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Cyber Slavery, Port Cities and Systemic Cruelty

Logistics of Labor Extraction in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical analysis of the logistics of neoliberal slavery in the 21st century, focusing on the role of the port cities as the hinge in the supply chain through the case of the cyber scam industry of the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone. The hinge, in a metonymic and metaphorical way, connects a complex mobile networking system with a multi-dimensional and topological dynamism. The overlaid networks consist of a tripartite operation—the production, the market, and the law—and explains the persistence of human interest in profiting from surplus values through human labor extraction, and the violence and cruelty inherent in this. The logic of circulation no longer follows Marx's analysis of M-C-M or M-M+, but the formula of V-M+. Through void with no cost, and violence with no law, there is no limit to the multiplication of capital.

Keywords

Asian Mediterranean – port cities – slave trade – SEZ – neoliberal slavery – Belt and Road Initiative – cyber slavery

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1 Human Labor Extractivism Upgraded in the 21st Century¹

Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), the role model for China's One Belt One Road Initiative, has drawn global attention because of the recent outbreak of news, starting mid-2022, concerning cyber slavery in Sihanoukville; this exposed the severity and the scale of the organized crime of forced labor in the Chinese scamming compounds. The reports showed that the victims were primarily from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Georgia, Russia, and the United States. The conservative estimation of the number of victims is around 25,000 (*Al Jazeera* 2022; Chen 2022; *The Reporter* 2022; Chiang and Chen 2022; *The Reporter* 2023). In addition to the SSEZ in Cambodia, other Southeast Asian cities, such as Manila in the Philippines, and border towns in Poipet of Cambodia, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Bokeo in northwest Laos, and Shrek Kokko in Kayin State, Myanmar, known as KK Park, are also well known as being sites for Chinese scam industries (Kennedy and Southern 2022; *The Straits Times* 2023).

The practice of the cryptocurrency scam is a global phenomenon. Some people earn cryptocurrency through a complex process called “mining,” while others suffer from crypto scams. Around 2 million people have been hit by crypto scams since 2020, according to New York-based crypto trade surveillance firm Solidus Labs (*The Rug Pull Report* 2022). Fraud and scams have continued to evolve in recent years and were regarded as the second top financial crime for 2023. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation reported 10 billion lost to online fraud in 2022 as crypto investment scams increased (*ComplyAdvantage* 2023).

This article aims not to probe the complicated issues of the financial crimes that have surged in recent years but to consider the logistics and technologies of extractivism targeted at human labor in SEZs, as a zone of legal exceptions, with adaptable laws that facilitate the highest profits of the practice of extraction. Through this upgraded mode of the cyber scam industry—the so-called “pig-butcher business”—we see a reemergence of the old slavery system, but refashioned as neoliberal slavery.

Cyber slavery in the 21st-century neoliberal labor market shares the common features of conventional forms of forced labor: the restriction of movement; open sale of workers between employers; debt bondage; dehumanization and depersonalization; abuse resulting from vulnerability; deception; iso-

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lation; intimidation and threats; retention of identity documents; withholding of wages; abusive working and living conditions; and excessive overtime. The difference between traditional slavery and neoliberal slavery is that the victims initially voluntarily participate in the work, motivated by their aspirations for more significant profit, but end up the same as classically enslaved people.

Neoliberal slavery is not the “modern slavery” discussed by Karl Marx in *Capital* either. Marx explained that the “free wage laborers” signed a “voluntary contract” of their free will, sold their labor power in the form of exchangeable commodities, and became the property of the employers, available for exploitation (Marx 2019, 188, 195). Urban laborers signed their contracts, in the form of exchangeable commodities, as free men, available for the employers to extract their labor force, and became a separate class in society. In contrast to relations of dominion and servitude—that is, slavery in ancient times—in the Middle Ages and modern colonies, Marx argued, the capitalistic form of slavery “presupposes from first to last, the free wage-laborer, who sells his labor-power to capital” (Marx 2019, 233).

Neoliberal slavery shares the same features of “voluntary contract” and laborers’ “free will.” However, the workers are exposed to higher unexpected risks in various zones of legal exception, with no national or international law to protect them. This neoliberalized labor market involves cross-border supply chains and outsourced private brokerage and administration. People from less developed societies, in desperate living conditions, or who became jobless during the pandemic, voluntarily seek job opportunities abroad and sign contracts with local brokers without knowing that the contracts are fake. Such a chain of free choice in the neoliberal market, connecting the participating and competing sectors, constitutes the vast web of the neoliberal slavery system. The repetitive patterns of forced labor as the source of surplus value, with their innovative techniques in the neoliberal labor market, require our attention.

In a previous article, I argued that multiple players from the labor import and export countries cofounded the complex logistics network of labor extraction. This network involves numerous high commissions, debt traps, deceptions, fraudulent documents, and corrupt recruitment systems disguised as legal procedures. This legal production of illegal exploitation and the extraction of the labor force, without properly implemented rules to protect the migrant laborers, creates various loopholes and gray zones in the juridical process (Liu 2022).

Such lawlessness through the web of diverse legal regulations reached its zenith with the practice of the “flag of convenience” (FOC), of neoliberal maritime capitalism in the 21st century. An FOC is a legal identity for a ship that provides applicable laws governing taxation, labor practices, safety regulations, licensing, inspections, and all the offshore management of financial centers.

FOC states often outsource flag registration, and private companies administer these private flags. In this way, FOCs play a game of pseudo-nationhood; the ship flies the flag of the flag state but there are no genuine links between the flag state's law, port states, ship owners, and crews. FOC states also offer services of Bare Boat Charter, offshore financial centers, and reduction of taxes.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD), in 2020, maritime transport accounted for around 80 per cent of international trade. Asian countries own half of the fleet market. The United Nations Conference and Development (UNCTAD) statistics also show that, in 2019, Asian companies owned half of the world's fleet, and that 93 per cent of global shipbuilding occurred in China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan; the Institute of Shipping Economics and Logistics claimed that, in 2019, China topped Japan in ship-owning for the first time (ISL). In 2022, 74 per cent of the global shipping capacity was registered with open registries, and 16 per cent of the global fleet carrying capacity was registered in Panama, followed by Liberia and the Marshall Islands (UNCTAD 2022).

Scholars of critical logistics have pointed out that the genealogy of logistics and racial capitalism originated with the Atlantic Slave Trade in the 16th century (Cowen 2010; Vehrenkamp 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 2013b; Chua et al. 2018; Cuppini and Frapporti 2018). The FOC is a legal invention to implement the changing phase of global capitalism since the 1960s. The transition from the national flag cargo shipping system to the FOC global shipping system has developed rapidly since the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Campling and Colás put it, in the global maritime trade, we have observed the phenomenon of the sea as a locus for the deep interconnection “between luxury and waste, big business and organized crime, open registries and secret jurisdiction” (Campling and Colás 2021, 267–268). No law seems to be able to regulate or intervene in the practices of slavery on these FOC fishing vessels on the high seas. Multiple sectors together configure this complex structure. Alongside the rise of neoliberalism and the enormous growth in transnational corporations, international trade, foreign direct investment, and so on, the invention of the FOC points to the emergence of a new stage in global capitalism. The legal “offshore” practices, which allow capital to choose the laws that bind it, were mimicked onshore in the emergence of the new terraqueous space of SEZ, Export Processing Zones, and their newly established ports. At the center of this composite logistic network is a zone of legal exception, like a void, in which act liberalized and competitive agents worldwide; this is a free zone where no state exerts jurisdiction. The high seas, or *mare liberum*, meaning “the free sea,” beyond the territorial sea of any state and any state's jurisdiction, perfectly illustrate the site of legal exception in the neoliberal market of the 21st century (Liu forthcoming 2023).

In this article, I want to continue my theoretical analysis of the logistics of neoliberal slavery and the zone of legal exception in the 21st century, focusing on port cities as the hinge and the intermediary in the supply chain through the case of the SSEZ. The concept of the “hinge,” proposed by Jean Gottmann, is helpful for us to think about the logistical mechanism that links the place to the more comprehensive network through the sea (Gottmann 1952, 1957, 1976, 1991). The nodal point that connects the producers and the consumers is the institution of different levels of intermediaries, or the middleman, which manipulate the law, the market, the goods, and the laborers to gain more surplus values through the process. Through the intermediary function of the port cities, as the hinge, with a congregation of diverse sectors and agents, maritime commerce has thrived from ancient times up until the 21st century. Furthermore, the port cities serve not only as the hinge between land and marine power but also as the connection between the producer and the consumer, intersecting diverse and contradictory realms of jurisdictions, linking areas of legality and illegality. SEZ legally opens such a space up for exceptions: Illegal practices are the derivatives through the legal institutionalization of the privatized and neoliberalized middleman system. The port city, more importantly, not only hinges a place to a complex network of commodity exchange and transportation, but also to the assemblage line of human labor as a cheap commodity through the game of legal exception. The hinge, therefore, in a metonymic and metaphorical way, connects one complex network to other complex networks, a comprehensive mobile networking system with a multi-dimensional and topological dynamism. The overlaid networks consist of a tripartite operation: the production; the market; and the law. The trio structure further links the multi-layered intermediary of labor brokerage. With the systemic operation, the innovative compound motor explains the persistence of human interest and its violence, or cruelty, in profiting from surplus values through human labor extraction.

This article's central arguments are fourfold. First, slavery with forced labor started in ancient times and continues in the 21st century, only now with upgraded operational technologies and legal procedures. The core aim of this tradition of slavery is to gain surplus values through human labor extraction by dehumanizing and depersonalizing some group of people. Second, the route of migratory forced labor has geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geohistorical factors that trace back to entangled regional histories. Third, port cities, as hinges, link the inland to the ocean, and the complex market system of the world plays a critical role in economic corridors in the age of maritime commerce. The operation of the port city consists of a tripartite apparatus: the demand; the supply; and the market. The market in this trio structure is both a fluc-

tuating zone, intersected and manipulated by the law, and the intermediary, leaving space for the game of law and legal exceptions. Hence, surplus values are gained through maximized human labor extraction. Fourth, Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia and its China-aided SEZ, one of China's overseas SEZs, as one example of the labor commodity exchange in the Asian Mediterranean, a concept employed by Gipouloux and other scholars (see the discussion in Section 3 below), together represent a typical case of a legal exemption for cyber slavery in the neoliberal labor market of the 21st century.

I shall begin with the last instance—that is, the case of the SSEZ—to demonstrate the practice of legal exemption that makes space for cyber slavery in the neoliberal labor market of the 21st century.

2 The SSEZ: A Hinge That Links the Place with the Cyber Slavery Network

The relationship between China and Cambodia has a long history with tributary ties, from Phnom (Nokor 扶南, 68 CE–550 CE), Chenla (真臘, 6th–9th centuries), and Angkor (Khmer Empire, 9th–15th centuries). Along with General Zheng He's expeditions during the 15th century of the Ming Dynasty, Chinese people in business migrated to Cambodia, and the Chinese population reached 100,000. During the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1999), China was its main ally in the communist camp.

Sihanoukville, a coastal city facing the Gulf of Thailand, emerged as a port city in 1955 and gradually became a leading national center of trade, commerce, transport, and process manufacturing. In the second decade of the 21st century, China and Cambodia established the SSEZ as a Chinese overseas economic and trade cooperation zone.² It is a gateway to international sea trade,

2 It might be of interest to note that China's overseas SEZs, or Overseas Economic and Trade Cooperation Zones (OETCZ), are anchored along the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) countries. OETCZs serve as cooperative platforms to advance the trade and investment cooperation under the umbrella term of the BRI. Among the 156 OETCZs, 139 are located in countries that have signed memorandums of understanding to jointly advance the construction of the BRI. Southeast Asia, embraced as the largest trade partner with China in 2021 and as the ancient "maritime silk road", is the main destination region with the greatest concentration of China's overseas cooperative industrial zones. Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam host most OETCZs in Southeast Asia; 44 of the 156 OETCZs are located in Southeast Asia. In addition, Europe, as the connective terminus between the Eurasian continent and the node of the Western expansion of the BRI, has a cluster of Chinese OETCZs, mainly in Belarus, Russia, and Hungary, but also in other countries (Sun et al. 2022; also see Knoerich & Goodburn 2021).

casinos, and tourism (Warr and Menon 2016, 273–290). Considered the role model for China's One Belt One Road Initiative, the SSEZ in Cambodia presents a typical case of the “hinge” that links a place to a complex network. The complexity of the network intersecting legality and illegality in terms of the forced migratory labor in the supply chain is what we want to scrutinize closely here.

Establishing the SSEZ aims to attract foreign direct investment, mainly from Chinese private companies. The project of the SSEZ is supported by the elite patronage system of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and the CPP's elites have been fed by the infrastructure development and industrial expansion of the SSEZ (Loughlin and Grimsditch 2021, 2334–2352). China has invested vast amounts of money in the Ream Naval Base in Sihanoukville City and established the SSEZ as a critical choke point in its Maritime Silk Road. The Chinese population in Sihanoukville reached 250,000 in 2019, and the official statistic shows that Chinese companies owned 90 per cent of the businesses in Sihanoukville (Chiang and Chen 2022). Favorable rules include fast-track application procedures, custom procedures, simplified administrative services, income tax exemptions, export tax exemptions, and customs duty exemptions. SSEZ developers and investors have benefited from these special rules (Theot Therith 2022). For example, the SSEZ's official website claims that it offers completed infrastructure support, policy advantages, and excellent services. Its policy advantages include no export taxes, no import taxes for types of equipment, construction materials, components, or raw materials used for production, no income tax for the first six to nine years, and a 20 per cent income tax following that, no VAT tax for exports, and 10 per cent tax on domestic sales. The investors can also benefit from leases of land, factory buildings, apartments, dormitories, and so on, with a one-stop service from the government department for document processing and administrative approval. The SSEZ has also helped to establish a legal advisory platform to provide professional legal service to enterprises (*SSEZ in Cambodia*).

However, the working conditions of the Cambodian workers in the Chinese-owned enterprises in Sihanoukville, according to reports, are generally poor. They work long hours a day and six to seven days a week, with a poor health and safety environment and for low wages. Except for the manufacturing sector, most workers do not have written contracts. Casinos are the most popular business with an expanding market in Southeast Asia, and the SSEZ is famous for being a casino center. Private Chinese companies own the majority of Sihanoukville casinos. At the end of 2018, there were 138 licensed casinos in Cambodia; 88 were in Preah Sihanouk province. In addition to officially registered casinos, there are also illegal casinos. Due to the scandals caused by

the poor working conditions of Cambodian workers, the government issued a ban on online gambling in Cambodia in August 2019. With an estimated 90 per cent of the gaming revenue in Sihanoukville being online, many casinos have stopped operations. This drastic change led to the closing down of most casinos and factories and a rapid increase in the scam industrial parks in the SSEZ (Buckley and Eckerlein 2020).

The Al Jazeera documentary (2022) *Forced to Scam: Cambodia's Cyber Slaves* shows how the sites of the cyber scam enterprises are scattered in various places, from the port cities to Phnom Penh and the northern borders of Myanmar, Vietnam, and China. Thousands of workers with fake online identities are forced to work fifteen hours a day on romance scams or cryptocurrency investment scams, with the goal of stealing money from victims. The criminal enterprises of the global scam operations involve massive corruption of high-level officials, both the Cambodian elites and Chinese entrepreneurs (Al Jazeera 2022).

Taiwan independent media *The Reporter* revealed in an in-depth report, "Uncovering the Human-Eating Trap Beneath the Taiwan-Cambodia Scam Industry Chain" (2022), that, in the cases of Taiwanese victims, local Taiwanese gangsters served as intermediaries and facilitated the human smuggling transactions. The young people who lost their jobs during the pandemic were lured by fraudulent advertisements on Facebook and Instagram that promised high salaries and good jobs. They went through in-person interviews in Taiwan, were offered air tickets, and flew to Cambodia, hoping for better wages. The moment they landed at the airports, their passports were confiscated, and they were sold to various companies. During the process, these people were addressed as "pigs" (zhuzai 豬仔)—that is, profitable ones waiting to be butchered. Most people were threatened and tortured with electric batons, and some were beaten up or raped if they did not comply. Some people even ended up with their organs cut out and left in the streets as beggars in different countries (*The Reporter* 2022). *The Reporter* released a sequel to the SSEZ case in March 2023, "Scams and Frauds after the Taiwan-Cambodia Incident: Sophisticated Division of Labor, Escalation of Violence, and Juvenile Perpetrators." This special issue reported on the complex criminal networks behind the SSEZ scam industries; these involve the Cambodian political elites and the local police officers, who cover the cases or do not respond to victims' repeated calls for help (*The Reporter* 2023). The SSEZ, as China's overseas SEZ, turns out to be a concession area, a zone of legal exception, with different sets of laws; local government cannot intervene. Other port cities at the borders of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are also famous as sites for Chinese scam industries (Kennedy and Southern 2022; *The Straits Times* 2023).

The Chinese overseas SEZs such as Sihanoukville and other port cities or border cities exemplify zones of legal exception that provide various forms of adaptable laws that facilitate the highest profits through commercial transactions, but also foster a zone where no juridical intervention can suppress the illegal derivative activities of human trafficking and the “pig-butcher” cyber scam. Complex underground criminal networks have existed around the Golden Triangle region for several decades and have been revived through the rise of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Several SEZs have been established with the support of the Chinese government as part of the Belt and Road Initiative; this is designed to promote economic development in the region and increase trade and investment between China and the countries of Southeast Asia. However, SEZ infrastructure development and economic growth have also exacerbated criminal activities through legitimate companies. Even convicted financial money laundering and drug trafficking criminals from China have gathered in Sihanoukville, obtained their nationality and citizenship status, and resumed their criminal business (Kennedy and Southern 2022).

3 The Role of the Port Cities in the Asian Mediterranean and Its Economic Corridors

This article is concerned with the issue of human-related extractivist activities, that is, neoliberalized slavery, which has flourished in the 21st century through illegal practices being disguised as legal. We can situate the case of the cyber slavery of the SSEZ in two contexts: first, the mechanism of the hinge of the geopolitical and geoeconomic cheap labor supply chain in the Asian Mediterranean; and second, its genealogical mutations and institutional transformations in local histories.

The rise and fall of the trading port cities follow the flow of capital and military power in the different historical eras. Jean Gottmann (1952, 1957, 1976, 1991) interpreted the distributions of the port cities as political partitions of space and definitions of territories by the established order along the seaboard. His analysis offers a perspective for us to understand the choke points as hinges of several competing jurisdictions in the Asian Mediterranean across time. Moreover, we can envision the “hinge” not only connecting the place to a more comprehensive network through the economic corridors, but also as having a multi-dimensional and topological dynamism that links to a complex mobile networking system. The ingenious innovations of technologies, institutions, and juridical implementations that support the transformation of the “hinge complex” showcase the characteristics of the time.

The term “Asian Mediterranean,” employed by François Gipouloux (2009a, 2009b), aroused scholarly interest in the concept of a “Mediterranean” in the geoeconomic and geopolitical relations in the Asian region.³ Following the Braudelian idea of the region, Gipouloux (2009b) suggests using the concept as an analytical tool and viewing the maritime space as one that breaks up borders; it is defined by flows, and different temporalities and economic/military corridors coexist. According to Gipouloux, the Asian Mediterranean comprises the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, and the Sea of the Célèbes.⁴ The characteristics of the Asian maritime system show that it is an interwoven and complex network of several large emporia.⁵

In her study *China's Emergence as a Maritime Power*, Angela Schottenhammer (2015) revealed a more comprehensive picture of the ancient maritime routes of the Asian Mediterranean Sea. The Persian and Arab overseas traders reached Southeast Asia as early as the sixth or seventh centuries, and China in the late seventh century. By the Han dynasty, around 202 BC to 220 AD, trade routes connected China to the Indian Ocean, from Kuang-chou to Vietnam, Cambodia, the Malay peninsula, the Philippines, Java, Sumatra, India, and West Asia. During the Sung (960–1279) and Yuan (1260–1368) dynasties, China was a maritime power and an emporium of commodity exchange in the medieval Asian world. The expansion of Chinese maritime trade with overseas countries not only went through the intermediacy of Persian and Arab merchants, who came to China via Southeast Asia, but also through Chinese intermediaries, who diverted their trade route so that it now ran over the sea rather than across the land (Schottenhammer 2015, 441–442).⁶

Kenneth Hall has demonstrated in his important work *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (1985) that the waxing and waning of states in various parts of Southeast Asia were directly tied to shifting inter-

3 Studies about sea commerce include Gipouloux (2009b), Reid (1993), Pomeranz (2001), and Blusse (2008). Takeshi Hamashita began researching East Asia's tributary trading sphere in the 1980s. His series of studies accumulated in a seminal work on the tribute system and the tributary trade (Grove, Hamashita, & Selden 2008).

4 Gipouloux distinguished three Mediterranean spaces: the European Mediterranean of the Italian *repubbliche marinare* (maritime republics); the Hanseatic League in the Baltic Seas; and the Asian Mediterranean.

5 For example, the kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra from the end of the 7th to the 10th century; Malacca before its conquest by the Portuguese in 1511; and the Ryukyu archipelago between Japan and China.

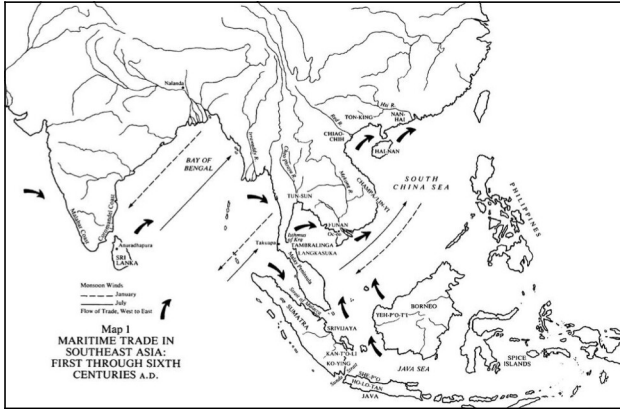
6 The shift of trade routes from overland to maritime was primarily caused by instability in Central, North, and East Asia, particularly the threats and even invasions from the Tibetan kingdom, the Silla kingdom, the Po-hai kingdom in Manchuria, the Khitan's Liao dynasty, and the Jurchen people, who founded the Chin empire.

national trade routes. In the second and third centuries, the transportation of goods along the maritime route between the southeastern coast of China to the Bay of Bengal was mainly through the ports under the authority of Phnom and Chenla. In the era of the Srivijayan maritime state through the eleventh century and the kingdom of Angkor, Champa coastal ports remained the crucial transition spots that linked the maritime trade routes—from the southeastern coast of China through the Malacca Straits to the Bay of Bengal. The role of the intermediate traders and market centers, together with the different levels of mediators, such as compradors, merchants, brokers, or harbor masters (*shāh-bandar*), were legitimized official positions with royal charters, connecting the movement of goods from the hinterland to the coastal plain and international commerce (Hall 1985, 17–20, 22–27).

In the logistics of the labor supply chain, the easiest way to accumulate surplus value is through labor exploitation. Champa was widely known as the primary source of the slave trade through its ports to the Asian worlds. From the second and third centuries, the emperors of different Chinese dynasties received tributary offerings from the kings of Cambodia; the gifts offered by the Cambodian kings, in addition to gold, silver, exotic animals, and perfumes, also included black-skinned, savage people to make up for the shortage of a manual labor workforce (Hall 1985, 192; Li 1998, 119–129).⁷ Schottenhammer also remarked that among the common trade commodities handled by the middlemen from Southeast Asian countries, such as ivory and rhinoceros horn, minerals, valuable woods, precious stones, and tortoiseshells, the most valued and frequently documented “commodity” was “black slaves” (Schottenhammer 2015, 518–520).

From the maps provided by these studies on the Asian Mediterranean, we can see that the trading routes altered from 200 BC to the 21st century, following the rise and fall of various coexisting kingdoms and the emergence of new port cities, linking rivers from the inland to the ocean and the world (see Map 1). The rise of China and its Maritime Silk Road Initiative of the 21st century has drastically determined the paths of the economic corridors and the port cities. Gipouloux points out that, along with the reform policies of the Deng Xiaoping era after 1984, the emergence of the East Asian economic corridor helped to create the modern Asian Mediterranean; China became a “flexible empire” and challenged other economic powers (Gipouloux 2009b: 4).

7 Savage slaves with dark skin and curly hair are often mentioned in the slave trade history in Southeast Asia. In Chinese histories and fiction, these dark-skinned and curly-headed slaves are addressed as *Kun-Lun*, “slaves” (崑崙奴).



MAP 1
Maritime trade in
Southeast Asia: first–
sixth centuries AD
SOURCE: KENNETH
HALL, *MARITIME
TRADE AND STATE
DEVELOPMENT IN
EARLY SOUTHEAST
ASIA* (1985)

In recent years (2015–2019), China has gained more and more control in the waters and signed leases on several critical ports: the Malaka Gateway for 99 years, Gwadar Port in Pakistan for 40 years, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar for 50 years, Kuantan in Malaysia for 60 years, Obock in Djibouti for 10 years, Hambantota in Sri Lanka for 99 years, Muara in Brunei for 60 years, and Feydhoon Finolhu in the Maldives for 50 years. The strategic determination of the port locations of China's Maritime Silk Road extends far more extensive than a regional plan. It indicates China's plan to redirect the global shipping routes and to play a more substantial role in international shipping (Nouwens 2019). Along with the control of the maritime routes, the increase of China's shipping and the fishing industry is also drastic in recent years. UNCTAD statistics show that, in 2019, half of the world's fleet was owned by Asian companies; 93 per cent of global shipbuilding occurred in China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, and 16 per cent of the global fleet carrying capacity was registered in Panama.

Port cities are crucial for maritime industries in terms of the logistics of transportation and management. "Logistics" derives from ancient Greek λογιστικός (*logistikós*), λογίζομαι (*logízomai*), and λόγος (*logos*), connoting arithmetic practice, rational thinking, reason, and computation. In the case of port cities, logistics refers to planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient and effective flow and storage of goods, services, and related information in the commercial sphere. The smooth transaction from one point to the other is aimed at satisfying the customer's requirements. The seamless connection from the supply, production, and consumption lines, with the global information flow, market distribution, instant services, and financialization management merge at the nodal point—the port city. In this process, governments around the world also have devised similar technologies of control and administration to ensure the management of logistics (Chua et al. 2018, 618–620, 622; Cuppini and Frapporti, 96; Toscano 2018, 4).

What deserves our attention is that, as a hinge and a distribution center, the port city plays a vital role in the logistics of the supply chains. But the “hinge” function of the port cities does not connect one end to the other, but to a multi-dimensional network system that links multiple complex network systems with a mobile topological dynamism (Figures 1 and 2). The functions of the port city consist of the storage and the movement of raw materials, work-in-progress inventory, and finished goods from the point of origin to the point of consumption. At the port cities, we see not only large areas for warehouses, but also cargo trucks, cargo ships, shipyards, and peripheral industries and businesses, such as garment factories, processing factories, restaurants, hotels, video game stores, casinos, commercial areas, residential areas, and so on. Through the multi-dimensional and mobile function of the complex hinge, we can detect the genealogy of the systemic logistics of commodity exchange and see how it is possible to accumulate surplus value through labor extraction gained via the age-old practice of slavery. Here, the logic of circulation no longer follows Marx’s analysis of C-M-C, nor M-C-M or M-M+, with excess surplus value, but I would propose the formula of V-M+. V stands for Void. Through the Void, with no cost, Money/Capital can increase incessantly; V also stands for Violence, restricted by no law, and Money can be accumulated automatically.

4 The Genealogy and the Logistics of Cheap Labor Supply Chain and Its Surplus Value

Slavery is the easiest way to obtain a labor force at no cost. The slave trade has existed in all cultures, and China is no exception (Chen 1988; Chen 1998; Gao 2007; Li 1986; Li 1998; Liao 1990; Mao and Chen 2000; Wen 2006). The “black slave” described by Schottenhammer is often called “*Kunlunnu*” (崑崙奴) in Chinese classical texts. These “black slaves,” with curly hair and black skin, are said to be from Southeast Asian regions, such as Champa, most probably offered as tributary gifts or traded as commodities; they were documented as early as the 3rd century AD in the Six Dynasties. The slave trade tradition in Chinese history existed as early as the Spring and Autumn Periods (ca. 770–476 BC). In the long history of different dynasties and empires in China, the practice of the slave trade, with systemic violence and cruelty, happened not only in courts, through the tributary system, but in aristocratic families and wealthy families among ordinary people. Poor people from the border districts or mountain areas were purchased, kidnapped, and sent to wealthy families to serve as manual laborers. The transactions of the slave trade coexisted with the

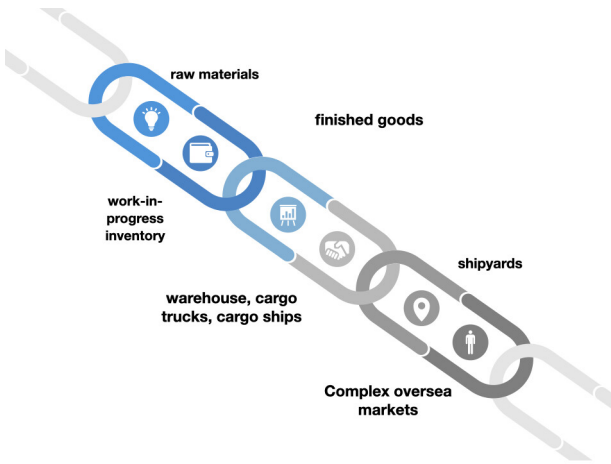


FIGURE 1
Port cities as hinges connecting raw materials and finished production to a more complex network of overseas markets
SOURCE: AUTHOR

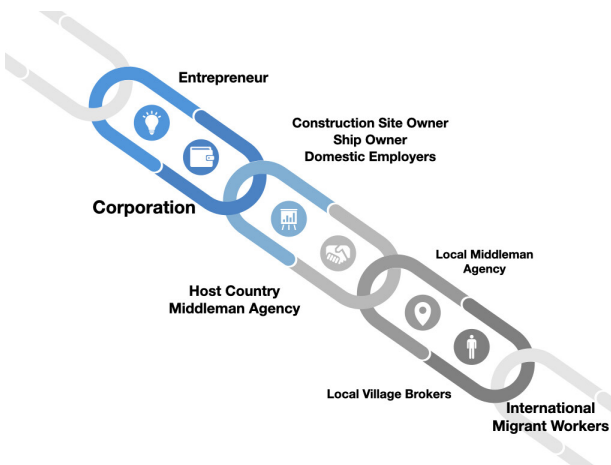


FIGURE 2
The hinge connecting one complex network to other complex networks
SOURCE: AUTHOR

exchange of commodities through the institution of the middleman or broker, which was called *Ya-Jen* 牙人或 *Ya-Hang* 牙行 in Chinese (Liao 1990; Mao and Chen 2000; Gao 2007).

As we can see from the laws of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC–207 BC), Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), and Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD), the fundamental principles of the slavery system remained unchanged and was even more comprehensive across the 800 years. Slaves were listed in the same category as castles, horses, houses, and farmland; they were considered as “objects” to be purchased, exchanged, sold, and offered as gifts. Slaves did not enjoy a status as “persons.” Instead, they were the property of their masters for life. Their children inherited their enslaved status. Slaves did not have social or personal rights, were not allowed to enjoy personal freedom, could not marry a person

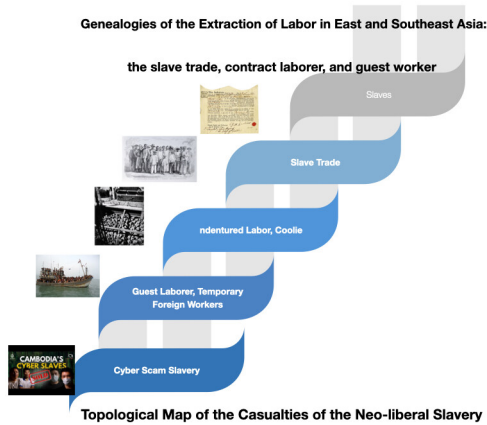


FIGURE 3
Genealogy of the extraction of labor from ancient times to the 21st-century neoliberal age
SOURCE: AUTHOR

of their own choice, and could be sold, exchanged, gambled, or offered as gifts or for the repayment of a debt. If a slave was beaten to death, the owner was not held legally responsible. During the Han Dynasties, the rise of merchants and super-rich families annexing large areas of land led to many bankrupt and homeless people. These placeless populations ended up as enslaved people through debt bondage. The population of slaves increased drastically in the 400 years of the Han Dynasties. In the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the slave trade was even more prosperous, with numerous slaves from the southern and western regions of China, as well as tributary clans and neighboring states, such as Goryeo, Annam, Jurchen, Mongolia, Persia, Arab, India, and other areas. The slavery system in China lasted for thousands of years, until the beginning of Republican China in the early 20th century (Li 1986; Chen 1988; Chen 1998; Wen 2006) (Figure 3).

The history of the middleman or broker, *Ya-Jen*, is as old as commerce and the slave trade. *Ya-Jen* was legalized as early as the Spring and Autumn Period (ca. 770–476 BC) and lasted thousands of years. The government officially legalized the middleman's business and its institution as *Ya-Jen* and their trade intermediary companies *Ya-Hang* (牙人牙行), as harbormasters, and entrusted them to process the written contracts to certify the purchase or selling of goods, including selling and purchasing slaves. The organizations associated with the middleman involve local markets and river harbormasters, especially local gangsters.

Since the start of the maritime trading business, *Ya-Jen* and *Ya-Hang* have also played significant roles in the port cities such as Guangzhou 廣州, Quanzhou 泉州, Mingzhou 明州, Wenzhou 温州, and Taizhou 泰州. *Ya-Jen* and *Ya-Hang* oversaw all import and export negotiations, including the announcement of governmental policies, and the management of incoming and out-

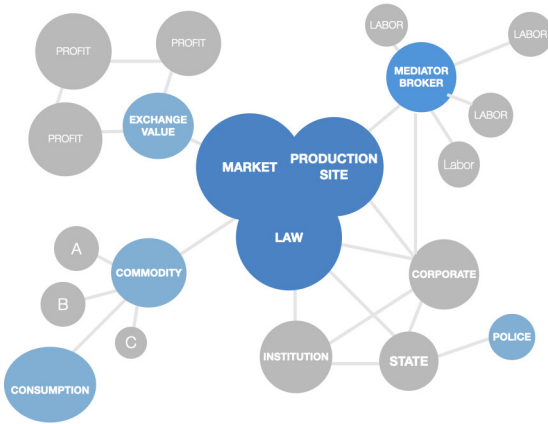


FIGURE 4
Tripartite overlaid networks:
the production, the market,
and the law
SOURCE: AUTHOR

going goods shipments, and also served as guarantors. They could also help customers avoid taxation, and were involved in usury, smuggling, and human trafficking; they charged commissions for these transactions. The role of *Ya-Jen* later transformed into that of compradors and brokers dealing with international commerce.

One variation of this long tradition of intermediaries is its evolution into the Recruitment Bureau (*Zhao-gong-guan* 招工館) in big port cities, such as Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, during the colonial period in the 19th and 20th centuries. Under the Dutch and British colonial governments, the Recruitment Bureau drafted coolies from the neighboring regions' low-income families as indentured laborers. They dispatched the coolies to foreign countries in Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa. The Recruitment Bureau is often addressed as Pigsties (*Zhuzai-liao* 豬仔寮), that is, the quarters for pigs. Each year, there would be more than 10,000 people shipped onboard. The recruitment institution of the coolies in the 19th and 20th centuries during the colonial period is an advanced form of the traditional *Ya-Jen Ya-Hang* middleman system and a precursor of the privatized broker system for temporary guest laborers of the 20th and 21st centuries (Figure 3).

The multi-dimensional complex hinge system of the cyber scam industries, besides its software technology design for fake stock market websites, the connection with local official elites, and the legitimate companies for money laundering, requires a complex, multi-layered recruitment chain, linking diverse sectors of the middleman or brokers from different countries, such as Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and Taiwan, to lure workers into the trap of the forced scam business. The outsourced recruitment agencies often involve local criminal enterprises, gangs, and syndicates, with high-intensity secrecy measures and precise division of labor (Fig-

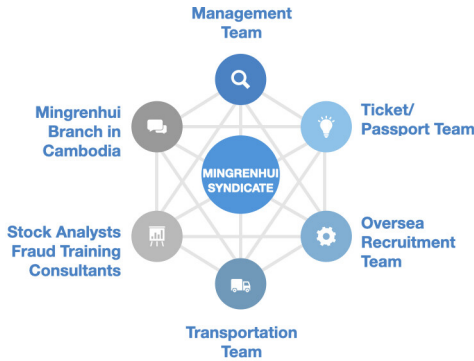


FIGURE 5
The multi-dimensional complex hinge
system of the cyber scam industries
SOURCE: AUTHOR

ure 4). One famous case is the Ming Ren Hui (明仁會) of the Bamboo Union Gang (竹聯幫), exposed by the Criminal Investigation Bureau in 2023. When they plan to arrange for recruited people to fly to Cambodia, they will book several hundred tickets in advance. Ming Ren Hui has rented an office building in the SSEZ for the operation of the scam industry (Kung 2019, 2022, 2023; Yang 2022) (Figure 5).

We now need to move on to several theoretical speculations of the extraction of labor through systemic cruelty as the source of surplus values in human societies.

5 Theoretical Speculation of the Extraction of Labor as the Source of Surplus Values

The enslaved people in ancient China and in colonial times were either captured enemies in battles or civilians convicted of a crime, kidnapped, tricked, trapped by debt bondage, or forced to labor for little or no pay. The treatment of these forced laborers as property of the owners, like pigs and cattle, along dehumanizing measures, continued across the centuries. The most curious part of this slave trade genealogy is that the institution of the middleman was always accompanied by a transformations of the law with the necessary legal processes and institutional implementation. We have also observed from historical documents the innovative engineering of institutions and organizations to facilitate such interests to accumulate more surplus value.

The concept of the complex, multi-layered hinge system illustrates not only the functions of the port cities but also the role of the intermediaries connecting the labor supply chain and the production/consumer end. Increasing the labor force by reducing labor costs is the fastest way to accumulate sur-

plus value. The game changer is the go-between who can facilitate the smooth logistics of transactions and negotiate with the law and the market. As already discussed, the fluctuation zone of the market is overdetermined and manipulated by adjustable laws, with extensive room for legal exceptions. Moreover, the mediator maneuvers the terms of the exchange so that the profit can be maximized. The fastest and easiest way to reduce costs and gain money today is to recruit labor through treacherous methods and use this labor to conduct online scams. The transformation and adaptability of the law and institutions have shown the persistence of human interests in the profitable business of taking costless human labor.

The practice of cyber slavery in the scamming industry in the SSEZ, in collaboration with the gangster syndicates in Taiwan, demonstrates a new form of neoliberal slavery in the 21st century. We can list a few theoretical speculations here.

First, cyber slavery in the SSEZ and other SEZs and border cities is not a one-off incident. From the genealogical traces of the slave trade in Southeast Asia and Chinese history, from ancient times to the coolies of the pigsty, the mutations of the institutions and techniques of the slave trade have demonstrated that the surplus value is built upon the tripartite structure of consumption + mediator/market/law + labor force. The ambiguous affinity between the law and the mediator to meet the demands of the market is exposed by the fact that the law can be adapted so that the mediator can make the most profit for the capitalist/entrepreneurs out of the transaction. Here, we see the logic of circulation no longer follows Marx's analysis of M-C-M or M-M+, but the formula of V-M+. Through the void with no cost and violence with no law, there is no limit to the multiplication of capital.

Second, the geohistorical relation between China, Cambodia, and Taiwan also explained why cross-border, organized crime has occurred in the SSEZ, the port city in the Maritime Silk Road project. Unlike slavery in the age of imperial expansion and colonial regimes, the new extraction of labor and laborers' maltreatment is not the product of force. Every individual is a neoliberal agent in the logistics chain: the entrepreneurs, factory owners, managers, citizens, intermediaries, and workers. The migrant workers voluntarily signed temporary working contracts, legally or illegally, for better wages and offered themselves to the intermediary. They were dispatched to whatever working place, on land or at sea, they were assigned to, and suffered inhuman labor conditions and even severe violations of fundamental human rights due to their noncitizen status. Due to the evolution of technology and the production mode, the nature and the form of labor in the 21st century has changed from that of ancient times, the feudal tradition, and the industrial ages; however, the debasement

of the human subjects and the extraction of their labor force, even at risk to their lives, remain the same.

Third, local governments' legal implementations, or lack of such implementations, further reinforce the contemporary neoliberal slavery system. The juridical processes support this operation of legalized zones of legal exceptions. The SEZ is a typical example where people can enjoy income-tax and export-tax exemptions, as well as customs duty exemptions and other advantages. SEZ is just a metonymic space, a fluctuating free space with many liberalized atoms of interests created by a web of complex logistics. SEZ serves not only as a space for foreign direct investment but also as a tax haven, with offshore financial centers, outsourcing process factories, and privatized brokerage agents. Each entity claims its territory and properties, secured by the laws, purchased for specific purposes. Each industrial park claims sovereignty without regulation, supervision, and even punishment for cases violating the local government's standard labor law and human rights. It can exercise its labor exploitation to the maximum without legal accountability. This ambiguous and opaque grey zone of legal exception presents a space where the law cannot fix the problems but where it can aggravate the situation.

Fourth, the technology of the slavery system also evolves through time and shows the persistence of human interest in surplus values through labor extraction. Cyber slavery in the SSEZ, supported by organized gang syndicates in Taiwan, involves transnational organized crimes in a virtually operated space, with the participation of agents from different countries. Traffickers pretend to be regular companies to recruit workers through legal job matching websites, Facebook, Instagram, personal networks, human resource departments, and even kidnapping on the street. We also notice a common feature of the connections between the corruption of governmental institutions and the activity of criminals, who operate with impunity. Furthermore, they call the victims of the human smuggling gangs "pigs," while the victims of the cyber scam are also called "pigs"; together, it is a "pig slaughtering" business. "Pig" was the term used for the coolies in the 19th and 20th centuries. The recruitment bureau is called the pigsty (*zhuzaiquan* 豬仔館) or *barracoon* in Dutch. In the port cities of southeast China, such as Macao and Hong Kong, *zhuzaiquan* is where the recruitment bureau keeps indentured laborers and transports them to Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. The coolies of the 19th and the 20th centuries were cheated or kidnapped off the streets from the rural villages, operated by the broker system, *Ya-Jen Ya-Hang*. The pigs of the 21st century, in response to fraudulent human resource recruitment advertisements, voluntarily join the team and fall into the trap; they act as different kinds of labor but are still in the same mode of slavery, at risk of torture and unrecorded death.

This article has discussed the trajectory of forced migratory labor in the Asian Mediterranean, focusing on the Chinese tradition of the tributary maritime route and its history of the slave trade. We have looked at the genealogy of the logistics that facilitate the flow of forced migrant labor across thousands of years. By doing so, this article has demonstrated the persistent human interest in, and the accompanying violence of, the systemic cruelty of the profitable business of taking a costless labor force through the invention and transformation of laws that facilitate such exploitation through dehumanizing and exploiting other human subjects. In the formula V-M+, through void with no cost, and violence with no law, we see the multiplication of capital through neoliberalized labor extractivism. The institutions and technologies have undergone a series of juridical metamorphoses and institutional syncretism. Various levels of intermediaries indicate how the shadow economy's legal system and illegal practices have been combined. The rise of China's maritime power since the 13th century quickened the pace and amount of the cross-border slave trade with the neighboring kingdoms in Southeast and Northeast Asia through the Asian Mediterranean Sea. China's Maritime Silk Road in the 21st century further expanded the horizon. Examining the pivotal role of the hinge played by port cities and intermediaries, both within their local spheres and across different regions, over an extensive period of time, reveals a constant and unyielding presence of a mediating institution and its deeply entrenched system of cruelty.

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