

## Scam: Inside Southeast Asia's Cybercrime Compounds

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At the beginning of January, 2025, the Chinese actor Wang Xing arrived in Bangkok for what he believed would be a casting call for a forthcoming film. However, he was met by people who turned out to be kidnappers and he was immediately taken to a scamming centre in Myanmar, from where he was expected to begin defrauding users of various social media (Gan, Jiang & Olarn, 2025). Fortunately for him, concerted police action led to his swift release and return to his home but the story sparked a great deal of interest in China and a fair amount of alarm. It is believed that this is a factor in the reduced number of Chinese students enrolling here at Krirk University in the current semester. That may be seen as a minor part of a human tragedy but it does indicate that so many cross-border activities are interlinked and inseparable from each other.

Mainland Southeast Asia, which is the focus of this book, is home to a wide range of illegal activities, including unregulated mining, drug smuggling, gun running and modern slavery. Various factors cause this, including limited government capacity and the fact that large parts of the region are effectively autonomous or semi-autonomous zones. In Myanmar, in particular, the civil war has exacerbated the limit of state rule and the scamming centre and its variants represent another means of raising the revenue necessary to continue the armed struggle. These may be controlled by an armed faction or just the nodes of criminality within a broader network of conflicting forces (The Irrawaddy, 2025).

These centres can be well-resourced and deeply-embedded in a local economy, where other members may derive considerable economic benefit from their presence. When it became known that centres were operating in Kayin State, along the Thai border, Thai authorities cut off electricity supplies and internet signal – to no avail as back-up generators enabled activities to continue more or less as normal.

Franceschini, Li and Bo trace the origin of scamming centres to operations in Taiwan in the 1990s, which then spread to mainland China, then the Philippines and then the Mekong Subregion. At first, the main action was to be found in gambling and, following a pun in the Chinese language, 'spinach cities' began to emerge. However, the scale and nature of the industry were transformed by the coronavirus pandemic, which saw many millions of people trapped in accommodation and only able to communicate with the outside world by online means. Loneliness, boredom and financial problems combined to make large numbers of people vulnerable to predators. This led to the creation of numerous scams: phishing,

romance scams, investment and job scams and so forth. What all these have in common is reliance on a large amount of labour, given that internet access is now pretty much ubiquitous and relatively cheap. If the principal cost of an industry is labour, then there are obvious incentives to reduce labour costs as much as possible. Once the possibilities of precarious work have been exhausted, then moving to slavery is the obvious next step.

As shown in heartbreakingly detail in *Scam*, this involves relentless violence, physical and sometimes sexual, while workers can be sold to other centres, sometimes repeatedly, for thousands of dollars. This is a big business: in 2023 alone, Chinese authorities claim to have prevented telecommunications fraud of US\$45.3 billion, while in Hong Kong people lost US\$1.2 billion, people in Taiwan US\$270 million and Singapore US\$492 million. It is not surprising that a number of officials across the region can be persuaded to close their eyes to what is going on in their jurisdictions. Indeed, it is reported here that there are cases of collusion between police and scammer gangsters, with the former selling escapees back to the latter. Even when police aim to live up to their responsibilities, they have rarely received sufficient training (and are possessed of sufficient empathy) to be of much assistance. The same is true of members of nearby communities, who might also take the side of the gangsters in interactions with the slaves in the hope of monetary reward and fear of retribution. There are even stories of people posing as potential rescuers of slaves who themselves have plans to predate on them.

These issues are made worse, the authors argue, because of ambivalence of attitudes towards people who have apparently voluntarily taken jobs in the centres. There are indeed accounts of people who are in difficult circumstances and decide their best way out is to become a scammer. As a volunteer not resisting hard work, such people can avoid the violence inherent in the system. Of course, most people are lured in by job offers that seem perfectly legitimate and only realise their mistake when it is too late. It is reported that the Chinese government has intervened to prevent people travelling overseas when it is deemed that the traveller does not have a safe passage ahead of them. More generally, this ambiguity means that survivors may not receive much sympathy from other people as and when they have a chance to reintegrate themselves into their previous lives. It is likely that such people find their trauma reinscribed as a result.

This is certainly a very timely book and the authors have conducted a wide range of interviews in order to make their case. In part, it is an academic study but the style is accessible and the content is certainly compelling. One third of the book is given over to endnotes, thereby demonstrating a degree of intellectual rigor. It is hard to know what the best response is. From my perspective, we will find ways to alert our students and other stakeholders to the threat and to help them identify their own vulnerabilities. Perhaps AI can be used to help in this case. Yet people are, of course, people and consequently likely to behave in non-rational ways, no matter how well prepared they may be. Scammers, of course, are well aware of this.

## References

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