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**SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY
IN SOUTH EAST ASIA**

This text is taken from *Global China Pulse*: Volume 3, Issue 1, 2024.



Nowhere People

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Nowhere Men in the China–Myanmar Borderlands

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In recent years, telecommunications fraud originating in Myanmar has aroused widespread fear in Chinese society, including swirling rumours about organ harvesting being conducted in the scam compounds in the Southeast Asian country. Drawing from interviews with several Chinese migrants involved in illegal industries in northern Myanmar, this essay aims to highlight how this fear is continuously propagated and distorted, generating various narratives among different groups, particularly workers active in illegal industries along the border. These narratives reflect these labourers' own uncertainties and anxieties about the future and contribute to the dilemmas they face.

On 3 May 2023, during his visit to Myanmar, China's then Minister of Foreign Affairs Qin Gang called on local authorities to take swift action against cybercrime operations based in the country, emphasising how the Chinese public had become increasingly resentful of such fraudulent activities (Zhou 2023). Well before this stern statement, the online scam industry had already started to instil fear in the Chinese public, giving rise not only to widespread concern about falling prey to fraudsters or being sold into what the media has called 'cyber slavery', but also to a plethora of rumours, including persistent allegations of human organ extraction.

It is to these rumours as an underexplored aspect of the current crisis that we turn in this essay. Despite official efforts to debunk them, unfounded tales of organ removal have given rise to endless discussions on Chinese social media and even some idioms and catchphrases such as the notorious term *geyaozi* (割腰子, 'kidney harvesting'). While we could identify no proven instances of *geyaozi* linked to the online scam industry, examining these rumours helps us shed some light on a genuine issue: the movement of individuals across the China–Myanmar border to partake—willingly or not—in online fraud operations. This resonates with previous research, which has shown how rumours are intricately intertwined with the collective mood of some social groups, mobilisation efforts launched from both the top and the bottom, and even the persecution of minority communities (Haar 2005; Kuhn 1990).

In scrutinising the migration flows linked to the online scam industry on the China–Myanmar border through the prism of social apprehension and rumour, we observed how the actors at the centre of the crisis—the workers who willingly or unwillingly enter the online scam industry—have been conspicuously absent from the debate. Whether

due to their precarious situation in both Myanmar and China or apprehensions about repercussions from the Chinese authorities, their voices have largely remained unheard, with public discussions within China dominated by the views of state officials and ordinary citizens unconnected to the industry. To address this gap, between January and April 2023, we conducted interviews with 13 individuals in Hunan, Jiangxi, and Fujian provinces who travelled to northern Myanmar for work (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Origin	Gender	Occupation
Xiao Jie	Fuqing City, Fujian Province	Male	Online gambling and telecommunications fraud
Xiao Fei	Yiyang City, Hunan Province	Male	Student
Li Ye	Yiyang City, Hunan Province	Male	Jade wholesaler
Zhang Hua	Putian City, Fujian Province	Male	Web game (gambling) designer
Feng	Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province	Female	Jade wholesaler
Xiao wei	Fuqing City, Fujian Province	Male	Crypto-currency, foreign currency exchange, disposal of non-performing assets (背债)
Li Min	Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province	Female	Disposal of non-performing assets (背债)
Da Shan	Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province	Male	Internet gambling
Da Meng	Xiangyang, Hubei Province	Male	Border casino
Cao Yi	Fuqing City, Fujian Province	Male	Cross-border and online sex services, telecommunications fraud
Meng Wei	Fuqing City, Fujian Province	Male	Crypto-currency, loan-sharking
Liu Xuan	Nanchang, Jiangxi Province	Female	Loan-sharking and telecommunications fraud
Li Xiang	Nanchang, Jiangxi Province	Male	Cross-border sex services and telecommunications fraud

Even though in official reports people such as these are often broadly categorised as part of the ‘telecommunications fraud group’, our interviewees were involved in a variety of illegal or illicit industries that went beyond simple telecommunications fraud, encompassing activities such as online gambling, border casinos, money laundering, and smuggling of raw materials. Many of them told us that they had been lured into these industries by fellow villagers or friends and were unable to leave or had decided to stay for a variety of reasons, including familial obligations, economic temptation, and fear. For instance, some villages in Fujian are very protective of the scammers because they share in the benefits through their remittances. These complexities also present limitations to our research. The interviewees often consciously avoided directly criticising their industry or the superiors who introduced them to it, choosing instead to rationalise their actions. This also makes it difficult for us to assess where these individuals stand in relation to the illegality of the activities in which they engaged.

Distorted Perceptions

The term *geyaozi* is an idiom that originally comes from northeastern China. In February and March 2023, a considerable number of social media posts and videos emerged on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and Douyin alleging that in bars all over Southeast Asia, but especially in Thailand, Chinese tourists were being drugged to have their kidneys removed and sold. This was triggered by a video posted on Bilibili by a prominent Chinese influencer named ‘Heart Healer Lin Lin’ (心医林霖), in which he alleged that there was an entire clandestine industry in Thailand that lured and kidnapped Chinese tourists to remove their organs. Even though the Thai authorities debunked the claim and the original video was soon taken down, the fake story made the rounds on Chinese social media, sparking intense fear. Official efforts by the Chinese Government to dispel the rumours were to no avail, as unverified and sensational stories of *geyaozi* continued to spread on the Chinese internet (China Youth Daily 2023).

Numerous Chinese self-media outlets extensively covered alleged *geyaozi* incidents, often linking them to cybercrime in northern Myanmar. For instance, in September 2022, the public WeChat account Lukewen Studio (卢克文工作室) published an article titled ‘How Did the Kidney-Cutting Group in Northern Myanmar Emerge?’, which garnered more than 100,000 views. Official voices also chimed in. On 23 March 2023, an official WeChat account affiliated with the Communist Youth League of Zhejiang Province, titled ‘Escaping “Kidney-Cutting” and “Wearing Handcuffs” in Northern Myanmar: This Experience Goes Viral’, gave further exposure and legitimacy to the *geyaozi* narrative (Youth Zhejiang 2023). Chinese official media also reported on the experience of a man named Li Wei, who had been kidnapped while on a trip

in Yunnan Province to collect a debt and then taken to northern Myanmar to work in the online fraud industry (Wu 2023). There, he suffered inhumane treatment, which left him traumatised to the extent that even after he returned to China he continued to scream in his sleep: 'Please don't cut my kidneys!' Regardless of the fact that Li still has his kidneys, journalists repeatedly quoted survivors stating that the gangsters running the compound used threats of *geyaozi* to enforce discipline (Wu 2023). The message therefore got out that organ harvesting in scam compounds was real and widespread.

This did not change even after multiple claims of *geyaozi* in Myanmar were officially debunked by Chinese law enforcement and media (Sanlian Shenghuo 2023; Shanghai Rumour Buster 2023). These included the high-profile case of a man with the surname Xiao, who the police in Anhui Province alleged intentionally fabricated a story about having been subjected to organ harvesting in Myanmar (Guancha Net 2023). It is largely because of this coverage that the Chinese public came to see organ harvesting as an integral component of the online scam industry in Southeast Asia. This, in turn, has led to fears about Chinese nationals living in Myanmar, with even individuals engaged in ordinary professions in the area stigmatised and labelled as suspicious.

Our interviews bear out this point. For instance, Zhang Hua worked in Myanmar for three years. While he did not engage in the online scam industry, he pointed out to us how all Chinese workers who went to Southeast Asia were suspected of being involved in illegal industries when they returned to China. In his words:

Whether you go to Myanmar to start a business or find work, no matter if it is a legitimate job or not, if you tell your Chinese relatives that you are in Myanmar, they will only think you're there to commit fraud. Not only that: many people on the internet would say that those who go to Myanmar are 'three-low' individuals [low IQ, low education, low skills]. But many situations are not as they seem.

Another interviewee, Li Ye, also pointed out that fear prevented people from considering the real circumstances of international labourers, simply preferring to mock them:

The Chinese feel that people who go to Myanmar are illegally bought and sold as labourers as part of the international human trade. Many people think that those who are 'sold' to Myanmar deserve it, believing they were deceived because of their greed for money. In fact, many people were tricked by acquaintances or relatives. There are many such scams in north Myanmar.

The story of another of our interviewees, a woman named Feng, shows how stigmatisation extends to a wide range of individuals—not only those involved in telecommunications fraud and human trafficking but also those who partake in certain grey industries tacitly tolerated by the authorities. Invited by friends, Feng went to Myanmar in 2018 to engage in the cross-border jade trade. The jade business involves selling large quantities of raw jade, but because it is hard to know how much jade is in a rock before buying it, engaging in this trade involves an element of risk, akin to gambling. According to Feng, there are numerous jade establishments in Myanmar primarily aimed at deceiving foreign tourists and businesspeople. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, she could sometimes go home to see her loved ones, but when the Chinese authorities started enforcing stricter border control, this was no longer possible. Having to choose between remaining in Myanmar and going back to China, all her female friends chose to return home and take care of their kids. Feng stayed behind, holding on to her business in Myanmar in the hope of bringing more income to her family. Unfortunately, her decision backfired and undermined her relationship with her children. In her words:

I was working hard for my family, wandering around out there, unable to find other female friends to talk to. Sometimes even when something rude happens, I have to respond subtly and not express my objections directly. But recently my children said I'm a criminal who will *geyaozi* others!

However, when I heard one of my children telling me in tears that his classmates were discriminating and even beating him because of my work, I was heartbroken and could not be angry with them. I could only blame myself. Also because of government regulation and online gossip, fewer and fewer Chinese women are coming to Myanmar. People now believe that it is only safe to stay in China and that all Chinese in Myanmar are criminals.

Stories like these show how, even though Chinese migrants in Myanmar often live in very difficult circumstances, when back in China, they fail to elicit any sympathy. Due to the fear of *geyaozi* and allegations about their supposed involvement in online fraud, they become 'unclean' individuals and are subsequently ostracised. However, social ostracism is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the challenges they face.

Nowhere Men on the Border

If even people who migrate to Myanmar through regular channels to work in perfectly legal sectors often face this type of stigmatisation, the situation for those who work in the online scam industry—a term that, as we have seen, in the eyes of the Chinese authorities encompasses a wide range of illegal and illicit industries—is even more complicated. In their analysis of irregular Chinese immigrants in the United Kingdom, Luo et al. (2023) noted that these people not only suffer intense exploitation from local human-smuggling rings and employers, but also face the risk of criminal conviction. Those who move or are trafficked to northern Myanmar to work in online scam operations face a similar dilemma.

Journalists and academics have extensively covered the endemic violence in these businesses (see, for instance, The Paper 2023; Franceschini et al. 2023). No matter how bad are the conditions they face, Chinese workers in Myanmar know that once they return to China they also face possible legal consequences for illegally crossing the border and for the other crimes committed. This applies to all, regardless of whether they entered the industry willingly and then remained for the profits or they were trafficked and forced into criminality.

Lured by the promise of higher wages, in 2019, Xiao Jie and some fellow townsmen (老乡) voluntarily travelled from their hometown in Fuqing, Fujian Province, to northern Myanmar to work for an online gambling and fraud company founded by another townsman. In 2023, they returned to their home country in an unlicensed vehicle operating illegally across the border and have been unemployed since. This is how Xiao described his experience in Myanmar:

Many people involved in telecom fraud, casinos, and drug trafficking are Chinese. Abuse definitely exists, but it really depends on luck and what industry you're involved in. For example, some fraud companies are run by a group of people from the same town [老乡], and they don't usually recruit outside of their areas. But if you're tricked into entering a casino, they may have 'single rooms' [单房] to punish those who don't obey. Confinement and beatings are quite common. But *geyaozi* is really rare. At least nothing like that has ever happened around me. Terrible companies also need people to work, not to lose their ability to conduct business.

Rather than *geyaozi*, Xiao Jie indicated that it was the growing societal fear within China and the increasingly harsh crackdowns on illegal industries in northern Myanmar launched by the Chinese Government that spread panic among the workers in the online scam industry, both those who were there willingly and those who had been coerced. Employers often exploit these fears to reinforce their grip on their workforce:

The crackdown on us is getting more severe in China. For example, the Chinese Government will ‘persuade’ us to return, which means that they are actually giving us an ultimatum. If we don’t return, our household registration [户口] will be cancelled and we won’t be able to go back at all. But if we go back, we will be convicted and sentenced, and we won’t be able to get out of jail before three to five years. If we decide to stay here, we have no bargaining power with the bosses. They will take advantage of this, deliberately reducing our commissions and wages because, after all, at that point we are a person without an identity, without a household registration.

There is undoubtedly a reasonable argument to make that individuals who engage in online scams willingly such as Xiao Jie should shoulder the legal consequences of their actions (the situation for those who are forced into criminality is much murkier and warrants a separate discussion). However, we also observed that this fear narrative also reveals an extreme distrust of the Chinese Government among ordinary scam workers. They believe that the Chinese authorities do not judge them fairly and that there are deep connections between Chinese officials and the bosses of illegal industries. In addition to fearing punishment, they also worry about becoming ‘scapegoats’.

For instance, Xiao Wei has been engaged in illegal currency exchange activities at the China–Myanmar border through smuggling for a long time, providing cash for telecommunications fraud companies run by Chinese nationals in Myanmar’s Wa State. He told us that the current policies on telecommunications fraud in China, along with the fear generated by these policies and media discourse, do not harm the real controllers of these operations. Instead, they adversely affect frontline workers in the telecommunications fraud industry, who are left with no choice but to stay on:

Those bosses won’t be affected much because the profits are too high, they earn two to 10 million yuan [about 280,000 to 1.4 million USD] a year. They have government connections in China. Even if the bosses end up in jail when they return, their connections get them out after only one or two years. Moreover, these bosses can protect their earnings through offshore companies. The ones who suffer the most are us, normal labourers. We have no power, no money, no social influence.

Now that the Chinese policy is implemented, the bosses are happy, not, scared, because they don’t receive too much damage, but we will be left with no choices. We either return to China and go to jail or stay here and work for the bosses day and night no matter what. The bosses will maliciously lower your salary. Now some [workers] are paid at the end of the month with low salaries. Life’s getting harder and harder.

These workers are left with no recourse. In an investigation of Chinese construction workers in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, Franceschini (2020) pointed out that Chinese workers often are very distrustful of local laws and law enforcement and, due to long working hours and language barriers, are unable to integrate into local society, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. Compared with labourers in legal industries, those working in illegal sectors find themselves in an even more precarious state. Consequently, when it comes to dealing with everyday issues such as wages and working conditions, they have no recourse and become even more vulnerable.

Xiao Fei and one of his classmates were lured to Yunnan Province in the summer of 2022 with the promise of a high-paying internship. When he heard that he would be sent to Myanmar for the internship, Xiao Fei thought it might be a scam and decided to withdraw. His classmate was sent to a scam operation in Myanmar, but returned to China a month later because he could not bear the pressure. Xiao Fei described his classmate's experience:

He had few interpersonal relationships in Myanmar and could only communicate with his [Chinese] colleagues. Because he was smuggled in, when he encountered difficulties, there was no way for him to go to the local authorities or the Chinese Government. Police officers have been bought [off] by local companies and only help those companies without listening to their workers. He wanted to go home, but the boss threatened him that if he wanted to return to China, once back, he would be punished and imprisoned. He dared not go home; did not even dare to call home. He could only work every day, wait until he had saved enough money, then be smuggled back in a 'black car'. After returning, he now stays at home all day and doesn't go out.

Physical mistreatment and psychological pressure go hand in hand for workers employed in illegal industries in Myanmar. Because they are afraid of being discovered by Chinese officials and convicted, many are afraid to speak out about their experiences. While *geyaozi* has grown into a mainstream narrative due to public panic, the true experiences of these workers have become undercurrents, their voices nothing but whispers. Intimidation from scam management and distrust of the Chinese Government have become persistent fears haunting the workers, affecting their decisions about whether and how to leave these illegal industries.

A Future without Hope

All the individuals we discussed in this essay inhabited, at least for a time, the China–Myanmar borderland. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) emphasise, the very idea of a ‘border’ itself serves as a mechanism for controlling the mobility of individuals. In the context of cybercrime at the China–Myanmar border, these labourers find themselves subjected to stringent forms of control on at least two sides. On the one hand are the gangsters who run the online scam operations where they toil, who often restrict the mobility of their staff and subject them to extreme discipline; on the other is Chinese law enforcement, which in recent years has launched a substantial crackdown on the fraud industry and its operatives within and outside China. The workers’ plight is further compounded by their fear that once back in China they may be ostracised by their community. With an uncertain future looming, they are left with the stark choice of either remaining in Myanmar and enduring harrowing labour conditions or facing severe penalties and social ostracism back in China—and this assumes that they have a choice about whether to leave, which is not always the case.

The concept of the ‘border’ is also the best metaphor to represent their predicament in another sense. As well as inhabiting the space between two nations, their identity is relegated to a liminal status between ‘victim’ and ‘criminal’. On both sides of the border, they are perceived as ‘dangerous outsiders’, their voices silenced and their potential for resistance stifled. Despite the harrowing reality in which they live, they fade into the obscurity of the border, losing their ability to tell their own stories as well as their agency.

In 2024, when we followed up with some of our interviewees, their circumstances had changed. Some had quietly returned to China and were now applying the scam techniques they had learned to foreign markets, attempting to continue their activities and evade pursuit by the Chinese authorities; others were convicted upon returning to China; others again had paid substantial sums to the people who held them trapped in scam compounds to regain their freedom and return to their hometowns, but still lived in fear of getting arrested. Even though they are no longer physically located in the China–Myanmar borderland, fear and a sense of displacement still haunt them. ●