



Ten Worker Stories

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COVER NOTE

This is a collection of stories centering the experiences of Chinese guest workers working for Chinese companies abroad. These stories are written based on CLW's interviews with workers from 2020 to 2022, documenting a slew of embodied experiences of abuses including deceptions, arbitrary wage manipulations, restriction of freedom, threats and violence, poor living and working conditions, poor safety and health protections, and passport confiscation. These workers were of varied backgrounds and skill sets, and were posted to different countries including Indonesia, Serbia, Cambodia, Turkey, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; one thing that aligns their experiences is their common struggles and experiences of abuses and exploitations under Chinese employers overseas. The COVID-19 pandemic also fundamentally shaped many of these workers' experiences. China's COVID-related travel restrictions and quarantine requirements provided many Chinese employers the excuse to further abuse the power, restrict workers' movements, and keep them abroad for longer than the contracted terms.

Facing abuses, a common theme running through these workers' stories is a deep sense of powerlessness facing their employers' abuse of power. As a few notable examples, Story Two, "Chen in the DRC" depicts an electrician's story in the Democratic Republic of Congo that culminated in him escaping his factory facility and ending up homeless in the wild without his IDs. In Story Ten, "Liang in Indonesia: A Long Way Back Home," worker Liang Qi grew cynical after witnessing his workplace management's nonchalance when facing a fellow worker's death and experiencing a slew of unfair treatment himself. His sentiment was resonated by other workers, as the accumulation of mistreatment—wage-withholding, arbitrary deductions, deceptions, workplace injuries and deaths, and the management's abuses—finally led to Chinese workers in his industrial plant rising up to organize a strike. However, Liang's pessimism continued even after the strike, as he observed Chinese workers' solidarity as shallow and ephemeral.

Yet the struggles and abuses do not define Chinese workers as individuals. In some of these stories, sparkles of hope and joy peeps through workers' unforgiving daily existence. In story Nine, "Bian in Serbia," regular waged worker Bian Xuqin faced a variety of mistreatments in an outsourced property management company in Serbia. Despite the exploitation, he found some nostalgia in his Serbia

experience as he found joy outside of work, striving to learn a new language and looking to a better future.

In a sense, these stories are testimonies to the reality of Chinese working class individuals' daily experiences living and struggling in a world indifferent to their struggles. Some, despite hardship, find beauty in the world. Others, however, find their work to be exploitative and all-consuming. Yet their daily struggles point to a larger problem of labor exploitation and systemic inequality.

WORKER'S STORIES

1. Tian Ye in Serbia

As a project manager for a construction team, Ye Tian (pseudonym) was assigned by his company to work with his team on a construction project in Serbia. Despite the fact that the project was being carried out by a big Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), in reality Ye's actual employer was a small company subcontracted by the SOE. With the unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ye and his coworkers found themselves stranded in Serbia without proper pay.

“[Although we didn't sign a contract with Tianjin Electronic Construction], we are working for Tianjin, so they have to be responsible for us. They are basically just facilitating all these bad practices,” Ye said.

Ye Tian worked as a project manager for a Chinese construction company and was dispatched to Serbia in March, 2020. His team consisted of 40 some workers, who focused on water and electricity installations, building constructions, and finishing. As a dispatched unit, Ye and his team were sent abroad under a contract with their “boss,” Jiangsu Huaian Ruizhifeng Construction Co., a subcontractor of a large Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) called Jiangsu Electronic Construction. They worked for a power plant construction project.

In 2021, Ye and two of his colleagues were transferred to another job site in Serbia: the Linglong Tire Factory. “They needed the people,” Ye said. This time, Tianjin Electronic Construction, another big Chinese state-owned enterprise, was the actual construction contractor with Linglong Tire. Ye and his coworkers at this construction site were hired by more than a dozen different construction contractors subcontracted with Tianjin Electronic Construction.

“I never signed [a contract] with either Tianjin Electronic Construction or Jiangsu Electronic Construction. Boss Ge signed with them, and I signed with him,” Ye reflected, “...and this boss, he is not really a labor service intermediary. He's with Jiangsu Huaian Ruizhifeng Construction, Co. We signed with them. He's basically a subcontractor.”

Like other workers, Ye's passport was confiscated by his employer after he landed in Serbia. He also knew that he had a work visa when working with Tianjin Electronic Construction, but this visa was never renewed after it expired. Fully understanding who his employer was and what his visa status was, Ye already had an advantage over other Chinese construction workers who were brought abroad and provided with little information regarding their situations. However, his knowledge did not protect Ye or his coworkers from labor rights abuse.

“We got suspended from work on March 1 [2022]. Wages from August 2021 to October have been paid bit by bit, [and we cleared] about 70 percent [of wages for those months]. After that and until now, we've been owed almost five months worth of wages. [The company] also wouldn't pay for our [return] flights,” Ye said. “Now we have already reached [the end of our contract]. All we want is for the company to settle our [outstanding] wages, and provide the money for the flights and the fees for our COVID quarantine.”

According to Ye, he and two other workers were suspended from work because Ge, his “real boss,” borrowed two workers from Ye's team for a boiler installation job at another site. As he tells it: “After Tianjin Electronic Construction found out, they were not happy about it saying that the two borrowed workers were their employees, and could not leave their positions. That's how they suspended us. I really just didn't appease them, didn't maintain the relationship [well enough] with them.”

The chain of subcontracting relationships created more problems for Ye and his team.

“When Tianjin Electronic Construction transfers [payments], they take out around 20 percent and store it in the bank for tax purposes. Ge needs to go fix the taxes, and take the remainder [of the money] out of the bank and give it to us. Other than that, Tianjin Electronics also takes out another 20 percent of the monthly output value and keeps it in the bank. Ge then pays us the amount [that's left] after all those are project fees paid,” Ye explained, “but now Ge has a cash-flow issue. So now we're all stuck.”

Frustrated, Ye thinks the project contractor, Tianjin Electronic Construction, should take on the responsibility.

“I work for Tianjin Electronic Construction,” he says. “Yes, I never signed a contract with them, but I have a work pass from them! They need to be responsible for us. I don't care who ultimately owes us money, whether it's Ge or Tianjin Electronic Construction. We are working for Tianjin, so they have to

be responsible for us. As a big company, a central state-owned enterprise in China [i.e., SOE, directly supervised by the Chinese government's central organs], they [Tianjin Electronic Construction] need to take on the supervisory role. Say the small companies under it can't act straight, Tianjin Electronic Construction needs to step up. They are basically just facilitating all these bad practices.”

However, Ye signed a labor contract only with Ge's company Jiangsu Huaian Ruizhifeng Construction. Although Tianjin Electronic Construction signed a commercial contract with Ruizhifeng, and Ye technically worked under the supervision of Tianjin, Ruizhifeng was Ye and his team's employer. In this chain of contract relations, Tianjin Electronic Construction was somewhat insulated from liability.

Despite Ye's frustration, he continued to negotiate with Ge, Tianjin Electronic Construction, and even Linglong Tire, the client enterprise that “hired” Tianjin Electronic to complete the construction project where Ye and his coworkers were assigned to. At the time of the interview, Ye had yet to bring his concerns to the Chinese embassy in Serbia.

2. Chen in the DRC



Image shows a mine. Sourced from the internet.

"This is worse than death. Without electricity, I could only go find food [in the wild] during the day. There were some wild tomatoes and some small bananas that were about to ripe growing there. And that was the only thing I could do," Chen Yu (pseudonym) said, recalling the days he spent wandering on a mountain in the Democratic Republic of Congo after escaping from his factory plant. Here is his story.

In 2021, Chen returned to his hometown in Hubei from a job in Indonesia. After a short while, he decided to leave home to work abroad again. For the sake of his wife and kids in elementary school, he wanted to make more money.

"I should've listened to my wife," said Chen. "She said I should just find a job near home. Even 4,000 to 5,000 CNY [around 558 to 698 USD] a month would have been fine. [...] But I was thinking, it's May already, the kids are about to go on summer break. Money is needed for a lot of things. Plus, for the second half of the year, we have to visit relatives. [So] we need some money at hand." He continued: "I ain't doing much at home anyway, just out fishing, smoking sometimes."

Determined, Chen found on the internet that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was recruiting electricians. The pay seemed good, good enough for him to leave the country again. So he

submitted his resumé online and added the recruiter, Guangdong Jichun Labor Service Dispatching Company, to his WeChat contact. He later passed the interview, after which he was directed to take a test for COVID-19.

After he got past all of the procedural requirements, finally, in July 2021, he crossed the ocean to Lubumbashi, DRC, where his worksite at Kai Peng Mining Sarl was located.

After landing, Chen found out that his employer had given him a tourist visa instead of a work visa. Perhaps that saved the company money, but it also meant that Chen could not work legally in the DRC.

His passport was also taken away by the company the moment he landed. Kai Peng, the company that Chen was actually working for, promised to cover its employees' transportation fees for a return to China once a year. But Chen discovered that the first year was exempt from this promise. Even worse, he later learned from his fellow workers that people before him had run away from the worksite. Chen found the ordeal sketchy, but he couldn't do anything about it since he had already signed up for it.

After he started working, his discontentment increased.

Chen's living quarters were sandwiched between a sulfuric acid pool, a kerosene pool, and two electrolytic chemical liquid pools. "When the wind blows, the smell of kerosene and sulfuric acid is so pungent! How can you live with this? Many people can't stand it, I'll tell you! At night, the door of the company's dormitory was locked with iron chains. If there was a fire in the building, how could us workers escape?" Chen continued. "...[A]nd think about it, if the company truly is a good company, why would they be scared of people running away? Think about it! Something's not right!"

Aside from the strictly enforced curfew, his living quarters were also surrounded by walls standing 10 to 15 feet tall, topped with barbed wire. Later in the interview, Chen described his life at the worksite as "prison-like."

It turns out that when Chen signed the contract, he was promised "first-class living conditions." The gap between expectation and reality was tremendous. But that was far from the only issue.

Chen is a low-voltage electrician. He told the recruiter that he knew “a little bit” about high voltage work, but he wasn’t comfortable doing it. After he arrived, however, he learned that his job was to work on high-voltage electricity, a risky job that he was never officially trained to do.

For the month and a half he was with Kai Peng, Chen worked night shifts from around 6:40 p.m. to 6:40 a.m. Each night he had a meal before heading to work. At work, other than cold, doughy steamed buns, no food or snacks were available. Chen heard from the kitchen staff that each cold bun incurred a 50 USD wage deduction.

“Not much of my daily wage was left after that deduction!” Wu said. He would rather stay hungry than pay for steamed buns.

After consistently working 12-hours a night without ingesting enough food, Chen developed a stomach problem. He took four days off from work for some rest and to see a doctor. The doctor told him that he just needed to eat better and take care of himself for a while. But with his 12-hour night shift job and no food offered in-between, that seemed impossible.

“I deal with electricity. Think about it, we don’t have anything to eat at night. And when people are hungry, cold, or sleepy, isn’t that the time accidents happen? [...] To be frank it’s just the company being stingy. Not even a bite at night. Think about it, there are around 200 people at the plant. How much money are they saving?” Wu said, still indignant.

“Where I work is really far away from [Likasi] the [nearest] city. It is about a few hours’ drive away.. So it’s hard to find people to get us food. There are people in procurement, but they won’t do anything for us,” Chen recalled. “And many of the people here, I don’t know why, don’t like to get into trouble for themselves. We are all talking amongst ourselves, and once we get to know each other, of course we complain about the company. There could be people who tattle.”

Unlike other workers who knew to keep a low profile facing injustice, Chen is loud. And that led to a chain of events.

The four-day leave he took for his stomach issue was treated as neither a work-related injury nor as sick leave, but as unpaid leave. More than 200 USD was deducted from his monthly paycheck. The series of deceptions and unfair treatment perpetrated by his employer pushed him to his limit and he

decided to act. “[In the company chat group], I said, the night shift is so long, if no food is provided, that’s definitely an issue [....] Also I got four days of leave [in total], that was not counted as work injury or sick leave. So I didn’t get paid for that.”

In fact, before taking the issue to the company chat group, Chen had already reached out to the director of Kai Peng to argue his case. He was subsequently blocked, which was why he decided to escalate the issue in the group chat.

After his post in the group chat, Chen received a lot of friend requests.

“Because I told everyone’s heart-felt truth. [...] a lot of people said to me, ‘Hey brother, you spoke the truth!’ I told the truth, I said things that are felt by everyone. I said things that they are just too afraid to say,” Chen said, proudly. “But I think that was probably how I got on [the company’s] shit list.”

Chen said that a number of his coworkers later reached out to him, reminding him that the company’s wages were calculated based on performance. If he wasn’t careful, his paycheck would suffer.

At Kai Peng, workers also experience wage deductions if they fail their lifestyle assessments. Chen was asked to fold his comforter into a rectangular shape without creases, and was also required to keep his wardrobe tidy and clean. His wages were deducted as a result of his failing to meet these requirements.

Later, he learned that he had been transferred from his position as an electrician to a position as a security guard.

“I am small. I’m only around 5’3,” said Chen, describing how he was unfit for the new position “All the others were like 5’8 or 6’. I got kicked by one of the security guards the day I started too, because I was not standing right. I had not, after all, served in the military.” After working as a security guard for a few days, he was transferred to the mine.

“Then I thought about it,” he continued. “On the labor contract they had written that, if I quit during the probation period, I would need to cover my own transportation fees. And then I thought, well they’re definitely conspiring against me [by getting me to quit]. [...] I’ll need to cover the flights, the visa application fees, and the liquidated damage. It’ll total around 10,000 USD!”

Chen was ready to get out of the situation. Although it seemed impossible, he planned to escape the factory plant that was surrounded by 10-foot walls topped with barbed wire.

“I was running away right?” he said. “The captain of the security guards, my fellow countryman, had me work on the ditches outside of the walls. I knew what that meant. He didn’t ask for me to dig the ditches but to study the route for my escape, [like] which direction [to take], who to contact.”

Before his decision to escape, Chen got a leg injury that became infected, something that he suspected was connected with the chemicals released into the air by the pools of industrial liquids surrounding his dormitory. Despite this setback, he was determined.

With help, Chen made an escape attempt, climbing over the wall during a power outage. “‘Don’t ever try to come back!’ the person who helped me said,” Chen recalled. He told Chen that the consequences could be serious.

After his escape, Chen tried to find a job in one of the major cities in the DRC. None of the Chinese companies he approached took him in. Chen found the situation to be suspicious.

He tried to pick up other odd jobs after that, but he was worried that Kai Peng would find out about him, and that his new employer’s business could be affected. “I didn’t want to bring issues to other people, especially because my contract [with Kai Peng] was still in effect then. So [that’s why] I became homeless, wandering around,” Chen said.

This was how he ended up wandering for days in the mountains, in the terrible heat, with a festering wound on his leg. In the mountains, some locals had set up a camp. Chen recalled his rescue: “I could only ask for help from the locals ... I said I haven’t had anything to eat for days. Then one of the locals said ‘Follow us. We’re taking you somewhere.’ That’s how I was brought to a camp with the Chinese. That’s how I got in contact with the outside world again.”

At the time of this interview, Chen had already gotten a new job in Nigeria at a glass manufacturing company. “I had to leave fast, I have a lot of evidence in my phone, including how they threatened me, the evidence of some physical disciplines in disguise, all of it. I also have some other documents. So I

needed to leave this place, leave the DRC. Only then would I be safe. They can't be looking for me in another country, right?"

With that, Chen's story in the DRC drew to a conclusion.

3. Wu's Wait

In October 2019, Wu Tianxin (pseudonym) came to Sulawesi, Indonesia, and planned to stay on the island for half a year. He worked for an outsourced team that does construction and installation work for PT Obsidian Stainless Steel (PT OSS). This industrial plant was the second industrial plant constructed by the Chinese steel giant Jiangsu Delong and was often referred to as Delong Phase II at the time when Wu was around. Like many workers around him, Wu was drawn to work overseas by the high wages promised by such overseas projects.



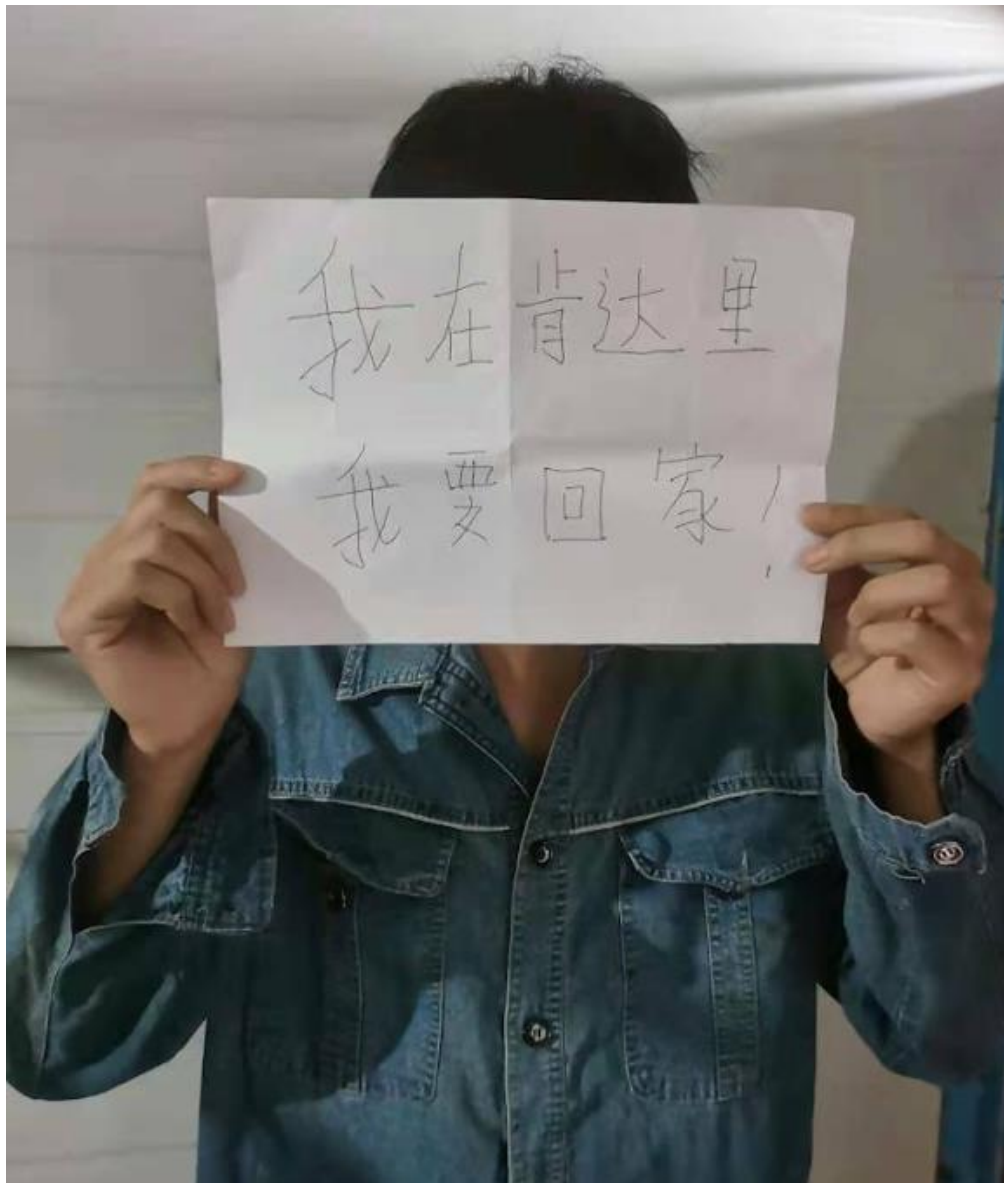
PT OSS, image sourced from the Internet

"Those who go abroad will generally not do it without a higher pay rate than the domestic rates," he said. His reasoning for going abroad was rather simple: to earn enough to cover a family member's surgery.

In the past, when Wu was working in other places in China, he had only worked five or six months in one location at a time, at most. After his terms were over, he would go back home to take care of the kids and the elderly in his family.

What he did not expect is that he would be trapped indefinitely, or so it seemed, on a construction site in a foreign country.

By April 2022, he had been in Indonesia for five and a half years. During this time, he marked three Chinese New Years at Delong Phase II, and two at Phase III (or PT Gunbuster Nickel Industry, the third venture of Jiangsu Delong), until there was no work left to do as a construction worker. Wu was worried about not being able to go home. With little savings left after finishing the jobs, he was unable to afford a trip back to China without interrupting the remittances he was sending to his family back home. Finding himself faced the choice of either not returning home or cutting off his family's only source of income, anxiety consumed him.



The note reads "I am in Kendari, I need to go home!"

At first, Wu learned through his co-workers that some companies in Indonesia were recruiting. He proceeded to contact a hiring manager to better understand the situation.

"At that time, [the manager] was not talking about their own company or Delong. Instead, he was posing as Xiamen Xiangyu. I searched for Xiamen Xiangyu on the Internet, and discovered that they have a good reputation. That's why I thought I should come," Wu said.

Xiamen Xiangyu is, indeed, a reputable company. It is a Chinese state-owned investment enterprise and one of the main investors and stakeholders of PT OSS.

However, after arriving in Indonesia, Wu's experiences turned his expectations upside down. He felt scammed.

Like many of his fellow Chinese workers overseas, as soon as Wu got off the plane, his passport was confiscated. He didn't think much of it initially as it was presented to him as standard procedure.

Later, it turned out that the nine-hour workday was in fact nine-and-a-half hours, and was expected to be accomplished without either rest or a corresponding increase in wages. And even with that, the construction project demanded greater labor efficiency: "For example, say you pull half an hour out of the nine-and-a-half to sit down and take a rest, for a cigarette break or something, well, if they take a photo of that [i.e., of a worker resting with a cigarette], bam! That's a 2,000 CNY [about 300 USD] fine," Wu said. He found the situation unreasonable.

According to Wu, it was promised that his wages would be settled monthly. The only exception would be the first month's wages which would be withheld. Wu was okay with that arrangement. However, after Wu arrived at the construction site, he was not paid a single penny for four months. When he was finally paid, the company still withheld more than 20,000 CNY (about 3,000 USD) from the wages due him.

"For the purpose of future disciplinary actions, they said. 'If you have all the money, what if you stir up trouble and get into fights later on? Money's got to be deducted for that (bad action). Some money has to be kept for that.' And that's what they said," said Wu.

It is an unlawful practice for companies to issue fines for individuals who violate company rules and regulations. Companies are not enforcement authorities and therefore do not possess the power to impose such fines. Despite this, wage deduction is a common practice of companies and is a tactic used to control workers' actions.

Six months later, in April 2020, Wu's contract term ended. He asked his employer to send him home under due process. However, with the COVID-19 global outbreak and China's "Five One" international aviation policy which set a strict quota on the number of international flights to China under a strict time interval, it became extremely difficult for workers to get a hold of a ticket home. Airfares for flights both to and from China drastically rose. For the companies in Indonesia, it also became difficult to recruit workers from China, giving them an incentive to keep laborers around for longer periods of time.

So the question becomes: Why wouldn't Wu just purchase a ticket himself to fly back to China?

For workers like Wu, the situation was more complicated than the simple purchase of an airline ticket. Passport confiscation, as a common practice for Chinese companies, limits workers' movements and gives companies a disproportionate power in deciding whether workers can stay or leave their workplace. Wage withholding also means that when workers like Wu want to leave, they need to take their hard-earned money into consideration: should they continue to work for a chance to get their money back from their employers or leave on the chance that they might never see that money?

Wu heard that some of his coworkers had asked the company to return their passports and gone home at their own expense. Some workers even asked their families back home for money just to buy their return tickets.

Wu, though, hesitated. "Well," he said, "for a regular laborer, spending 10,000 CNY [around 1,500 USD] for a one way ticket to China? " He found that highly unreasonable, so he waited. That was in mid-2020.

In the following months while Wu was waiting, ticket prices continued to rise. In October 2021, direct flights from Jakarta to China were raised to 23,800 CNY (around 3,400 USD), while China's "Five One" aviation restriction policy required direct flights. If Wu were to pay out of pocket, that would

cost the equivalent of two to three months worth of labor. And this is not even accounting for his living expenses.

Companies have grown reluctant to pay for transportation for workers like Wu, who only signed for a term of six months.

But Wu was growing desperate. In October 2021, he made the decision to pay out of pocket for the ticket home. But this time around, his company refused to return his passport. He was left with no options.

Two and a half years after his first arrival, Wu was still working at the same construction site. For many Chinese workers like him, the industrial park became an isolated territory with only an entrance and no exit.

The industrial plant's security force patrols the area 24/7. According to Chinese workers' accounts, the plant's security force is more interested in protecting the industrial plant's interests than the workers' lives and safety. Many have witnessed their fellow workers confronted by force when they tried to raise issues with their employers.

Violence against workers goes unacknowledged and unreported. Workers' deaths in the industrial park overshadowed workers' will to resist their employers and their struggles for their due wages and rights. Fearful of the factories' security and other repercussions from their employers, some workers tried to contact the Chinese consulates and embassy. Disappointingly, it was reported that the consulates decided to hand the issue back to the industrial plant instead of investigating the issue, leaving the workers to face possible retaliations yet again.

In Wu's time in Indonesia, some of his fellow workers escaped the industrial plant and found smugglers willing to transport them across Malaysia so they could get home. Others made their way to Jakarta with the help of the translation software on their mobile phones. Cautious, Wu chose to continue working while waiting for the company's arrangement. He did not go on any of the strikes or raise any issues with his employers. "They can't find any fault in my work. The company has no reason to make it difficult for me," Wu said.

After the construction project ended, Wu was left with no work to do. Living off of savings, he sank into an even deeper anxiety. When would he be able to go home? How could he overcome the various COVID testing requirements? What if he was stuck in a Jakarta hotel forever?

If his life was filled with endless labor before, it was now full of restless waiting and torturous anxiety.

4. Liu and Li's Story in Serbia

Liu Xia (pseudonym) went to Serbia to work for a better life for his family. Despite his hopes, he could have never guessed at the problems that would ensue following his arrival. Arbitrary wage reductions and terrible living conditions were the least of his worries. Facing COVID deaths, a lack of workplace protection, failures to secure a legal work visa, and mounting COVID-related travel restrictions, he felt exhausted, afraid, and forgotten. Left behind by governments, embassies and his employer, here, he recounts his story to China Labor Watch.

Liu Xia is an unmarried 27-year-old man from Henan. According to his account, the average worker made less than 1,000 CNY (around 150 USD) a month where he lived. Presenting a difficult environment to succeed within, Liu witnessed his parents going from one gig to the next just to cover basic necessities.

As a young man, Liu didn't have much higher economic prospects than his parents. In his previous work at Foxconn, Liu was paid about 3,000 to 4,000 CNY (around 418 to 557 USD) a month. After leaving Foxconn, Liu again found himself at a loss. New jobs in the city could be hard to come by for someone like him, a seemingly "low-skilled" migrant worker. His freedom of movement and upward mobility was severely restricted by the local and national policies that place caps on individuals' work and education based on where they were born. He is not alone in this struggle, as thousands of Chinese migrant workers both before and after him have faced similar roadblocks to their success.

Growing desperate for a new source of income, Liu saw a hiring notice from a recruiter for a general laborer position in Serbia. He contacted the hiring manager and was promised a monthly pay of 9,000 CNY (around 1,252 USD). The hiring manager also promised benefits for this position including guaranteed reimbursement for work-related injuries and medical treatments. To Liu, that was an enticing offer. Considering his limitations at home, Liu decided to leave the country. He paid the 10,000 CNY (around 1,309 USD) intermediary service fee – a big commitment for him.

Not knowing much about Serbia, Liu's only knowledge about the country came from the hiring manager. "I was shown some videos and some photos," he said. "I just thought Serbia was a European country where workers' conditions were better."

Liu would later learn that his optimism was misplaced.

Liu brought only some personal items when he left for Serbia, a common practice for Chinese migrant workers when they leave home for a job. From what he was told, the company would provide everything else.

Upon landing in Serbia, his passport was taken away. “That’s to apply for a work visa,” he was told. But neither he nor his fellow workers have seen their passport since that day.

Without their passports, workers like Liu often hesitate to seek aid from the local police. At the end of the day, they have no way to prove their identity and legal status and therefore have practically no protection in this foreign environment. But even with their passports confiscated, workers still did not receive a valid work visa as promised. Given the agreement signed by China and Serbia which allows visa-free entry, companies often exploit the opportunity to bring in cheap labor without work permits. This puts workers at a further disadvantage because they lack the proper work status necessary for legal protections in Serbia.

Liu was sure he would sign a contract with his employer after arriving in Serbia. Despite his online research into working abroad, the job was completely different than the one advertised by the recruiter. The 9,000 CNY (around 1,257 USD) monthly salary rate became a 300 CNY (around 41 USD) daily wage. Liu had a 10-hour workday. Overtime was calculated when his work day exceeded 10 hours, at a rate of 38 CNY (around 5.30 USD) per hour. “But lately the foreman arbitrarily adjusted that [overtime] rate to 35 CNY (around 4.80 USD) per hour,” Liu said, unhappy about his employer’s action. To a migrant worker from a rural area, this pay, even just a few CNY—which is the equivalent of a few cents in USD, is very important. Getting a higher-paid job is the sole reason many of these workers leave home and travel hundreds, or even thousands of miles to cities and regions they are not familiar with. This type of deception and arbitrary deduction is therefore upsetting. On top of these wage deceptions, the company does not offer sickness and work injury compensations either, though those things were promised.

“The bathroom is always blocked, blocked solid. So the smell is always bad throughout the entire dormitory area. Food is alright, though it often smells off, but we fill our bellies, and I haven’t been sick. The energy [we get from our food] is enough to say the least,” said Liu.

Another worker, Li Junshi, worked in the same facility. As a seasoned worker and a welder, his experiences were different in some ways from those of Liu Xia, yet similar in others.

“It’s like living in a pile of trash,” Li said, after a grueling thirteen months in Serbia working for Zijin Mining Operations. As a seasoned worker, he was careful about reading his contract and negotiating with his employer for his rights. Yet he was still taken advantage of. Recounting his experience to China Labor Watch while in quarantine, due to the process and unfair treatment he experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, he was ready to fight for his rights.

Li works in equipment installation and welding. In 2017, a random work connection introduced him to his current boss, the head of a subcontracting firm in Serbia. He subsequently kept his current boss on his contact list. In 2020, Li found himself in a difficult job market due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was when he saw a hiring notice posted by his acquaintance. Li called to discuss the job post in Serbia, circumventing the pricey labor recruiters.

Hearing that he would be paid a day rate of 400 CNY (around 55 USD), Li was reluctant to go to Serbia. “You know, I can get a similar pay in China,” he said. But over the phone, the boss promised a raise after two months. Li eventually accepted the offer.

Li was careful. He read through the contract before signing, and kept a photo of the contract, despite not being offered a copy. “All that it [the contract] said was [that workers need] to follow the company’s rules and regulations, and then [that they needed] to work 10 hours per day, but there was no mention of the pay,” he said.

Like many other workers, after landing in Serbia, Li’s passport was taken away, essentially trapping him there. And once the workers are trapped in a foreign country, many companies start squeezing them out of their last penny.

Li had understood that he would be working for Zijin mining, but on the contract, another boss was listed. “He’s a subcontractor. He probably has his own company,” Li said.

This relationship later proved to be problematic. Despite being told that his daily pay rate would be 400 CNY (around 56 USD), Li knew that his boss reported a higher pay rate to Zijin and took the rest for himself.

“[My] boss told us to hand in two [Chinese] bank cards, one with the Chinese Industrial and Construction Bank (ICBC), the other with the Chinese Construction bank (CCB). My boss kept the one card with ICBC, and Zijin made direct deposits [of my wages] to that account. I got text notifications from that bank telling me that Zijin paid me 600 CNY (around 83 USD) per day. And after the withdrawal our pay would be sent to the CCB account. There I was still getting the 400 CNY (around 55 USD) per day rate. Also Zijin’s pay was after-tax. But my boss would deduct another round of taxes,” Li said.

Li only learned he was being taken advantage of because he activated the text notification service with his bank. During the interview we conducted with him, it became apparent that he believed his boss was performing the same trick on a lot of his fellow workers. However, he had no power to change this arrangement.

After two to three months in Serbia, Li demanded the raise he had been promised. But, at this time, his boss came up with all sorts of excuses, claiming, for example, that Li’s skills were subpar. Ultimately, Li gave up asking. During the time Li worked in Serbia, he was also promoted to group leader, but he did not get the wage increase typically associated with the added responsibilities.

On top of the unrealized promises and wage theft, Li’s boss took advantage of the workers in other ways.

“We didn’t have weekends or holidays,” Li recalled. “If we didn’t go to work, deductions were taken from our wages. I had a 300 CNY/day (around 42 USD) subsidy for the two days of Chinese New Year holiday, but only if I worked through it. And that was all the overtime pay and holiday subsidy I had. But even for that I had to demand it from the boss.”

Li also heard that some workers who were injured at work would only be given uncompensated time off. Medicine and hospital visits were not reimbursed. “That’s why I’m very careful at work,” Li said.

Though Li was careful at work and avoided injury, he was hit with a 5,000 CNY (around 698 USD) fine that he was notified about in a Wechat group chat one day. That fine was imposed for not fastening his seatbelt once.

Li immediately went to his boss to argue his case. His boss reassured him, promising to pay him back if he did not violate another clause in the regulations in the next three months. But a year passed, and Li got nothing. Whenever Li asked for the money back, the boss would beat around the bush.

“I didn’t even sign the violation notice,” Li told us angrily. “Besides, according to the site regulations, the fine was only supposed to be up to 200 CNY (around 28 USD).”

Li wanted to go to the project manager to escalate his case. “But my boss told me not to,” said Li. “He said he was going to reimburse me in the following month, and that it had nothing to do with the project management. It was our own regulations. And I was like, ‘well, if you do reimburse me, great. If not, then nevermind.’ I’m going to sort things out after I go back home.” Li felt determined.

According to Li, his boss also cut corners on workers’ living conditions. Li recalled living with four to five roommates. A standard room could only accommodate four people, but in some cases, additional beds would be squeezed into the dorm rooms.

“During summer, the summer heat goes right through the single-layered walls. It was unbearably hot,” he recalled. “It’s bad.”

The company’s cafeteria was equally subpar. Even though Li insisted that he went abroad to make money and was willing to endure harsh conditions, he could not help but note “...go to any family out there; they’re probably eating better than us.”

“It’s our boss’s cafeteria, and it’s not comparable to Zijin’s own cafeteria,” Li added, cognizant that working for a subcontractor brought with it a number of disadvantages.

According to Li, other construction and mining teams had better protections. “The foreigners [locals] at the site wore gas masks at the smelting plant. But other workers on our team were given medical masks,” Li said.

The piercing odor of sulfur dioxide irritated his nose and might have poisoned his body, but he had a job to do. Often, he felt too exhausted to go shopping for fruit and cigarettes after a long workday and had to ask the logistics team to buy them for him at an inflated price.

If wage cuts and terrible conditions were not enough, Li also witnessed a site manager at Zijin beat up his coworker. He encouraged the coworker to sue, but the worker refused out of fear of retaliation.

“Nobody cares about us,” he said.

COVID-19 only aggravated the situation, leaving Li exhausted and accumulating mounting fees. An outbreak at the site left two workers in the room with Li bedridden. “They coughed, sneezed,” he recalled, “and didn’t have the strength to get out of bed for a week. I told them to find the boss immediately, but the boss said it’s just seasonal flu...”

After a year, he decided not to extend his contract and applied to go home for a “family emergency.” However, returning to China was difficult due to the pandemic restrictions and skyrocketing airfares. All workers had to apply to the company for approval in order to go home, and the process could take over a month. Li told us at the time of the interview that around 200 workers were still waiting in the queue for their turn to go home.

Luckily, Li was scheduled to fly and was quarantined in Beijing at the time of the interview, but his problems did not end there. According to Li, his company had signed an agreement with him to reimburse the quarantine expenses incurred during his journey to his hometown. He was also promised a subsidy for the fourteen-day quarantine.

“I told the company that the amount [on the agreement] was definitely not enough to cover the quarantine cost,” he said. “But they said ‘it’s only a formality. Just sign.’” So he did. But this time, he took yet more precautions in interacting with his employer: he recorded the entire phone conversation he had with his boss, and deliberately wrote the wrong ID number on the agreement to invalidate it.

“When I get to Shanghai, I am calling the police. I had to pay the quarantine fee at Beijing out of pocket, but I had no money for the Shanghai quarantine or for Shenyang [my hometown],” Li said, determined to defend his rights and have his employer pay as promised. However, there was still a long way to go before he reached home and got the justice he sought.

Even if he had had the money to pay for it, the quarantine might not have served its purpose. Just the day before the interview, the hotel staff told him he would have a roommate.

“I immediately refused. I didn’t even know that person. How am I supposed to quarantine if there is a roommate? I told them, ‘as long as the room is clean, I wouldn’t mind if it had no windows. I’d take that [rather than a roommate].’ But if they assign me a roommate, I don’t have any other options.” he told us, resigned. All of the deceptions he experienced along the way have made him cautious, but precautions cannot resolve everything.

Fed up with all the issues he faced in the past year, Li has come up with a plan: “I am going to Zijin’s headquarters next to talk to their HR and ask about the wages and the ticket [for his fine]. I know they have my time log. I also have my log for six to seven months, which should be enough. [If they claim to have no such record] I can ask them how they could be paying me without a timelog.”

Determined to advocate for his rightful compensation, Li said he is also planning to get his quarantine reimbursement and wage raise.

“I didn’t get my money. Where did the money go? If HR tells me to find my boss, I will go find him. If he refuses to deal with it, I will see him in court,” said Li.

5. Wang and Zou Story in Indonesia

Chinese workers overseas are largely men. Far away from home and from their established social network, much of the Chinese workers' experience is characterized by the management's abuse of power and the enforcing of rules that contribute to their own interest. Poor working and living conditions, bad contracting practices, wage arrears, and passport confiscations are a few issues manifested within these spaces. For female workers abroad, experiences of labor abuse are further complicated as they also face discrimination, harassment, and power imbalances because of their gender.

Wang's Story

While in Indonesia, Wang Tingfu (pseudonym) worked for an industrial plant called OSS as a crane operator where she was the victim of an unfortunate accident. She subsequently returned home. Wang's facility held a couple thousand workers, mostly Indonesian. Around one fifth of the workers were female. "There, women mostly work on operating things, looking at monitors, or like me, operating cranes," Wang said.

According to Wang, due to the gender imbalance and the remote, isolated location of the industrial plant, female workers like her received a lot of unsolicited attention from bored men. "The men would find all kinds of ways to add women to their contacts through chat groups or acquaintances, yeah," she said. : "If they were my coworkers, they would get me food, you know, the type of things men do to coax women into trusting them," she continued.

But Wang did not find her coworkers to be much of an issue. Her issue, instead, lay in the treatment the female workers received from the company management.

"Previously, there was this man who got together with this woman, and they [management] found out. The two had to quit and were sent home," she said. "A couple of months' wages were withheld, and never given back to them. I also remember from a chat group posting that a man got involved with a woman. I think he was fined 10,000 CNY (around 1,400 USD) and got suspended."

According to Wang, if male and female workers are caught in the same bed, disciplinary actions follow. However, the same rule did not apply to the facility's management.

“The managers all have their own dorm rooms,” Wang said. “The management, at the director level or above, all of them have women.”

Wang herself was also harassed by a manager in the PR department. She ignored the erotic videos sent to her, and the direct summons for her to come to his room. “But when I needed to go home, because of this, I had to wait in quarantine for months, because the return schedule was arranged by him, you know,” she recalled.

Wang implied that because of her refusal to comply with his manager's request, the manager abused his power to put her return to China on hold, essentially trapping her in an endless process of quarantining to wait for her turn to be scheduled home.

Knowing the arbitrary power that the management held in her workplace and feeling concerned about her return home, Wang never spoke up about the sexual harassment she experienced when she was working in PT OSS. Instead, she buried her sense of powerlessness and injustice deep in her mind and carried on with her life.

Unlike Wang, another female worker, Dongzhi Zou, did not lie low after she received sexual advances from the higher management, and she later had to face the consequences.

Zou's Story

Zou Dongzhi is a single mother to a 13-year-old daughter. To make a living for her family, she decided to leave the country to pursue a higher income. That decision led her to Indonesia, where she worked on several ventures of the Chinese industrial giant Jiangsu Delong.

“In the last couple of years, I was anxious to go abroad to pay off my debts,” she told us. “I had been operating a small workshop [in China] doing monochrome printing, but then monochrome printing was eliminated from the market. I lost a lot of money, and so I went abroad to pay off the debt.”

Like many others, she commissioned a labor service company in order to get a job abroad. “At the time, I spent more than 10,000 CNY (around 1,400 USD),” she recalled.

Immediately upon her arrival, Zou felt taken advantage of. “I didn’t sign an agreement with [the recruiter]. That was a scam,” she said. “You know, for these couple of years, it’s been one scam after another. I haven’t earned that much money, haven’t even paid off much of my debt either. At the time, the labor service agent was a fellow from Yantai, who drove us to the spot to apply for the job ourselves. So basically, they just brought us there, and we really didn’t need an intermediary. That’s 10,000 CNY (around 1,400 USD) for free [for them]. Then I came to this shitty environment at Delong.” Zou tried to find the labor service and argue her case. After making physical threats against the agent, she received 1,000 CNY (around 140 USD) back, an amount she decided to be satisfied with. .

It turns out that Zou had to pay for more than just getting the job. Because the return ticket cost around 30,000 CNY (around 4,200 USD), and because she wanted her trip abroad to be worth the trouble, she stayed, despite finding it difficult to adjust to the living conditions in Indonesia.

“Gradually I got used to it,” she said. “And that’s why I continued [to work for Delong] for three years.”



Photo taken outside a dormitory

What Zou called Delong is not a specific factory or facility. Instead, it refers to multiple entities under Jiangsu Delong. As a Chinese industrial giant, Jiangsu Delong rode the trains of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Indonesia's National Development Strategy, and has under it multiple joint ventures—mega industrial parks such as PT Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry (PT VDNI), PT Obsidian Stainless Steel (PT OSS), PT Gunbuster Nickel Indonesia (PT GNI), and PT Dexin Steel Indonesia (PT DSI). Workers colloquially refer to them as Delong Phase I, Delong Phase II, Delong Phase III, and Delong Phase IV, respectively. After their contract terms end, workers are often transferred from one industrial park to another to start a new contract to address these industrial plants' labor needs.

At the time of the interview, Zou had only been transferred to PT OSS a couple of months earlier, after her last contract ended.

As a woman, she was put in a position considered less labor-intensive than others, and she was assigned to work on central control over some facilities. When she started, her monthly base rate was 7,000 CNY (around 976 USD). Rate increases are based on workers' time at a facility. As she had

been working for Delong for over three years at the time of her interview, and because she got a small promotion to Team Leader, her monthly pay rate was around 14,000 CNY (around 1,952 USD) after tax and insurance deductions.

As someone with only a high school education, Zou was content with her pay. Despite feeling taken advantage of by her labor service agent, the fact that she avoided an outsourced contractor and signed directly with Delong provided some degree of stability, unlike many other workers who were recruited by Delong through third party labor service intermediaries or subcontractors to evade legal liability. Workers can get into worse conditions simply if they are hired by these third party contractors.

This didn't mean that Zou escaped unfair treatment.

When she signed her contracts with Delong, she noticed several things: some clauses had been left blank, the name of her employer was notably missing from the form, and she was prohibited from taking photographs of this contract. These all constitute malpractice and are actions that allow Zou's employer to change its terms arbitrarily. "They would yell at me, saying that we can't take photos," she said. But according to what she heard from her coworkers, this was a common occurrence for many. Yet, because she was stuck abroad, her options were greatly limited: she could either accept the bad contract, start to work, and get paid, or she could fly back home paying for the trip with money she didn't have.

The blank signature line resulted in a serious impact. After the contract had been taken from her, Zou discovered that her employer had been filled in as Shenlong, a Jiangsu Delong shell company. . According to Zou's coworkers, this was a common practice. And many suspect that this was Jiangsu Delong's attempt at insulating itself from legal liability.

But this deception was the least of her problems.

Towards the end of 2021, she left her previous facility and signed a new contract. Her new workplace was in PT OSS, where she completed the same line of work in center control. "There isn't a term on the contract. The company just decides when you'll leave."

In this new facility, women make up a small number of the workers. “There are very few women here, so in the managers’ eyes, me and Linna [Zou’s friend, pseudonym] were fools. Among us in central control, the women, some women have several boyfriends,” Zou said.

What Zou is referring to here is the scarcity of women in the industrial plant. As a result, all of the women were pursued by their male coworkers and managers to some capacity. This was the case regardless of whether either party was married. According to Zou, many women also take advantage of the situation and receive promotions or positions with lighter workloads through their connections with men. Zou and her friend in the facility, however, never engaged in such a practice.

“Most [women] have boyfriends, [and] someone like me is in the minority,” she continued. “It really depends on the women. Some are out there trying, and they can’t wait to get in bed with the management so that they are protected, not bullied.”

There was an undertone of judgment in Zou’s statements, assuming the women, in this case, to be taking advantage of the situation. However, what she did not mention directly was the systemic abuse of power exercised by men who are in positions of power. And in Zou’s experience, her refusal to engage in such behavior did, in certain ways, leave her vulnerable and, in Zou’s own words, “unprotected.”

A managing director at Zou’s facility in PT OSS, her last workplace, had explicitly and implicitly asked her to start a sexual relationship similar to those entered into by some of her female coworkers. But Zou refused, and later confronted the director and accused him of sexual harassment. That led up to an interaction during which the director told her that “...you won’t get away with this.”

She later reported the issue to the industrial plant’s management.

After that, rumor began to spread in her facility that she was ‘wrong in the head’ and was suffering from paranoia.

Later, in February 2022, she and her friend Linna were fired from the facility and were told to leave the factory plant’s premises in two days. Her termination note cited “paranoia” as a reason for her dismissal, while her friend’s said “cardiovascular issues.”

“Linna doesn’t have heart problems. She just sometimes can’t breathe when she gets bullied. But she doesn’t have heart problems. She had it checked at the hospital already, ” Zou said.

Without any other options, Zou was transferred to Jakarta for quarantine in preparation for a flight home. But after the quarantine period ended, she was informed that the results of her COVID test disqualified her from flying home.

“I’m not sick, and I’m not experiencing any discomfort,” she wrote in an email pleading for help.

She was informed that she needed to wait six weeks for arrangements to be made for her to take the next flight home. However, as she was the only source of income for her family back home, waiting was not a viable option. She applied for another job in Indonesia, but her request for her ID and passports was rejected by PT OSS, despite her new employer’s request for the hard copy of her passport “for visa purposes.”

Stuck, Zou had nowhere to go. She called and wrote to the Chinese embassy in Indonesia, but had not received any response at the time of the interview.

6. Lu and Zhang's Stories in Turkey

Two workers, both nearly fifty years old, decided to go to Turkey. Applying for higher-paying jobs overseas at the Hunutelu Thermal Power Project, they hoped to build a better life for themselves and their families.

According to the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) website, the Hunutelu Thermal Power Project is China's largest direct investment project in Turkey. It is located in the Adana province in the southern region of the country. With a total investment of 1.7bn USD, the project is regarded as a flagship project of both China's BRI and the Middle Passage project, Turkey's own national project.



Image of an industrial plant. Image sourced from the internet.

Despite the grand scale of this project, there was no parallel increase in workplace protections. Some workers worked at least nine hours a day, receiving only stale food to keep themselves going. Worse, many workers were owed wages while others contracted COVID-19 due to inadequate preventive measures. With their health and safety placed on the backburner during the pandemic, many of these individuals are still suffering from the after-effects of the virus today. Others who were injured at work

did not receive compensation and instead had to pay out of pocket for any medical expenses they incurred.

The experiences of two workers convey this shared pain:

Lu's Story

Lu Jiang (pseudonym) had a quiet and peaceful life. Until 2017, he had been running a pig farm in his rural hometown. This line of business lasted for nearly two decades of his life. It was his livelihood. According to Lu, he “saved up 700,000 to 800,000 CNY (around 97,000 to 110,000 USD)” from his twenty-year business, an impressive sum which, in the town he comes from, gives him a well-off status.

However, in 2017 the local government ruled that his pig farm was an illegal concern. As a result, his career was abruptly terminated. In his rural hometown, he had few options other than turning to crop farming. Despite the massive amount of manual labor involved in this career, his income would only reach around 40,000 to 50,000 CNY (around 5,500 to 6,900 USD) in a good year. This was not nearly enough to live on, and it left Lu dissatisfied with his situation. According to Lu, a good amount of the income had to be reinvested into the land and therefore left very little profit for his family.

So, Lu, who had just turned forty-six at the time, tried to find ways to improve his income. His family needed him.

“In the winter of 2021, I had been learning welding for two months and saw that this company was recruiting. I contacted them saying my skills weren’t good enough, so I was looking for a place that wasn’t too demanding. [he hiring agent] said that was fine, and they offered pretty good wages [in Turkey]. The daily rate was pretty good, at 550 CNY (around 69 USD) minimum, so I was like ‘yeah, that’s good.’”

As a man from rural China, Lu was not familiar with the world of overseas labor.

“I didn’t sign a [service] contract. This was my first time going abroad. I didn’t know anything,” said Lu. When he was introduced to his employer through a recruiter, Lu was supposed to sign a service commission contract. “Later on, I asked around and found that nobody working at that thermal power plant had signed any service commissions contracts,” he said.

Never having left China before and unfamiliar with traveling procedures, Lu arrived in Turkey in May 2021. His passport was taken away immediately per “standard procedure.”

“It was taken away without explanation,” he said. It was not reasonable, but there was nothing I could do.”

Looking forward to the high income, he overlooked the other suspicious bits and pieces about the process. After landing in Turkey, although he had signed a labor contract, his employer never provided a signature on Lu’s contract. Lu did not receive a copy of this contract either.



Image of construction workers.

These were only minor issues compared to what happened later on.

“After I arrived at the work site, they gave me a [occupational] test immediately,” said Lu. “When I failed, they transferred me to another position. There was no probationary period. They started paying me at an unskilled worker’s rate instead [of the rate I’d been promised]. I didn’t ask how much the unskilled worker rate was. They just told me I was getting paid 300 CNY (around 42 USD) a day.”

Even though his daily rate had plummeted from 550 CNY (around 69 USD) to 300 CNY (around 42 USD), Lu had no choice but to accept it.

“At that point, even if I wanted to come back, I couldn’t,” he said. “Getting home would have been difficult. I had to pay out of pocket for plane tickets that were 80,000 to 90,000 CNY [around 11,100 to 12,400 USD]. That was too expensive.”

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent inflation in airfares trapped a lot of workers like Lu overseas. Stranded, Lu and his fellow workers had little choice but to accept whatever life – or, more accurately, his employers – offered.

Lu never went to his boss to discuss his pay. “Well because, I knew that even if I went to talk to him, he’d just find ways to dodge my questions. Plus our wages don’t come from this boss. They come from the actual contractor of this project,” Lu explained.

With no overtime rates, insurance, weekends, or injury-related protections, Lu worked odd jobs at the construction site, without a fixed position. He worked at least nine hours everyday, not accounting for mealtimes. Despite working such an intense schedule, his daily basic dietary needs were not met.

“Rice—we ate animal feed rice, the kind fed to chickens and pigs,” Lu, a past pig-farmer, indignantly said on the phone. “Animal-feed-grade rice would be fine. But we have lots of rats here, and they are too lazy to even pick out the rat droppings. It’s all mixed in with the rice. Let’s put hygiene aside, even. The rice has dried up into lumps and grown moldy. The meat and vegetables—if they weren’t rotten, they wouldn’t feed them to us. Diarrhea is common.”

Not only was he eating terribly, Lu also had to carefully avoid injuring himself while working. Transporting building materials, the type of odd jobs he often was assigned, could cause severe injuries. “Being smashed in the leg or something [along these lines] happens in basically every team, basically every month,” Lu said.

The captain often warned them not to get injured, saying that “[y]our life could be saved if you’re rescued in time. You know, in Turkey, once you’re injured, the mortality rate is very high.”

The owner of Lu's subcontracting company made a fortune on its workers' labor while cutting corners on their living and working conditions.

"Money the [project contractor] company deposited into our bank accounts was supposed to be ours. But he [the subcontractor's manager] exaggerated work progress and demanded money back from us to cover the fines. Every month, we had to return 3000 to 4000 CNY [around 416 to 554 USD]. The highest amount was 3800 CNY [around 527 USD]. I calculated it. [The total amount of] the money I returned to the boss was more than 27,000 CNY [around 3,740 USD]."

"Chinese laws don't work there [in Turkey]. We have to keep a low profile and cause no trouble. If you do, it becomes very difficult to get around. When you face injustice, the only thing you can do is to deal with it after going back [to China]," he said with a sigh.

Lu's health deteriorated significantly due to the harsh living conditions and exhausting work.

"On around June 10th, I think, I found that my blood pressure was high, so I didn't go to work," he said.

On June 10th, his contracted term had passed, but his scheduled return to China was delayed.

"Actually, during the time I was there, fewer and fewer people came to work there," Lu told us. "If he [the outsourced subcontractor] allowed us to go home before or by the contracted term, there would be no one left to work. He didn't explicitly say this, but you know [this to be true] if you think a little bit about it." Lu continued, commenting on his boss, "You know, some people were here to work for seven, eight, nine months. If he wants you to go home, you'll be able to go; if not, he won't buy the tickets for you. Before your term's reached, [he'd say] 'You get the ticket yourself,' but he wouldn't say that after [the contracted term is reached]. He'd say, 'There are no flights, or there are no tickets available.'"

Unfamiliar with the language or even the process of getting an airline ticket and with his passport taken, Lu depended on his employer to send him home. After more than 50 days of delay after his contracted term ended, and with health concerns, by the beginning of July, Jiang Lu finally was able to go home.

Lu's boss, however, still owes him his wages for May and June, and it is unknown when Lu will receive the full payment.

But Lu Jiang said he still has plans to work abroad.

“But definitely not for a Chinese boss or for a BRI project. They just rip us off too much,” said Lu.

Zhang's Story

Zhang Liang (pseudonym) was also hired by the same subcontractor as Lu.

Zhang arrived in Turkey five months after Lu. When asked about his experience working overseas for the past 10 months, Zhang said it was difficult to fully explain what he'd been through. Besides eating spoiled food and rotten meat like Lu Jiang, Zhang was paid less than promised and was also owed wages. By the end of his term, he was experiencing a number of work-related conditions including high blood pressure, high blood sugar, brain atrophy, and vision loss.

In early August of 2022, Zhang Liang was owed three-month's wages and could not go home. He went to the Chinese embassy in Turkey along with 26 other fellow workers to protest. This was after his fellow workers' previous protest was proven effective.

“The 27 of us were willing to publicize our passport numbers [i.e., publicize their identities ,] said Zhang. “We went on strike. We were striking for our wages.”

This is not the first time Zhang Liang had dealt with the embassy. Earlier, he had injured his eye at work. His employer, however, took no action. Zhang was only able to receive some compensation after pleading with the embassy for help.

“I'm still a few hundred CNY short,” he told us. “I didn't ask for it. It's too much effort to ask for my money back.”



Image of construction workers, sourced from the Internet.

For Zhang, everything started back in September 2021. He was still working odd jobs in China when he saw a job ad on WeChat. He contacted the job recruiter and was soon interested in work overseas. Without signing a formal contract, Zhang Liang embarked on a journey to Turkey in early October.

“The agent was also a liar. He told me that [the pay] was 10,000 CNY (around 1,385 USD) a month. That would make it 330 CNY [a day] (around 46 USD) on average. But once I got there, the boss said he would only pay me 320 CNY (around 44 USD) [per day],” Zhang Liang said.

Like Liang Lu, Zhang’s health deteriorated in Turkey; he was working as many as nine to twelve hours a day under poor living conditions.

“I was injured twice,” he said. “The first time [it happened], they compensated me. The second time, I went to the city hospital, just in time for the Turkish Eid al-Adha festival. So the hospitals were on holiday, especially the ophthalmology. I couldn’t find [any clinics]. After that, I went to the provincial hospital. That was more expensive. My boss was not happy about it and would not reimburse me. I

didn't know what to do. It was a total of more than 2,100 TRY (around 80 USD). I wasn't making a lot of money to begin with."

Without a contract, there are no formal channels for protection. He had to beg for things like going on leave to see a doctor, which annoyed him no end.

"Our captain said, 'What work injury do you have?'" Zhang said. "You have no work-related injury [compensation], no medical insurance. You can go see the doctor all by yourself. We don't owe you anything.' That's what the boss said."

Zhang's boss did not care to step in, nor did the project's overall management.

"Like our bosses, they [project management] basically don't speak to us like humans," said Zhang. "They don't even look at us like workers. When you talk to them, they respond half-heartedly. I stopped trying to talk to them. Actually, on this matter, I asked them before. [They said] 'You want us to pay for your high blood pressure? You're out of your mind,' So I went to the general management. I asked, 'How are you going to fix this for me?' General management wouldn't do anything. [They said] go to your own boss. Project management wouldn't do a thing either."

Desperate, he pleaded for outside donations to cover a part of the medical expenses. Little did he know that in July, he would be hit by another round of bad news: he wouldn't be able to go back home and he was owed money. He was not alone in this as many of his coworkers experienced the same issue. Some decided to act.

Workers assembled in front of the Chinese embassy, and the bad publicity prompted the company to finally deal with workers' concerns. Zhang got three months of wages back, from May to July, on the promise that he would sign a contract.

"What the contract means is that after they paid me, from then on, the company is the company, and we are the subcontracting team. [And we are completely separate.] We've got nothing to do with them, and we can't file a lawsuit against them," Zhang Liang said. "We all signed it and [stamped it] with a fingerprint. If we don't sign, they won't pay us. I had to sign it to get paid."

This disclaimer seemed to have only served to prevent the workers from fighting for their rights—work injury compensation, for example. Other clauses in the agreement prevented workers from disputing the traveling and quarantine fees for their return to home—fees that the employers are supposed to bear according to many workers’ contract terms.

“Hotel quarantine costs, we’re still fighting for that,” said Zhang. “We’ve got this worker who had given the company’s phone number to the hotel. After calling [the company], the hotel said that ‘the company said no one by that name was employed by them.’ So the company won’t ever admit to hiring that person.”

Zhang Liang laughed nervously. He is back home now, but he must face a list of medical issues and a long, endless journey to defend his rights.

7. Kang's Story in His Own Words: Arduous Work and the Difficult Road Back to China

Writer's summary: Like many workers who want to improve their families' economic situation, Kang learned about work projects that were recruiting in Indonesia and decided to go abroad to earn a living. The labor recruitment intermediary he contacted falsely advertised itself as a representative of Xiamen Xiangyu. As of the time of this interview, Kang still does not know the name of the labor intermediary he signed a contract with, nor does he know if the contract is legal. The contract was taken away soon after it was signed, leaving many of his questions unanswered. When he arrived in Indonesia, Kang's passport was immediately confiscated. At the work site, he found many discrepancies between the promises of his boss and the reality of his working conditions. After beginning his work, he quickly experienced several labor violations including long working hours, dangerous conditions, and unpaid wages. Kang later injured his right leg at work, but due to the lack of resources at the company-owned clinic and concerns over the presence of COVID-19 in hospitals, he went back to work after only receiving a simple bandage. Even now, every time it rains Kang feels a twinge of pain in his bones presumably due to the lack of adequate medical treatment provided to him during that time. In mid-August 2020, he decided he couldn't do it anymore and chose to quit his position and wait for his turn to go home.

Kang's words:

For the past ten years, I have been floating around, from the Congo Gold Mine in Africa, to Serbia in the Southeast of Europe, to the Steel Factory in Indonesia, to Singapore. I have floated around many countries, and have eventually temporarily settled here in Indonesia. Here I will talk about my overseas workmates, Xiaole (pseudonym). He is an old friend of mine from Serbia, who later went to Indonesia.

In 2019, before the outbreak of the [COVID-19] virus, I went to the second phase [Virtue Dragon Phase II] and worked for six months. In April 2020, I applied to go home. Because of the virus, my boss didn't approve my application. I had to work for two more months at Phase II. Then there was work to do at Phase III. It has been 14 months since I arrived at Phase III.

I've been gone for two years. Of course my family is worried. I've got the elderly and the kids back home. My wife takes care of two children. So who doesn't want to go home? Now I'm not working.

The boss said my pay is going to be mailed back home after I'm back, so I haven't been giving money back home for the past six months. And from April to today, I've spent around 160,000 CNY [around 22,350 USD] [on cost of living].

My home is in Jiangsu. I've stayed in Tangshan, Tianjin, and I've also been to Dongbei too. But I am of a Northeastern temperament ↩—I do not beat around the bush. Before coming to Indonesia, I had done a lot of similar work. For those going abroad, if they are not paid at least a hundred CNY more than the domestic rate, they generally won't bother, right? Ten or so CNY more [than the rate back home] is usually not high enough for them to consider. The minimum is usually around 100 CNY (around 14 USD). So for me, I got into an accident back home, and I spent a lot of money on the surgery. The economy is tough, and I want to raise a family, earn a little more money, so I listened to my friends after they introduced me to work. My friend also heard the news from a friend. It's like that for us workers; you gotta make some friends when you're out there. And so I'm out of work then, and my friend had work to do at the time. So I asked, "Hey! Are they hiring over on your side?" He said, "Yeah, they are hiring in Indonesia, wanna go?" He passed me the boss's WeChat information and phone number. That's how I came here.

This is also my first time going abroad. At the time, they [the labor recruiters] didn't drop their name. They didn't talk about Virtue Dragon [i.e., the company that actually contracted the Industrial plant construction project] either. They said they were Xiamen Xiangyu. So I searched Xiamen Xiangyu online. [and found that] they have a pretty good reputation. That's why I considered coming here. Actually, Phase II was invested in by Virtue Dragon and Xiamen Xiangyu. The same thing happened to many other workers. No one had ever been here before, but had only heard from their friends thinking that it's alright working for this boss.

But after coming here, [I saw that] the situation was just different. I feel scammed.



Image shows workers taking a shuttle.

I don't really know what visa I got for Indonesia; it says 211 [note: likely referring to the B211A visa, a form of visitor's visa that does not grant holders the right to work]. After getting off the plane, before even exiting the airport, our passports were confiscated. So later on, other than the time when we had to extend our visa, we never had our passports with us. You would just go to the immigration bureau for a photo, and sign a form. I don't know what it was. So the moment when my passport was confiscated, I began to regret the decision. I just felt like it wasn't a normal company.

For meals, around 2,000 CNY(around 280 USD) is taken from our pay for board. I've never heard of that. But later on we disagreed [with that], and so we never paid them the money. But we did pay an information fee of 200 CNY (around 28 USD). They said that we are supposed to pay for that whenever we leave. When we arrived, they promised 26 to 27 work days a month, rainy days too. Nine

hours a day. But after we came, [we found that] the actual time [we were expected to work] was nine and a half hours. I do installations at a height, so I can't work at night. That's why I don't work overtime. But work here is so much more tiring. One sentence can quickly describe the situation: "no matter how much you do, they won't think you're working enough." The projects are paced really fast here. Back home, I would take home about 350 CNY [around 49 USD] [per day], and it's very chill. And if I worked overtime at night or in the morning, I would get around 450 CNY [around 63 USD] a day. Here, it's so tiring to work just during the day. No one would say you're doing too much work. Here's a way to describe the conditions: say out of the nine and a half hours, you have worked nine. You rest for half an hour, for a smoking break, or you're resting there sitting down. Bam! They take a photo, that's 2,000 CNY [around 280 USD] gone for fines.

When I came here, they said they would withhold one month's salary, and after that wages would be settled [monthly]. But after arriving, for three or four months, I never received a dime. I only had the 2,000 CNY [280 USD] that I brought here myself to survive. Four months in, we finally got the first payment of one month's pay. Later this year I heard that some of them [the workers] never got a cent from January to June, for half a year. They sent payment for January to June only from the end of June to the beginning of August. But they still withheld a part of that money too, they didn't clear the full amount. The reason given was, 'I am concerned that you'll get into trouble, start fights here, [and when that happens] you'll need to be fined. So there's gotta be 10,000 to 20,000 CNY [around 1,400 to 2,794 USD] put aside here [for fining purposes]'.

Generally the money is deposited directly into your bank account. And if you don't ask for money, they won't pay you proactively. You tell them that your family needs money or you need the money for this and that, then they go through your timesheet, and after that they will ask you to give them the account and [they'll] send you the money. That's how it works. It's not like what they've said, [that they would] withhold a month's [worth of pay] and afterwards they would settle for every month, then settle everything once and for all when you're leaving. That's not how they do it. Now, I probably have around less than 20,000 [CNY] [around 2,794 USD] withheld.

I work pretty hard, and they can never pick out any faults. And the pay is not that bad. But after six months, they made us continue to work [after the contract terms ended]. So we asked for a raise. They said that was impossible, and that they'd give us a raise next time around. For now, whatever they say is the rate is the amount given, and [there is] no raise, not a cent. They said we're lucky our pay doesn't get reduced. Now it's been six months. I can't do it anymore. If I stay for any longer, I probably won't

be able to go back within this year. If I don't go back this year, it will be the third year I've been here. In the past when I worked back home, I would have gone home after five, six months at the most. I've got elderly [relatives] and kids back home, and I gotta take care of them. But after I came here, I just couldn't go back.

The [safety] conditions of the site, basically, even when you wear protective shoes, it's not doing much [to protect you]. When it was November, that was when it was the hottest here. When it was so hot, and you stepped in the sand, at its deepest it would reach your knee. After coming to Phase III, you aren't even able to wear protective shoes. You have to wear rain boots.

The protective gear provided consists basically of safety belts and hard hats, which they provide for you. Also there are gloves. But there are no work clothes. When it rained, they gave us a pair of rainboots.

When it comes to the environment, it is what it is. It's often raining back-to-back at Phase III. It's either raining during the day, or during the night. Sometimes when it's raining, we still need to work out there without cover, sweating in the rain. Then you get sick. It's normal to catch a cold. Take some pills, and you just sleep through it. You'll be alright the next day.



Image provided by a worker of the worksite when it rains.

Our accommodation was one room for six people. To get from our dormitory to the shower, it was two miles. The bathroom is connected to the shower, so if you have diarrhea, you may not be able to hold it until you reach the bathroom. For a lot of stuff, it's all good if you don't talk about it. Once you do, it sounds like a joke. But that's the way it is.

When it comes to food, all I'm saying is that you're not starving to death. When we came, they claimed they would cover the room and board. But if you're not eating enough you still gotta buy stuff, you would need money, right? The canteen staff ration your meals. So everything is a specific size portion. If you're still hungry, then you get food on your own. Chicken, roast pork and shrimp are all off limits for me because they give me a bad stomach. Food is not offered for people who are not working. Since I stopped working, I haven't gone to the canteen for half a month. I've been eating [plain] noodles the entire time. Noodles in the morning, noodles in the afternoon. I had only one meal yesterday. It's hard to get groceries here too. And from April to now, I've spent more than 15,000 to 16,000 CNY [around 2,095 USD] [on food]. Now I'm just getting some veggies. Napa cabbages are around 10 CNY [around 1.4 USD] each here. The locals sell produce like the fresh markets do back

home, [they] sell produce right outside of the industrial park. The eggplants and potatoes they sell are all rotten. They're not selling anything nice.

When we were working, we left work at 11:00 [a.m.] for a lunch break and went back to work at 1:00 [p.m.]. Now, I don't work, and I'm free to make my own schedule every day. Anyway, there's no way to exit the industrial park, so I usually just use my phone, go out of the room for a walk, take showers, wash my clothes. There's nothing else for entertainment here, just walking around.

At Phase II, after working for not that long, my right leg was injured. A pole more than 10 meters tall crashed down, and gave me a deep cut across my leg. A supervisor took me to the clinic in the industrial park. We only have a small clinic selling medicine, and only so many kinds of drugs are sold there. They couldn't do injections, let alone infusion. There are really poor medical conditions. It's around four or five hours to get from the park to the hospital, and the pandemic was really bad so I didn't ask to go to the hospital for an x-ray. I didn't want to go anywhere, so I rubbed some iodine [on the wound] and wrapped it in gauze at the clinic in the industrial park. I asked what I should do with the medical expenses. They said I needed to go to the accountant for a reimbursement. But the leg was just wrapped, and it's not much money at all, like less than 100 CNY [around 14 USD]. Later on, when it came to medicines, I paid out of pocket. I'm not gonna ask them to reimburse me; it's fine for just a couple dozen CNY. And they said I could not go back home, so I took a few days off, then returned to work. But everything feels different now. My right knee is always hurting. My left leg was injured back home, and I needed a reexamination six months ago. But I've worked four or six months past that, and I still haven't gone back home. Every rainy day I get this searing pain in my bones, and it's never comfortable. It's rainy here all the time too.

We have had at least two falls among the team workers. Even when someone's sent to the hospital, [injuries are treated with] just a simple bandage and cast. No one dares to do a surgery here. First are the poor medical conditions— not even as good as back in my hometown. Second, with how serious the pandemic is now, no one wants to go to the hospital for any reason, unless you're seriously injured and you need an x-ray. It's around a three-hour drive [to the hospital] here; if you're slow, it's four hours.

Stranded

On the second or third day of the year 2020, the city began to be locked down. But the work continued. I can't say for sure if there were infected people in the industrial park, because the company didn't announce it. But there's got to be some [who are infected]. In our team alone, there are some who [tested positive for COVID] and were sent to quarantine. But I didn't see it with my own eyes. I don't wanna talk nonsense. I don't know the exact number of people who were infected in the surge [of cases].

The company never organized for all workers to get tested. Instead they tested only those who were going home. When the pandemic was really bad, they gave us masks and asked us to wear them during work. [They provided] no other pandemic prevention sort of stuff. The nose-stabbing kind of COVID tests, if you failed one, you'd have to quarantine for seven, eight days. If you were all good, you got released, then you worked as normal.

Last year [2020]), around October, people were going back home. At the time they were only stabbing our noses instead of drawing blood [for COVID testing]. This year [2021], I was tested on April 7, and paid two million rupiah [equivalent to 900 CNY, or around 140 USD], and had to have my blood drawn.

Our testing procedure is like this: we apply to go back home, and our boss reports to Virtue Dragon. When the company [Virtue Dragon] approves, we can then do the testing. There is no schedule for testing. For example, half a month ago, on August 17, I stopped working and started my leave, then told my boss that I wanted to go home. I waited until the 31st to have the test done. Now I'm waiting for the test results. There is screening happening at the industrial plant, and only when your test result passes the requirement is it arranged for you to go to Jakarta. And after you arrive at Jakarta, you have to be tested at least two or three more times, and only after you pass [those tests] would the talk about the flights happen.

Their project department then will notify what the quota is for us outsourced teams. And the hospital people then drive over for the test. At the earliest, I was tested and passed in the industrial park on April 7, 2021, got my visa [passport] back on the 15th, went to the airport, and was qualified to fly. I arrived in Jakarta on April 17, got off the plane, went to the hotel and got tested, and had to pass the test again. The only thing is that, on the 20th or 21st, I did not pass the test for [the April 22nd flight to Fuzhou] on Xiamen Airlines. A week later, on April 28th or 29th, I got tested again and passed. After passing, the company scheduled me to fly to Fuzhou, but I didn't pass the test for the flight

again. I am so confused. Why would I pass all the tests, except for the ones for the flights? And then after a few days, I get tested again and pass, then fail again for the test to fly. Then, I was quarantined at the hotel alone for more than two months. During that time, I got tested twice, and finally passed the last time. On June 23rd, I got tested again, passed, but they said no flights were available on June 29th. There are hundreds of people, from Phases I, II and III waiting here, and all of them went back to their job sites. There were 20 or so people who came to Jakarta with me, and all of them have been failing the COVID tests, and have gone back to their jobs since. Now the company's saying that they will make arrangements gradually.

Since July, the pandemic has gotten worse. They're saying that it was the embassy that requested to have all of us transported back to the factory plant, and make further arrangements after this wave [of the COVID] passed.

And it's not like if 10 people are sent to take the test all of them are guaranteed to be able to leave. Very few people are able to successfully book passage home. I would say 25 percent is even a high estimate. Say there are ninety people being tested in the industrial park, those who failed [got a positive result] are immediately screened out. There are seventy qualified people remaining, and, if there are only thirty flight tickets, then there are forty people who can't leave even though they are qualified. Like within the quota of the tickets available, people are screened based on their antibody numbers from low to high. The cutoff point being the number of [available] tickets. So if you're not included, then never mind, try your luck next time. The [antibody] number required to fly Xiamen Airline is under 0.2. Xiamen Airlines is actually the strictest. China Southern Airlines is a little better. So if you can't qualify for Xiamen then try South China. If you can't qualify to fly South China, whose [cutoff number] is 0.3 something, then you have to go back like I did. If there weren't this number requirement, there would have been a lot of people who would have been able to leave. Now for the people around me, there are even people who actually got on the plane and then had to get off, even after passing so many [requirements]. The company's explanation at the time was that it's inexplicable but somehow two passengers are put in the same seat [so it was overbooked]. So the airline had to take one of them off the plane. Think about what that person's thinking about [when he's] getting off the plane! This is the first time I've ever heard of that. I don't know who's fault it is.

It's not like if you get a double negative [i.e., negative test results for both antibody and normal COVID tests] then they'll let you go. They can just say that the policy has changed, and you can only leave when they say so. In Jakarta, many people who had higher numbers [on the antibody tests] were

able to go, and those with low numbers were not able to leave. There's gotta be something behind that. Say at the end of June and in July, they actually only scheduled for people in Virtue Dragon themselves [to leave, instead of any of the outsourced team]. Starting last month, outsourced teams requested that their bosses negotiate with Virtue Dragon. That's when things started to happen. But not a lot of people got to leave. We're lucky if two or three people are able to leave in a month. Last month, two people from the same dorm room left. One of them had a bone fracture in his hand, the other was taking care of him. He's just waiting here because with that type of injury, he wouldn't have been able to work, so it's better to let him go home. So that's why these two people left last month. But after they arrived at the Phase II [location], one of them failed the test. So both of them are now stranded at Phase II waiting. The person who's taking care passed; the injured one didn't.

In general, the number of tickets booked is small, but there are so many people. Well, if there are a lot of people going home, no one's gonna be working. So of course they try everything to stop you from leaving. Some people in our dormitory also asked to go at their own expense, but no arrangements have been made. There are several reasons why they don't want to give back your passport for you to go home at your own expense. The first is that the ticket is expensive, and they're scared that you're going to get the company in trouble after going home. The original price of the ticket was around 20,000 CNY [around 2,800 USD], now it is nearly 40,000 CNY [around 5,588 USD]. Think about it. A regular worker, spending 40,000 to 50,000 CNY [around 5,588 USD to 6,984 USD] just to go home, no way they're not gonna go stir things up with their bosses. Some of them only worked for one or two months, and they don't even have the money. So they're asking their family for money to go home. Our travel policy is that those who have under six months' [of work], are going to pay 40,000 CNY [around 5,588 USD] out of pocket. [If they've worked for} between six months and a year, it's 30,000 CNY [around 4,190 USD] out of pocket. For those who have worked more than a year, flights are going to be paid in full [by the employer] .

The test is paid out of pocket. And if you fail one time, you have to pay out of pocket for the next. The first time I went to Jakarta, the test was more than 900 CNY [around 126 USD], and after I came back from Jakarta, before taking the vaccination, I had another test. That was more than 800 CNY [around 112 USD]. After the vaccination, I applied to go home and had another test, which cost me another 800 CNY [around 112 USD]. That test was done on the 31st.

I had my first vaccination on August 5, and 21 days later, had my second on August 26. Four days later, on the 31st, we had to take a test. The vaccine could affect the test. And if you are back home,

and [your antibody] value is 0.7, 0.8 some people would say your antibodies are good. But here when you fly, they require a really low value, like under 0.7. But the company requires lower than that. Xiamen Airlines is 0.2 or less. Anyway, the lower the better. Now it's all about control. Everyone who wants to go home understands that they're playing with control now. If you don't try to control people then everyone's gone, no one's going to be working.

I'd say that if someone actually gets COVID, the medical conditions here are not great. If you charter a flight and send them back home for a check, well, it's not just one person's issue, it's about several thousand people. If there is really a problem, back home you can quarantine all you want, fix it how you'd like. Here, you are waiting to die after catching it. Like the locals who are isolating at home, there are deaths too. And you, a Chinese person, want good treatment? How's that possible? If you get it [COVID], you just lie down and pray.

We also went to our bosses. They said the pandemic is serious; there are few flights available, and the tickets are expensive. So those who are requesting to go home can only wait for further arrangements. That's basically what they mean. I know someone who went to Jakarta last year in October, but he hasn't gone home yet. Didn't pass the test, and [he's now spending his] 11th month in the hotel. Imagine, locking someone in a room, and opening the door only for three meals a day, and closing the door when you're done getting the meal box. Stay in that room and wait for 11 months. Think about how strong that man is. I stayed for less than three months, and I thought I was going insane.

We signed a guarantee, like a waiver agreement. It basically said that, as soon as you're out of the factory plant, you have no relationship with this company. There's no company stamp on that, only my signature. Everyone is required to sign that, and you're not going to be allowed home without signing that. They keep the copy, and there's only one copy. I asked, "Didn't I sign one back in April when I was leaving?" They said, "Didn't you come back later on? You have to sign it this time too." Well sure, it's not like I've never signed it. So I signed twice, once in April, another in August. If you don't sign, even if you pass all tests, you're not leaving if they don't make the arrangements. It's naked oppression. I control you. After you leave, you can sue me, but you won't win the suit. And now, even though we all know that, when it comes the day that we file the suit, this piece of paper will be useful to them. But I don't have any other choices now. The only way out is to sign whatever they ask [you to sign]. As long as I get home alive and safe, that's good.

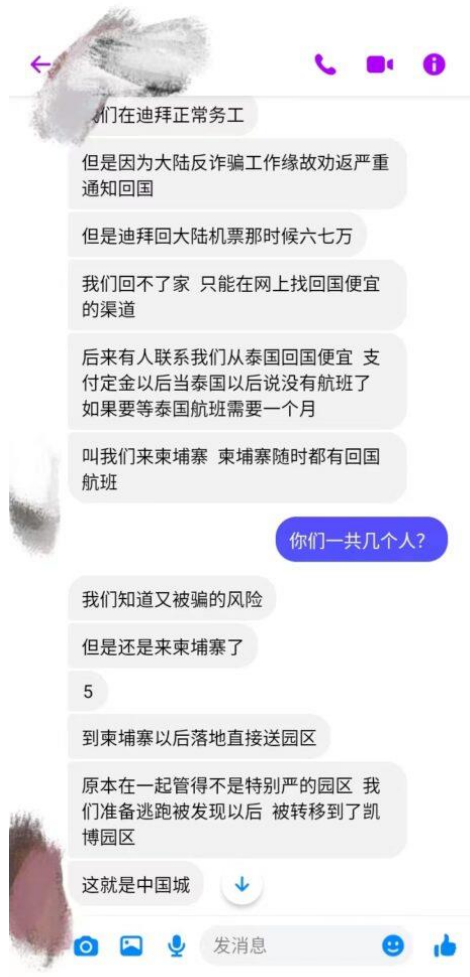
Someone left paying everything out of pocket, and got their passport and left. I asked for my passport back too, and I'll pay out of my own pocket. Whether it's 40,000 or 100,000 CNY [around 5,588 USD to 13,967 USD], I don't care. I'm spending my own money. But when I asked for my passport, they pushed back, and wouldn't give it back no matter what. Because if you have your passport and go back home, you're gonna stir things up with them. The person who went back, the one who went back paying out of pocket in May or June, they sued them. . At the time, the combination of the fees for quarantine and flights was only around 17,000 CNY [around 2,375 USD]. Well, a random worker, spending more than 10,000 CNY [around 1,397 USD] just to go home? [And] now, the flights at the end of September to the beginning of October have risen to around 23,000 CNY [around 3,213 USD].

So the bosses are only saying one thing: Wait for the company [to make] arrangements.

8. The Story of Wang Kang and Shen Jie in Cambodia

Wang Kang (a pseudonym) was working overseas in a third country when was scammed by a cyber scam syndicate over a flight ticket.

"We know the situation in Cambodia," Wang Kang said during the interview, adding that he is generally a very cautious person.



One of Wang's chat logs

Wang was originally working standard jobs in Dubai. One day, he and his coworkers were informed that anti-fraud regulations implemented by mainland (China) officials caused many companies to cease operations in Dubai and send their workers home. "But the ticket back home, at the time, was 60,000 to 70,000 CNY [around 8,428 to 9,833 USD]," he said. "We could not go back [at that price], so we had to look for something cheaper."

Every second spent in another country without work was one more second drying up his savings. Wang felt like he was in deep trouble with nowhere to turn. That was why it seemed to be a blessing when an anonymous person reached out through the internet with an opportunity for escape. This person informed Wang that it would be cheaper to transfer to Thailand and look for flights there.

Here, it is worth noting that, for workers like Wang who lack the language skills and knowledge of local society, contacting travel and labor intermediaries is always the first choice for maneuvering through the complicated process of working and traveling abroad. Understanding the demand for experienced intermediaries, an entire industry has developed around international traveling. With the number of commercial airlines to China having dwindled during the pandemic, intermediaries with the means to acquire tickets became the first – if not the only – choice for many who were eager to go home.

With this dynamic in mind, it is common for ticketing intermediaries to distribute ads in different workers' chat groups or reach out to workers directly, which means that an agent of an unknown travel agency reaching out to Wang would not arouse suspicion.

Knowing that this could be an opportunity to go home, Wang and his coworkers did not want to miss this chance. They quickly paid the deposit for a ticket to Thailand and were hopeful for a quick return flight home.

However, after they arrived in Thailand, they were told that there were no more flights to China available and that the next flight wouldn't be available for another month. Stuck in a foreign country and paying out of pocket for their stay, Wang and his coworkers were contacted by the mysterious flight ticket agent again. This time, they were informed that "there are always plenty of flights back [home] from Cambodia."

"We knew there was a risk of us being scammed, but we went to Cambodia anyway," Wang said. He prayed that he wouldn't fall into a scammer's trap.

The reality then hit. "When we landed in Cambodia, we were transported directly to the [cyber scam] compound," Wang reported.

Wang and his coworkers were sent to a scam compound in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. According to Wang, the management and security in the first compound they were led to were not particularly strict. However, after a failed escape attempt, Wang and his coworkers were transported to the infamous Kable Chinatown, which is heavily guarded and way more difficult to leave from.

Wang lamented that many more Chinese mainlanders were probably lured to Cambodia in similar ways. Airfares for direct flights to China were soaring at the time, with China's pandemic policies making transfer flights virtually impossible.

During the three months in the scam compound in Sihanoukville, Wang and his companions were luckily never beaten. But they were physically punished and threatened often. They were also told that if they wanted to leave, they had to pay their "employer" a fee of 30,000 USD each.

During the period of their stay, they wrote many emails to the Chinese embassy in Cambodia, and also sent messages to the Chinese embassy's Facebook account, with no response. Wang also asked his family to contact the mainland Chinese police force, who said they would contact the embassy. But to their dismay, they never heard back.

As Wang and others began to lose hope, things took a dramatic turn. Toward the middle to the end of 2022, news of individuals trafficked and sold—called "piglets" (猪仔) in Chinese slang—in Cambodia became widely publicized across international media. With the nascent global attention, the existence of human trafficking rings in the Cambodian underworld could no longer be swept under the table. The Cambodian officials opened up a variety of channels for victims to use to get help from the Cambodian Immigration Bureau as well as national and local level law enforcement. Even the Facebook and WeChat accounts of Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior were open for victims to contact for help.

At the end of August 2022, Wang and others also left messages on Sar Kheng's Facebook account. Personnel on Sar Kheng's end contacted them requesting further information. Wang and his coworkers were much more cautious this time. They waited to submit their information to the Cambodian officials.

"We had someone in our company who reached out to who knows who. And after that information was leaked, [that person was] beaten in front of the entire company, and so badly that [their] teeth fell out. And after that was over, that person was resold to another company." Wang said, still frightened.

It was not until he confirmed that at least one Chinese mainlander was successfully rescued after contacting Sar Kheng that he finally submitted information to Sokheng's account. Thankfully, in just three days Wang along with his coworkers were rescued and transferred to a police station in Sihanoukville.

Although relieved, Wang did not realize that this was far from the end of his story. The journey back home was far from easy.

On September 1, Wang and the others arrived at the Sihanoukville police station without being instructed on what to do next. They were not even allowed out of the police station. What's more, they did not receive their passports either.

After a stay of about four or five days at the police station, they were transferred to the Sihanoukville immigration office—a place still functioning legally despite Wang and others having to pay, i.e., offer a bribe—for everything.

"One room housed two dozen people. Many people had no place to sleep. [If] you wanted a nicer bed to rest on, [you needed to] buy it for 250 USD. Cell phones were taken away, so if you wanted to use a phone you had to pay 400 USD," Wang said.

Wang heard that the Malaysians and Taiwanese were getting out faster, while all the Chinese had to wait for at least three months. "It's like a prison," Wang recounted.

There were four or five rooms in the small building where Wang and others were kept. One room housed around 20 people. Upwards of one hundred rescued victims were in the same position as they were: held in the immigration office awaiting their release date.

"The longest one was held in the immigration office was for four months," Wang said. "Normally, it should only take however long it takes to record some interview statements, and prepare some release documentation. In a few days we should have been able to book a flight back. The immigration officers here are just locking us up to force us to spend money. "

Wang did not exaggerate. According to him, the three daily meal portions consisted of white rice. Some veggies to go with the rice cost 5 USD. A bottle of Coke alone costs 5 USD.



Examples of meals at the Cambodian immigration office

Those who had been locked up for a long time also told Wang that if he wanted to get out immediately it would cost 20,000 USD. To have a case expedited, one had to pay 1,000 USD for so-called "accelerated scheduling." Without payment, the only option was to wait.

Another friend of Wang, Shen Jie (pseudonym), also complained in an interview that the Cambodian immigration office "is like a prison where foreigners have no human rights."



Garbage was everywhere in the Cambodian immigration office

According to Wang, not only did everything come with a price tag in immigration detention , the rooms were also littered with garbage. During his stay, a Thai could not withstand the conditions and attempted to hang himself. "[He] fell loudly, and was then found and the police were contacted. He was sent to the hospital. We don't know about the situation after that," said Wang. He stressed that the immigration detention office was by far the worst experience he had in Cambodia, with even more pitiful conditions than those of the cyber scam compounds he stayed in.



The rope used in the attempted suicide

"The longest time a person has been in the immigration office was a year and a half, living in miserable conditions every day in a tiny room, eating white rice, in a dirty and messy environment. The immigration people sold us meals and drinks to squeeze the last bit [of money] out of us like vampires [in the way that vampires drink the last drop of blood from a person]! Innocent people who have not broken the law are imprisoned! We can't find anyone to reason with, [we were] just completely helpless." Shen said.

Men and women were locked together, and there was even an attempted sexual assault. "The man was slapped by the police and taken out of the cell," said Shen.

Their conditions were bad, but Wang, Shen, and others were too scared to seek outside help. Wang said the immigration officials had the ultimate authority. "Someone who submitted information to media outlets got locked outside in a dog cage. It's all up to the immigration office when to release

you," he said. Shen also complained that the Chinese embassy in Cambodia was completely out of the loop. "People have been calling the embassy for six months, [and] nothing," he said.

On the night of September 21, it was the turn of Wang Kang, Shen Jie, and a few others to be asked for a 2,600 USD payment. They were told that they could leave after they gathered that amount. However, after scrambling to borrow the money from relatives, they were informed that the offer had been retracted.

After waiting for weeks, on October 6, Wang was told that everyone would be released on the next day at a cost of 300 USD levied as a fine for staying without a labor permit.

At that time, Wang decided to go home. Shen, however, decided to wait six months because he was concerned that his experience working in Southeast Asia would get him investigated by the authorities back home.

"Everything's good, as long as I end up home alive," said Shen Jie.

9. Bian in Serbia

Bian Xuqin (pseudonym), has done many things in his life. Of his many adventures, his most compelling tale comes from his time working overseas. Finding himself discontent with China's social conditions, Bian decided to apply for a job in Serbia. Despite his excitement and extensive preparation, his time in Serbia proved to be harder than even he was able to anticipate. Facing long hours, working everyday without weekends off, working overtime hours on holidays without additional pay and increasing wage deductions, Bian quickly found his time overseas to be difficult. On top of these conditions, he did not receive a dime of his wages for six months, and it was only after this long trial period ended that he started to receive his regular monthly pay. Although dissatisfied with his position, with his passport taken away immediately after arriving in Serbia, Bian had nowhere to turn.

Bian had worked a lot of different jobs in China. He worked for an advertising agency, in sales, and he even tried starting a small, family-owned restaurant. These career ambitions were not the limit for Bian. Having an itch to understand the world around him, Bian also used VPNs to bypass China's Great Firewall (GFW) in his spare time.

"In China, by going over the wall, I saw news about everything. That's how I gained some new insights about China. It's a very repressive environment; you can't express any discontent about the government online," Bian told the interviewer.

In 2019, Bian made some posts on Weibo, a Chinese social media site, about the Hong Kong protests. He found the Chinese officials' actions to be inexcusable. And, after he posted, the Chinese law enforcement tracked him down through social media. He was subsequently summoned to a police station in Nanjing, where he received a warning. Bian's disillusionment about the Party-State grew after this.

That was around the time that Bian caught wind of opportunities to work abroad. Bian met someone online who worked at Tianjin Electric Construction in the Linglong Tire Factory Plant and referred him for a position in Serbia.

Bian was careful. He knew from experience and hearsay that job recruiters online are untrustworthy at times. At best, they get workers to pay a fee before they start their jobs, starting them off in a bad financial position in a precarious position overseas. At worst, these positions can be outright dangerous

scams. Bian, however, was careful and made sure to speak with the company that was actually recruiting in Serbia to ensure his safety.

After an interview, Bian was offered the job. And after the company applied for a visa on his behalf, Bian's journey began.

In November 2020, Bian arrived at the Linglong Tire Factory in Serbia. He worked under the company Chenghaoda Electronic Construction. This outsourced company was subcontracted to conduct property and logistics operations for Tianjin Electric Construction, a company which was further contracted with Linglong Tire for a construction project. Bian was hired by a subcontractor to a construction contractor of Linglong Tire, one of the biggest Chinese companies in Serbia.



Image of a construction site, sourced from the internet

This chain of outsourcing relations matter when it comes to workers' living conditions and workplace rights in these overseas positions. These practices of contracting labor and multi-layered control act as

a method of protection for the project companies, making it even more difficult for workers to speak out against unfair treatment.

Bian was contracted to work for a year at the job site. Although he signed the contract after arriving in Serbia where he had few options to turn back, Bian was still careful to fully read and even take a photo of his labor contract before it was taken away. Everything seemed so clear and in compliance with the Chinese Labor Law on the contract: eight-hour work days, weekends off, overtime pay, and holidays breaks.

In reality, Bian's work conditions were far from what was detailed on his contract, as he later told the interviewer.

After arriving, Bian realized that his employer had granted him a business visa to come to Serbia. However, according to Bian, Linglong made an agreement with the Serbian government that made it possible for him to work there with a business visa without a work permit, with no issue with the Serbian Immigration authorities, despite the fact that this visa status should have only allowed visitors for a short-term stay for business activities.

“Externally, Lingong is a private company. But in fact, there are government connections behind it. Would a private company possess the kind of power to negotiate with the Serbian government and apply for [national] loans? [But] that's what I've heard,” Bian said.

At the job site, Bian first worked as a cook. He started working from 3:30 a.m. until 7:00 a.m. At 9:30 a.m., he started the lunch shift that ended at 12:30 p.m. The dinner shift was from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Having a hard time adjusting to the work schedule, Bian applied to transfer to another position—building management—for less pay. After the transfer, Bian's monthly wages decreased from 8,000 CNY (around 1,113 USD) to 7,000 CNY (around 974 USD). In his new position, he worked roughly nine-hour days, starting between 5:00 a.m and 6:00 a.m. and getting off work at 5:00 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break. Despite working past the eight-hour limit, Bian was not paid extra for any overtime.

“We were not paid overtime for our work. That's definitely violating the labor law,” Bian said. “The work time wasn't logged either,” he added.

Bian's wages, moreover, were not settled on a monthly basis. "The longest our wages have been withheld was for six months," Bian told the interviewer. "And they won't settle for the full amount. They only pay you for a month's worth after that [six months]."

Bian's employer paid him for the rest of the five months bit-by-bit over the course of the following months.

Bian was understanding of the wage withholding. "Chenghaoda, Tianjin Electronic Construction, Linglong Tire, all of them had cash flow issues at some point," he said. "But it's mostly Tianjin Electronic Construction [and its cash issues that trickled down to cause our wages to be withheld]." When asked how he received the behind-the-scenes information, Bian pointed to what the management of Tianjin Electronic Construction told workers during their meetings. "Tianjin Electronic Construction told us during their meetings with us that Linglong is not giving them the funds. That's why they have no money, and then we get no money. It's the [China] state on top of Linglong too. So if the state is not giving Linglong the money, our wages are gonna be up in the air too," said Bian.

"And it's not like we've never complained," Bian continued. "If you think what they're doing is not fair, and you go and try to argue with them and whatever, trying to complain, Tianjin Electronic Construction's management will get people to beat you up for a start. Then they can lock you up in a hotel room. I've seen it a couple of times."

Having known that his employer was powerful and would not refrain from using its power, Bian was not one to speak out against these conditions.

Bian has his own understanding of why Chinese companies like Linglong and Tianjin Electronic Construction are hiring Chinese at their Serbian operations.

"There were media reports on Linglong Tire's Vietnamese workers a while ago, and yeah, the situation was like that [as described in the media reports]. The sanitary conditions were really bad. Why not recruit the foreigners [Serbians]? Why are they only hiring Chinese for construction? Because it's easier to take advantage of the Chinese. The locals are working normal hours. The Chinese? Whatever they ask you to do, you're doing. If you don't listen, you'll pay the price. So almost all construction workers are also Chinese, no locals," Bian said, knowing that the stakes were high for an illegal foreign worker like him, despite in his mind, he still saw the white Serbians as the "foreigners."

What paralyzed Bian and prevented him from fighting for his rights was not just the control his boss had over his living and working conditions, personal safety, and his return home, but also that he felt unheard and powerless. The governments of China and Serbia, in his eyes, would not protect him or work for his interests. Living in such a state of disempowerment, Bian was practical when describing his work and living conditions during his time in Serbia—it was bad, but he knew he couldn't complain.

“The food was alright; we were not eating anything stale,” Bian said. “Five or six, or sometimes seven or eight people lived in one dorm room. It was dirty and bad. But our room was a bit better because of us tidying up, but it is what it is.”

Bian continued: “...the building management [job] was fine. Anyone who's working construction gets injured often. I got some injuries on my hands too. They wouldn't pay me anything for that. Most of the workers, [and] all the management were Chinese there, but everything violated the Chinese [labor] laws. My friend, he was working for an outsourced construction unit for Tianjin Electronic Construction. He hurt his leg. Never got a penny,” Bian recalled. “[And] the locals didn't like us being there, occupying the land and causing so much pollution.”

Despite the harsh conditions and negative circumstances, Bian found small ways to make his life better.

“I rode my bike to the sunflower field. I got out and relaxed,” he told us. “And I occasionally fished too. I also enrolled in an English class there and took English classes in a local town,” Bian recalled. “Because I knew I didn't want to go back to China, so I had to learn English well.”

“At the time, I lived in my own way. Although work-wise, sometimes there was no pay and no breaks. I kinda miss the state of life I had at the time,” Bian concluded.

Today, Bian lives in the United States. With his new life still full of instability and he fought his way to a stable life as a refugee, Bian seemingly recalled his time in Serbia, when he lived a structured life with expectations of a bright future, with a sense of nostalgia.

10. Liang in Indonesia: A Long Way Back Home

Arbitrary wage deduction, wage arrears, passport confiscation. These are just some of the issues that Liang Qi (pseudonym) had to tolerate while working in a Chinese-run construction project in Indonesia. Despite Liang's perseverance through these struggles, the management's undignifying treatment and its violence against him and his coworkers proved to be intolerable. After witnessing a foreman's chilling nonchalance towards a worker who was dying of a heart attack, all Liang wanted to do was go home.

But the nightmare continued. With his passport taken by his employer, Liang could not even go home of his own volition. He applied over and over again but received practically no response. He was trapped. Here is an account of his experience.

When Liang entered PT Gunbuster Nickel Indonesia (PT GNI) or, as workers like him called it, Delong Phase III, he had some hope that the company would turn out to be alright. "At the time, we heard that Delong was a big company, so we were a bit relieved," he said. "But the first day that we came in, everyone was looking at us with this look. We were weirded out. So in the dormitory I asked what was going on, and people were saying, 'You dimwits are getting scammed here again.'"



Image of a construction site, sourced from the Internet

At the time, Liang did not understand the seasoned workers' cynicism. Nor did he know that he would soon take on that very same attitude as he adjusted to life in Delong Phase III.

“So half a month passed,” he said. “A couple of hundred people came. We looked at these newbies with the same look as the previous ones had given us. We said the same thing. ‘Oh wow, stupid dimwits getting scammed here again.’” As Liang gradually learned the root of his predecessors' bitterness, he found himself adopting the same form of bitter cynicism, taunting the new arrivals for the same bad judgment that had led him and his cohort to be "scammed" and trapped in Indonesia.

Liang's cynicism didn't arise from nothing. When applying for the job through his employer, a labor service company contracted with PT GNI, a lot of promises were made. The recruiter promised to cover all travel expenses, said that only the first month's wages would be withheld while the rest would be paid monthly, and that his daily pay rate was going to be 450 to 500 CNY (around 62 to 69 USD). “But they achieved none of that,” Liang said. “For the four months I was here, I only got paid once.”

Deceptions and wage withholding are only a portion of the issue Liang faced.

“They took my passport away when we got off the plane, saying that it was for purchasing the tickets. Now that I think about it, we were stupid. We've never seen our passports ever since,” Liang recalled.

One's passport is an important identification document. For workers like Liang, however, not having their own passports also means that their movement, personal freedom, and legal status are controlled by their employers.

It turns out that Liang's employer did not refrain from exercising this power.

In the humid and hot climate of Indonesia, Liang worked tirelessly at the construction site as a welder. The first month passed, he did not receive his pay, but this he had expected. However, the second and third months went by, and he still did not receive a penny. Stuck in a foreign country and working without pay, Liang's mind started to wander, and he began to lose sleep at night. One day, he arrived at work late. Someone at work reported the incident to Liang's employer, who demanded that Liang make a phone call and explain his behavior. Finding the situation unfair, Liang told his boss to pay for his phone bill.

“I don’t have the money to pay for my phone service. Help me pay for it, and I’ll call you back,” he said.

That night, Liang was paid, but at a lower rate than even the lowest standard of 13,000 CNY per month (around 1,800 USD); he received only 11,000 CNY (around 1,520 USD).

“I went to my boss multiple times for this. The boss said, ‘Your skill is lagging.’ And I asked how. I said ‘Did I do anything wrong? Have any of the rebars I welded or any of the steelwork I’ve done collapsed?’ [The boss] followed up by telling me that I had a bad attitude.” Liang recalled, still angered. “I said, ‘What does that even mean?’ At the construction site, I do whatever the manager tells me to do.”

Liang continued: “‘Alas,’ the boss said, ‘the Indonesians are only paid this much, however much. Why would I pay you 4,500 CNY [around 629 USD]?’ So I said, ‘Well hire the Indonesians! Why did you hire me then? The real issue is, we agreed on this back home!’”

Liang added “[The boss said, ‘You want to] go back home? You can’t do that before reaching the terms. Wanna go work for a different company? No. Raise the pay? No.’ They are just forcing you to stay and work for them, and there’s nothing you can do. The pandemic is their biggest excuse [to trap and abuse workers].”

Indeed, stranded far from home and in a country he knew nothing about, Liang resided in a remote industrial zone where he relied on his employer for transportation. With his passport taken, Liang had nowhere to go.

“So what can you do?” Liang asked. “They are really just exploiting my youth, my time, my money, subjugating my soul, my mind, and my rights.”

Liang has evidently given the issue a lot of thought. Though he wanted things to change, he had no tools. However, the workers soon came together to organize a strike.

Liang recounted the events that led up to a strike:

“There was this worker from an outsourced unit. He had this intense chest pain, and asked his boss to transfer him to the hospital. The boss wouldn’t do it. Instead he just told him to rest and drink a few herbal potions. So after two or three hours, that man was dying. The boss still wouldn’t do it, saying that the shuttle was not at the industrial plant. There’s nothing he could do. “Well, actually, as a boss with hundreds of people under him, if he’s willing to act, the shuttle could be back in no time with just a phone call. But he didn’t do anything, so, alas, he [the worker] was about to die. The boss asked a few men to carry him out of the dormitory, and rest him on a wooden board, and find a cloth to cover him.

“He was put there to die,” Liang said. “Well, it’s so normal for someone to die here. To me, this is not really news. Nothing, really.”

Liang’s nonchalance over a fellow worker’s death was chilling. However, his vivid memory of the details of the event reflected a repressed sense of fear for his own fate.

Liang had no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the deceased worker’s body. To him, his fellow worker’s death was swept away as if it had never happened. Despite no one raising an issue at the time, it turns out that many Chinese workers like Liang hid their anger deeply within.

“Many workers started to have this real hatred toward their bosses after that. And there was this worker who reached his one-year term. He went to his boss, and his boss said some shameless stuff to him. They started to argue,” Liang recalled. “The boss called in two Indonesian guards who started beating the worker. Then, this Chinese person passed by the window while working and saw that. He ran back to the construction site and said to around a couple dozen people: ‘Someone’s beaten and they are half-dead! How are you still working!’ So a couple dozen Chinese [workers] ran over, and chased those two Indonesians away.”

According to Liang, the two guards took it as a Chinese-Indonesian confrontation despite the fact that they were only doing their jobs. “...[They] went back to the dormitory area and started throwing stones and beer bottles at the windows. So the Chinese workers gathered together. Thirty turned into 50, then 50 turned into a 100. At the end, six, seven hundred people gathered together against the management,” Liang recalled. “Then, the military [note: the origins of this anecdote are unclear, but according to workers’ accounts, a team of Indonesian-speaking persons wearing military-style clothing showed up with guns] was dispatched. Around 30 of them started to use guns to suppress the Chinese.

Well, the Chinese weren't armed at all. They had their heads and bellies against the guns, and said 'Do it if you dare!' So with that, the Indonesian military was kicked out of the living quarters. The bosses ran out of the industrial plant, and workers started the strike."



Image of a confrontation between protesting workers and the local police.

To Liang, the powerful moment was triggered by the accumulation of one thing after another. Wage-withholding, arbitrary deductions, deceptions, workplace injuries and deaths, and the management's abuses all took a toll on the workers, and this led up to the strike. Yet the powerful moment was overshadowed by a general sense of powerlessness.

"People are hired by different companies and we generally don't interact with each other," said Liang. "Your issue is not mine, and if everyone's on strike but we got paid, then we would stop and they [the other unpaid workers] could carry on. We're all working for different outsourced companies. Chinese people are not united, and what I've just talked about, the strike? That's the only time it happened. That was a miracle."

According to workers' accounts, there were thousands of Chinese workers working at PT GNI at the time. However, ultimately, Liang found himself alone, hopeless, and stranded in a country he was not familiar with and where his rights were not protected. He heard of the violence and abuse around him, and Chinese workers' general lack of solidarity further fed his disillusionment.

“The only thing I wish for is that, periodically, a translator could lead a group of us out of this place to walk around a bit. Really, like I didn’t, I feel like I didn’t commit a crime right? I feel like I’m imprisoned here,” he said.