decent working contracts, granting several benefits, including high-standard accommodation and a high income ranging from 30,000--100,000 THB for only a week of work. Sometimes, the

recruiters are friends of the victims themselves. Once they can find victims, recruiters receive a commission from the Chinese boss. For the transporters, the findings are in accordance with Naewa study's (2023), which revealed that transporters are often Thai nationals when the victims are transferred within Thailand. On the other hand, upon reaching Cambodia or Myanmar, the transporters become locals from the destination countries. Instead of traveling by airplanes, victims are transported using vans or on foot through forests, avoiding border crossings to escape detection by immigration authorities. Ultimately, this method prevents any official record of the victims crossing, making it difficult for authorities or relatives to trace them back to Thailand. This illustrates the highly systematic nature of the trafficking process, with close coordination between the two countries involved. The transporters from both sides coordinate seamlessly, and the structure of the operation is intricately linked between the nations. To further evade detection, victims are often transferred between several vehicles and made to walk at intervals, ensuring that law enforcement cannot track them easily. Overall, the study suggests that the money generated from scamming activities is laundered by the kingpin. This illicit wealth is then generated into various investments in both legal and illegal businesses in Thailand. These include entertainment venues, which cater specifically to Chinese tourists; convenience stores, which target the same groups; and purchases of high-value assets such as luxury real estate, cars, and watches. According to Naewna (2023), these assets are often resold, with the profits ultimately being transferred back to the kingpin in China.

## 5. Conclusions

According to these findings, further studies on strategies and tactics that recruiters employ to deceive victims, emphasizing the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence victims' decisions to seek work abroad, are needed. Further analysis in this particular area would enable a better and deeper understanding of criminal behavior, trafficking patterns, and future developments, which will ultimately contribute to the prevention of trafficking and the spread of greater awareness among those most vulnerable to exploitation.

Furthermore, it is imperative to examine trafficking routes and methods, especially in areas where international laws are ineffective or where authorities have limited access. Research in this area would provide insights into the major trafficking channels and subsequently support the government's prevention efforts. Additionally, exploring the relationships between recruiters and transporters, whether through family or social ties, would provide insights into how these connections enable operations and help traffickers avoid detection by authorities.

Most importantly, this study revealed corruption among state officials and the connections between these officials and criminal networks. Their close relationship enables trafficking operations across borders without being detected. Therefore, analyzing the scope and nature of this corruption could help governments, practitioners, and law enforcement develop more effective strategies and policies for combating trafficking and criminal organizations.

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## Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Office of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Thammasat 910 University (Social Sciences), number 67.04.2/(ECSO)175.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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