

***Scam: Inside Southeast Asia's Cybercrime Compounds.* By Ivan Franceschini, Ling Li and Mark Bo. London and New York: Verso, 2025. Softcover: 215pp.**

We have all received that phone call, text or email. In just a few clicks, we could win millions, realize an incredible investment opportunity or find a new love. Some might have received a more sinister message, one claiming to be from the police or an embassy, alleging that you have broken the law and must cooperate to avoid serious charges. Almost all are false, of course. Digital scams are carefully designed to exploit human weaknesses: fear, greed and loneliness. All too often, credit card numbers are handed over, bank accounts are drained and romantic partners disappear into the ether.

If cybercrime has become a grim feature of our modern, connected world, few people, until recently, realized Southeast Asia's centrality in the story. In their excellent new book, *Scam: Inside Southeast Asia's Cybercrime Compounds*, Ivan Franceschini, Ling Li and Mark Bo expose the rise of the industrial-scale global cyberscamming industry and its entrenchment in countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar.

This is the first book-length treatment of this phenomenon. It combines meticulous, evidence-based analysis with chilling, sometimes gruesome stories of brutality and exploitation. Structured across five concise chapters, it explores the rise of the cyberscam industry; the trafficking of workers into scam centres; daily life inside these compounds; the array of actors who profit from the frauds; and the difficult process of escape, including the work of non-governmental organizations and civil society groups helping survivors.

The authors' central argument is that Southeast Asia's scam operations represent a distinctive manifestation of "predatory capitalism" (p. 19). The compounds thrive in spaces of contested sovereignty, such as war-torn Myanmar, or in jurisdictions with weak rule of law and minimal oversight, including Cambodia's Special Economic Zones. While their scale and sophistication vary enormously, the most notorious compounds resemble fortified small towns surrounded by high walls and barbed wire, housing thousands of workers, many of whom became trapped after answering fake job advertisements. Those who resist or underperform face beatings and

torture. Workers are bought and sold between compounds. Some people have even lured friends and family into servitude to claim recruitment payments. By the end of *Scam*, you will find yourself questioning just how far human cruelty can go.

The scale of the cyberscam industry is staggering. According to a 2023 United Nations report, as many as 120,000 people were being forced to engage in scams in Myanmar, with another 100,000 in Cambodia (p. 9). While the authors acknowledge that the data is partial, their years of fieldwork and extensive victim interviews lend credibility to their findings. Moreover, the industry is astonishingly lucrative. The US Treasury reckons that Americans have lost US\$16.6 billion to scammers, mostly those operating out of Southeast Asia. In 2023, Taiwanese victims lost a record US\$270 million, and Singaporeans more than S\$650 million (around US\$474 million). These are almost certainly underestimates; many victims are too embarrassed or ashamed to report their losses.

Why has Southeast Asia become the global hub for such operations? In *Scam*, the authors argue that it stems from the convergence of local elites' interests with those of transnational crime groups. In Cambodia, there is substantial evidence linking scam compounds to senior politicians and businesspeople, as well as to "investors from Myanmar, individuals linked to triad groups, and Macau gambling kingpins" (p. 26). In October 2025, the United States and United Kingdom imposed sweeping sanctions on Prince Group, a Cambodia-based conglomerate run by Chen Zhi, a naturalized Cambodian citizen and prominent tycoon who has served as a senior adviser to both Prime Minister Hun Manet and his father and predecessor, Hun Sen. In Myanmar, numerous ethnic militias, which have controlled parts of the country's periphery for decades, are involved. This "environment of impunity", the authors argue, provides "the perfect destination for [scam] groups to relocate and expand their activities, while creating new sources of revenue for elites willing to act as protective umbrellas" (p. 18).

Yet the complicity extends beyond elites. In some areas, local communities are economically dependent on the compounds, which provide jobs for security guards, cleaners and construction workers—making them, as the authors put it, a "mainstay of the local economy" (p. 19). The recent seizure of thousands of Starlink terminals—satellite internet hardware produced by Elon Musk's SpaceX—from a scam compound in Myanmar also reminds us that the networks facilitating these crimes stretch far beyond the region.

Scam offers a particularly nuanced analysis of workers' experience, drawing heavily on Li's interviews with 96 survivors conducted between 2022 and 2024. Many "hardly fit the image of the ideal victim" (p. 16), given their involvement in illegal activity. Chapter Three details the combination of coercion, "militaristic" discipline and selective incentives that characterizes compound life (p. 135). The Cambodian authorities, in particular, have argued that trafficking and torture claims are often excuses given by those who engage in criminal behaviour. The authors convincingly reject that line. They also challenge the stereotype that scam workers are better educated than other trafficking victims. Moreover, even those fortunate enough to escape often face detention, fines or criminal charges upon returning home.

Efforts to curb the industry have been slow, partly because "the scale of the problem really started to emerge just prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 191). That might be starting to change. In 2025, several high-profile cases, including one involving South Korean victims, have increased the pressure on the Cambodian government. But reasons for pessimism remain. As the book notes, raided compounds often reappear elsewhere, and advances in Artificial Intelligence and "deepfake" technology are making scams ever more convincing.

Scam is a gripping, essential account of a criminal industry that has flourished in the shadows of global capitalism. Persuasive in argument and meticulous in detail, it deserves to be widely read.

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