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SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

EDITORIAL

Over the past few years, the media has extensively reported on a new form of trafficking in persons that has emerged in the context of the online scam industry—a phenomenon that is now frequently referred to as 'cyber slavery'.

There is substantial evidence of innumerable people from all over the world being trafficked into scam operations, in facilities mostly located in Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and the Philippines. In some cases, they fall for fraudulent job advertisements; in others, they are duped by friends, relatives, or occasional acquaintances; in yet others, they are outright kidnapped. Once inside the compounds, which are often surrounded by walls topped with barbed wire and heavily guarded, their documents are taken away and they are forced to perpetrate scams day after day under threat of physical violence if they do not comply and meet required targets. Often the only way for them to get out is to escape or pay a substantial fee to the criminals who run the operation—a sum that is often referred to as a 'ransom' by people involved in rescue efforts.

And these are not the only victims of the industry. On the other side are the countless individuals targeted by these scams, who suffer horrible psychological damage and, in many cases, lose their life savings to these frauds. All evidence points to the fact that online scams have been growing exponentially all over the world since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The problem is likely more severe than the statistics show, and many victims do not report what happened to them due to shame and other reasons.

As this burgeoning industry is notoriously dominated by ethnic Chinese criminal groups, this can be seen as another example of what Ivan Franceschini and Ling Li (2023) have in the pages of this journal called Global China's 'underbelly'. For this reason, in this issue of *Global China Pulse*, edited by **Ivan Franceschini**, **Mark Bo**, and **Ling Li**, we asked several scholars and practitioners to offer their perspectives on the phenomenon from their respective localities.

We open with a few pieces focused on Cambodia. Phnom Penh–based freelance journalist **Danielle Keeton-Olsen** discusses how local journalists—defined as those who regularly conduct interviews and investigations in their region of residence—played a crucial role in understanding the emergence of the online scam industry, despite immense pressure on their security and resources. **Neil Loughlin** shows how the rise of transnational organised crime in Cambodia is closely tied to local dynamics, with state actors facilitating, participating in, and profiting

from these activities, which are intertwined with a patronage-based political settlement under the ruling Cambodian People's Party that blurs the boundaries between licit and illicit economies. **Ivan Franceschini** collaborates with photographer **Roun Ry** to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Sihanoukville from quiet coastal town to a notorious base for online scam operations to try to understand how all this could happen.

We then shift the focus to Myanmar. **Kota Watanabe** explores the local power dynamics around the proliferation of transnational organised crime, including online scamming, in the Myanmar–Thailand border area since the late 2010s. He does so by focusing on the ambiguous character of the Karen Border Guard Force, a militia ostensibly under the Myanmar military's command, which protects and benefits from many of the 'crime cities' in its territories. **Xu Peng** examines the endurance and adaptation of ethnic armed organisations and militias in Myanmar's northern Shan State. Through a historical lens, she investigates how these organisations transitioned from the drug trade to the gambling industry and, more recently, online scams.

The next two essays focus on the plight of survivors of the scam compounds once they get out. **Jingjia Xiao**, **Qing Xiao**, and **Tianren Luo** discuss the widespread fear in Chinese society related to cyber-fraud operations in Myanmar, including swirling rumours about organ harvesting. Drawing from interviews with Chinese migrants involved in illegal industries in northern Myanmar, they highlight how this fear is continuously propagated and distorted in China, and how this leads to suspicion of and ostracism towards survivors. **Ling Li** investigates what happens to the people who manage to exit the scam compounds where they were trapped. In many cases undocumented and without financial resources, these individuals often find themselves stranded in a foreign country where they do not speak the language and have no support networks. One choice they have is to approach local law enforcement, but for many, this becomes another ordeal in their journey home.

We then conclude with three pieces that deal with the challenges of investigating the industry. In the first, **Chen Yanyu** sheds light on the work of some of the key actors who provide money-laundering services to the online scam industry. She shows how, while these businesses frame their involvement as simply 'matchmaking', their brokerage helps shape the rules and practices of the sector, regulating the distribution of both profits and risks. In the second, **Chen Yanyu** engages **Harris Chen**, a Taiwanese prosecutor specialising in fraud cases, in a conversation about the challenges

he faces in prosecuting online scam cases in Taiwan. Finally, **Mark Bo** sits down with Vietnamese white-hat hacker **Hiếu Minh Ngô** to discuss his work disrupting scam operations and how Vietnam features in all this.

The issue includes a few essays on unrelated topics. **Monique Taylor** looks back at the launch of yuan-denominated crude oil futures in 2018, which marked a significant step in the renminbi's internationalisation, offering an alternative to the US dollar in global energy trade and underscoring the shift towards a more multipolar world. **Julie Yu-Wen Chen** uses Silk Road Samarkand, Central Asia's most ambitious tourism project, to argue that there is a powerful cultural and political element behind some of the projects that fall under China's Belt and Road Initiative. **Vivian Wei Guo** examines the stakeholder engagement of China Road and Bridge Corporation in some high-profile projects in Kenya to highlight the importance of public participation in decision-making processes, especially regarding issues of local governance and community dynamics. **Kate Hua-Ke Chi** and **Rebecca Ray** assess China's push for increasing outbound investment in the aquaculture industry—the growing of aquatic plants and animals for food consumption—alongside host countries' incentives for drawing in such investment.

We wrap up the issue with three conversations. **Miriam Driessen** talks with **Ningyi Sun and Pascale Appora-Gnekindy** about their *Eat Bitter*, a film set in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, which reveals the human face of Chinese involvement in Africa. **Devi Sacchetto** engages **Grazia Ting Deng** in a discussion about her *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy* (Princeton University Press, 2024). **Hong Zhang** interviews **Yuan Wang** about her *The Railpolitik: Leadership and Agency in Sino-African Infrastructure Development* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Finally, **Christian Sorace** engages **Mikkel Bunkenborg** and **Morten Axel Pedersen** about their *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

The Editors ●