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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1qr9c005>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 10(1)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

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**Publication Date**

2012

**DOI**

10.36650/nexus10.1\_59-74\_MusikawongEtAl

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Peer reviewed

Practitioners' Essay

# The Importance of Ethnic Competency

## Labor Trafficking, Thai Migrations, and the Thai Community Development Center

Sudarat Musikawong and Chanchanit Martorell

### Abstract

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000, 2011) created new conditional residency visas and new avenues for American citizenship for the victims of human trafficking. Thai migrants have benefited from its provisions, but their disproportionate presence in this category has indicated the depths of this problem within the Thai immigrant community. This paper examines anti-trafficking advocacy, and it begins by criticizing existing Asian American pan-ethnic organizations. It addresses the limits of their approaches, and argues that ethnic-specific organizations still play an important role in helping victims as well as the ethnic communities in which they will settle.

### Introduction

Asian American umbrella organizations have faced linguistic and cultural challenges when trying to serve the influx of newer immigrants from Asia, primarily from Southeast Asia, who do not speak English nor identify as Asian American. The paper appeals to practitioners and Asian American studies scholars to recognize the limits of "Asian American pan-ethnicity," as that term was once understood over a generation ago in scholarly work and in local politics. We ourselves write as activist scholars embedded within the perspective of the ethnic-specific community based organization, the Thai Community Development Center (Thai CDC), which was founded in 1994 and based in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> While pan-ethnic political solidarity may have proven effective in the past, we argue that it can now marginalize and even alienate new, ethnic-based immigrant communities.

The experiences of Thai immigrants have been instructive. In scholarly work and in Asian American pan-ethnic organizations, labor trafficking cases involving Thai immigrant workers seem to represent overarching examples of Asian immigrant labor abuse, especially after the 1995 El Monte sweatshop/slave labor case. On August 2, 1995, sixty-seven female and five male Thai garment workers were discovered living and working in a clandestine, makeshift garment factory in El Monte, California. The Thai sweatshop owners also employed Latino immigrants in a front factory located on another site in downtown Los Angeles. Major designing labels put their tags on the garments produced in El Monte, including Bum, Felini, Tomato, and Clio; retailers selling these garments included Robinson's May, Mervyn's, Nordstrom, Target/Dayton Hudson, and Montgomery Ward.

Prior to the case itself, few scholars or activists had paid attention to migrant Thai garment workers, and yet the El Monte sweatshop case now represents one of the worst cases of sweatshop labor in the United States. The El Monte case revealed a transnational Thai workforce moving between the United States and Thailand. Also, as many scholars subsequently pointed out, this case illustrated a debt-labor system enabled through global capitalism, and it pointed to the need to redefine human rights discourse by centering gendered forms of immigrant labor (Lowe, 1997; Ching Yoon Louie, 2001; Sassen, 2003; Hu-Dehart, 2003). The case was so egregious that it triggered prosecutions based on the Thirteenth Amendment, and it inspired activists to demand new rules against human trafficking. For pan-ethnic Asian American organizations, the case was influential: in 2010, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance used this case to illustrate to the Department of Labor the overall condition of Asian Pacific American low-wage labor (Department of Labor, 2010).

Thai migration to the United States received a great deal of attention after 1995, and yet up through that point, the United States Census and other government agencies had not captured the Thai immigrant community very well. By the 1990s-2000s, Thai migrations had become much more complex and tied to global economic trends. In 2000, Thai migration increased even further, and the Census Bureau estimated that there were 112,989 lawful immigrants from Thailand; other reports, though, suggested substantial

growth in unlawful migrations as well. Thai migrants appeared disproportionately as the victims of trafficking, with fifty-six cases representing about twenty percent of all criminal trafficking complaints in 2008 (Reports & Political Affairs, Office to Monitor & Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. State Department, 2009: 12).

The terms of migrant labor have had obvious gendered dimensions that are ethnically specific: in Thailand, the government has not structure formal policies to encourage emigration, nor has it established policies to facilitate remittances, and yet kinship structures have long motivated many women to migrate within the country. They have sent remittances earned from manufacturing, garment, and sex industries in Thai cities back to their home villages. This pattern has become global: many women have now reported that their parents who care for their grandchildren expect significant financial support from their daughters, and that this has caused many to emigrate to meet those expectations. According to Siriporn Skrobanek and other scholars, in the early 1990s, 28 percent of northern Thai village households relied on remittances from a daughter, and according to the Department of Employment (2010), there were 312,989 government-approved Thai migrant workers between 2005 and 2007, 17 percent of whom were women. In 2010, The Bank of Thailand estimated that remittances from migrant workers were worth 55.8 million baht, or about 1.799 million dollars.

In Thailand, although the government has not explicitly marketed Thai women as workers available for emigration, it has encouraged private contract agencies to accomplish this goal, at least since 1967. Like all governments, Thailand has claimed to discourage unlawful immigration (Skrobanek, 1997, 24-25). Yet women in Thailand must make “choices” within a gendered family structure in Thailand, and with an awareness of the global political economy, with its many avenues for both legal and illegal migration. They have been forced to “choose” within structural conditions of inequality, and as such, their experiences have suggested that neoliberal subjectivity—characterized by rational economic behavior and by utility maximizing strategies—fails to capture their lived realities.

Still, *choice* as a concept has come to define legally and politically the terms of what is considered modern-day slavery and labor trafficking. A “victim,” by definition, did not choose her

circumstances; thus, women who have “chosen” to be brought unlawfully to the United States, to work in conditions that many American citizens would find deplorable, have not been regarded as victims worthy of protection. Federal law captured that idea in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). In 2000, when Congress approved the new rule, its sponsors said that they had two major objectives: the rule focused on sex trafficking of women and children; and it defined forced labor to include fraud and legal threat. For example, the rule allowed for prosecutors to file charges against an employer who had confiscated her employees’ passports to limit their mobility. Subsequent amendments to the TVPA provided avenues for legal residency and eventual citizenship for those who qualified as victims of sex or labor trafficking. The TVPA required the “victim” of trafficking to barter their testimony, to serve and to cooperate with state authorities, and to plead separately for the right to remain in the United States through the T visa. They could petition first for the duration of the criminal trial against their traffickers, and then they had to prove their moral worthiness to be a lawful resident. In order to do this, many overseas migrant workers sought to explain their migration experiences in sympathetic terms, and to do so by seeking help from allied organizations working against human trafficking in their home countries as well as in the United States. In this country, Thai victims of trafficking first reached out to the Thai consulate, Thai community organizations, and places of faith. Both ethnic specific organizations and pan-ethnic Asian American organizations have sought to provide services for Thai immigrant labor, albeit with contrasting effectiveness.

For important scholars like Yen Lee Espiritu (1992, 2, 108-119), Asian American pan-ethnicity consisted of “a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins.” Emerging from the 1970s, Asian American pan-ethnic identity began with a critique of how state actors had racialized all Asian ethnic groups to further structural racism. Public laws referred to “Mongolians” or “Asiatics” or “Orientals” without distinguishing between Asian ethnic groups, and with consequences that were harmful to all Asian immigrants. In response, Espiritu suggested, Asians in the U.S. might consolidate their identity as Asian Americans, and combine for strategic and political purposes, primarily to demand resources from the very

state agencies that had once victimized all of them. Asian American pan-ethnicity has proven quite powerful in many different contexts, as when Chinese American civil rights organizations supported Japanese American redress, or when Asian American organizations formed in the 1970s and 1980s to further Asian American political representation. In colleges and universities, “Asian American Studies” as a field was structured in explicit pan-ethnic ways, to include scholars whose sub-specialties might include Korean American history or Vietnamese American literature.

What follows, however, are two case studies of Thai immigrant workers that demonstrate some of the limits of pan-ethnic Asian American frameworks and institutions. In our experience, pan-ethnic Asian American organizations were less effective in newer immigrant communities that did not have extensive attachments to other Asian American communities, either materially or historically. The two cases presented here point to the need for *ethnic specific* community-based organizations, and based on these studies, we conclude with some recommendations for how these organizations might be supported, funded, and structured.

#### Case Study #1: Thai Domestic Workers Prior to the TVPA

Many Thais migrants came to the United States in the 1990s, often under false passports or by overstaying their tourist visas. Both have become prevalent practices, and Thai migrants themselves have framed this migration in a specific way, as a “Robin Hood” method that allows them to steal their way into a rich country to work for money that will be sent back to their own poorer country. This may be illegal, but it wasn’t immoral. The circumstances of migrating unlawfully were not lost on the migrants: they knew that overstaying a tourist visa, for example, would lead to vulnerabilities in the labor market. In the early 1990s, some of the worst scandals involved Thai social elites, consular officials, and even ambassadors: they had requested tourist visas using their privileged and diplomatic status, they then brought workers under those visas, and then abused them mercilessly. Supawan Veerapol, a Thai socialite with a home in Los Angeles, was the common-law wife of a Thai ambassador who was based in Sweden. In 1989, she recruited Nobi Saeieo, a villager from Thailand, by offering her two years of employment in the United States for a much higher wage than she could have earned in Thailand. Using

her Thai embassy contacts, Veerapol brought Saeieo on a six-month tourist visa; Saeieo showed her passport once, to U.S. immigration authorities at the airport, and then Veerapol confiscated that passport. Veerapol sent Saeieo to work with two other Thai employees at a Thai restaurant that Veerapol operated in Los Angeles, and she also demanded that Saeieo work in her home as a domestic servant. All three of the restaurant workers had arrived in the United States in the same way, and when their tourist visas ran out, Veerapol refused to pay their wages fully, abused them, and also used their identities to apply for bank accounts and credit cards for her own personal use. Veerapol threatened to have them deported if they tried to escape or speak to anyone outside the household (*United States v. Veerapol*, 2002).

Two of the workers told their story to another Thai restaurant owner, a person who then brought them to the Thai CDC. Since 1994, the Thai CDC had developed a reputation for helping Thai immigrants in distress. The Thai CDC had done so by establishing individual relationships with members of the Thai community; it had hosted community building events, workshops on entrepreneurship, and health and cultural fairs. Its staff provided direct social services and also partnered with affordable legal services and human and workers' rights advocacy groups in Los Angeles to serve clients. While based in that city, the Thai CDC sought a national presence by building ties to nationally syndicated Thai newspapers, as well as to satellite and cable television companies serving the Thai immigrant community in several markets.

When Assistant U.S. Attorney General Michael Gennaco stated that the Veerapol case was like the El Monte sweatshop case all over again, the Thai immigrant community divided. Some saw the case as a singular instance of abuse, even if it did have Thai analogs (Slater, 1998, Metro B1). In Thailand, domestic labor had long been predicated on a patron-client system, through which the ties between employer and live-in domestic workers could extend for generations. These socio-cultural contexts continued to play an integral role in Thailand, and they led to situations that many in the West would consider indentured servitude. Although some members of the Thai immigrant community did not think that Veerapol's relationship with Saeieo was so unusual, the Thai CDC staff worked with her and the other two Thai domestic workers directly to gain their trust, and then to facilitate their testimony against Veerapol for

her egregious abuses. The Thai CDC also explained to the United States Attorney's Office how patron-client systems worked in Thailand, to show how these workers could fall victim to Veerapol. The Thai CDC thus supported her prosecution, and in doing so, it indicated to other workers in the Thai immigrant community that they could, if they wished, reject these exploitative arrangements in the United States.

After our work in this case, we wondered to what degree a pan-ethnic Asian American organization would have had similar capacities as the Thai CDC. None were embedded in the Thai ethnic community, nor were they situated to understand and to earn the trust of the workers in that case. Being fluent in Thai, the staff at the Thai CDC easily understood and translated the testimony of Saeio and her colleagues, while at the same time mediating the ethnic specific tensions and norms within this community. Some members of the Thai immigrant community had suggested during the case that their community had been portrayed unfairly, as though all of their members were prone to abuse and exploitation. That the Thai CDC was available in that case—advocating on the behalf of exploited workers, while remaining sympathetic to the Thai community itself—made a significant difference in how the case had been handled and understood within that immigrant community. Pan-ethnic Asian American organizations were not involved in this case at all.

#### Case Study #2: Anti-Trafficking Advocacy and the TVPA

After the TVPA in 2000, anti-trafficking funding and rhetoric of anti-slavery overshadowed the demand for immigrant workers' rights and justice. The emphases on anti-slavery demonstrate how public agendas and the politics of both private foundation funding and state are focused on enforcement priorities. An exclusive agenda of anti-slavery does not address the need for immigration reform and labor rights. There is a need for a federal shift in programmatic priorities to increase social services and resettlement, not to mention, there is also a need for a focus on labor rights enforcement and an immigration reform that does not seek the temporary worker visa as an easy solution to the demand for low-wage immigrant workers. Existing temporary worker programs have created a lucrative market for labor trafficking under legal work visas. These conditions create a racially and ethnically marginalized second class noncitizen worker with little rights.



In Los Angeles, the federal government increased enforcement activities, while minimizing support for direct social services and resettlement. For example, in the past two years of budgetary allocations for the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons [G-TIP], money for enforcement grew and funds for direct services were cut. Throughout this period, labor trafficking remained one of the major avenues through which new Thai immigrants entered the United States.

Again, original entries were often legal, through tourist visas or through temporary work visas like the H-2A, for agricultural workers, or the H-2B, for workers with specialized skills. But once admitted, many recent Thai migrants fell out of status. Across different work sites, private labor recruiters and subcontractors provided the necessary documentation for lawful entry, but then also helped to exploit these same people through various forms of indentured servitude. In Thailand, in 2003, 2006, and 2010, the Department of Employment there acknowledged that private labor brokers coordinated much of the emigration for Thai workers, unlike in the Philippines, where the central government itself has played a more dominant role in sending workers abroad (Lorente, et. al., 2005, 224; Rodriguez, 2010).<sup>2</sup> The exception has been the case of the Philippines, in which the state government has taken on the dominant role of labor broker to sending countries.

Kinsey Dinan and other scholars have pointed out that restrictive admissions policies and poor interior enforcement have produced circumstances that generate lucrative opportunities for labor brokers. These organizations migrate and exploit workers on a large scale (Dinan, 2008, 70). Yet legal scholars and activists have noted that federal rules, including the TVPA, have focused on enforcement and prosecution mechanisms, often at the expense

Table 1. Numbers of Thai Overseas Migrant Workers

Year	Thai Ministry of Labor	Private Labor Brokers	Private Employers	Total
2003	409	77,624	69,644	147,677
2006	8,013	68,185	20,862	97,060
2010	3,452	52,971	19,558	75,981
2003-2010	11,874	198,780	110,064	320,718

of immigrant rights. Critics have noted that the resettlement of victims and the possible civil lawsuits for their restitution have not been outlined in the federal law as thoroughly as the means through which traffickers might be prosecuted and punished (Hussein et. al, 2005; Sharma, 2005; Sidel, 2008; Nam, 2007). Within the Thai community, where labor trafficking appears as a much more serious problem than sex trafficking, government officials and their organizational budgets also appear to favor enforcement and prosecution over resettlement (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2009).

For direct service organizations like the Thai CDC, enforcement and resettlement have been intertwined, as enforcement would not be possible without discussing with the Thai workers themselves the possibility of legal residency. Without earning their trust, these workers would not provide the testimony required for a successful prosecution, and this in turn has only been possible by guaranteeing their safety, and by supporting their hopes for resettlement, and readjustment. Yet federal money to support community-based organizations doing this work have not kept pace with demand for these services.

The number of persons requiring resettlement can be significant, even in a single case. On September 1, 2010, for example, the Department of Justice issued an indictment against Global Horizons Manpower, an agricultural labor subcontracting firm that had recruited over 1,100 workers from Thailand. Over many years, Global Horizons had "imported" hundreds of Thai migrant farm workers like commodities. Nine hundred Thai nationals had come forward as witness-victims after the indictment, and many of them reported "accepting" debt-labor contracts worth at least \$20,000 in exchange for three years of full-time agricultural work in the United States (Chatterjee, 2010; Kerr, 2010; Niese, 2010).

This case would not have been possible without the initiative and continued advocacy of the Thai CDC. Members of the organization had the language skills and other capacities that allowed them to gain the workers' trust, such that they were willing to offer testimony against Global Horizons. The Thai CDC worked with legal aid centers to arrange for T visas for many of the workers well before the federal criminal indictment, thus ensuring them of an ethnic support system to facilitate their settlement in the United States. Given the size of the case, however, the staff of

the Thai CDC struggled to help everyone who'd been involved in this case, and we felt that we could have done much more with the help of government agencies and other allied organizations.

Even now, the Thai CDC has struggled to identify funding sources to serve newer immigrants. Like many organizations, we have found ourselves in a vicious cycle of limited resources that have diminished our capacity, which in turn lowered our visibility and then reduced possibilities for subsequent funding. All community-based organizations have to prove to funders that they have sufficient capacity and accountability mechanisms, as well as an established record of implementing their services and activities successfully. Without the appropriate level of resources to start with, however, we have struggled in the face of overwhelming needs.

The existing structures and incentives between larger non-profits and the foundations that have supported them have not favored organizations like the Thai CDC. Larger pan-Asian American organizations have a longer history and more visibility; foundations seeking to maximize the impact of their grant awards might understandably favor the broad approaches to the Asian American community that these organizations have offered. Even though the needs of smaller, newer ethnic communities like the Thai immigrant community may be greater than established Asian American groups, the abruptness of their arrival and the depth of their needs have often escaped established Asian American organizations. Without concerted advocacy on behalf of the Thai ethnic community, each subsequent year, their needs would not have been met. At a time when both federal and private funding has been shrinking, the Thai CDC must work harder each year to make a case for funding, within an environment where larger established organizations and even larger foundations have collaborated for many years.

The lack of funding has been compounded by the fact that Thai immigrants, regardless of formal legal status, have been disproportionately affected by many social ills, especially when compared to other Asian ethnic communities. Immigration from all over Asia into regions like Los Angeles has been diverse, constant, and stratified by class and position—for ethnically marginalized racial minorities like Thais. Ethnic specific community based organizations like the Thai CDC still have a major role in

identifying and responding to these dynamic trends. Yet in our own experience, even when an ethnic specific community based organization has achieved name recognition as the Thai CDC certainly had, foundations and other donors have remained reluctant to contribute at higher levels simply because we are ethnic specific. When we've been turned down for funding, we've discovered that some of the foundations and donors believed that, compared to other Asian ethnic communities, ours was too small, even though they agreed that our needs were significant. We worry about those concerns: given that unscrupulous Thai subcontracting firms will continue to bring Thai workers to the United States under arrangements that are illegal and exploitative, we worry every day that an impoverished Thai underclass will grow even as we are watching.

In our experience, dedicated ethnic specific organizations have been essential. The other options we've witnessed have not addressed our community needs in satisfying ways: for example, just incorporating Thai staff members into existing pan Asian American organizations has proven only a partial solution. A Thai speaking staff member at a mainstream or pan-ethnic Asian American organization cannot replace the depth and breadth of services that a stand-alone Thai community organization can provide. Indeed, just hiring Thai staff will not necessarily give the mainstream or pan-ethnic Asian American organization an intimate knowledge of the community—one key advantage of organizations like the Thai CDC has been that it has always been embedded in the Thai community, with established relationships across places of faith, voluntary organizations, ethnic immigrant media outlets, and consular offices. We feel very much a part of this ethnic community's history and we have witnessed and participated in some of its major transitions, even through the worst of cases. For some of the most vulnerable members of our community, we have been the first contacts, we have built relations of trust, and we have translated American institutions to Thai migrants, just as we have attempted to translate the aspirations and concerns of Thai migrants to those same institutions. Mainstream, pan-ethnic Asian American organizations—even the ones with one or two Thai staff members—have not been able to fulfill that vital role.

## Building Viable Coalitions Among and Beyond Asian American Organizations

Still, ethnic specific organizations like the Thai CDC should and must collaborate with many partners among and beyond the Asian American community. In fact, those of us at the Thai CDC have found that some of our most effective collaborators have not even been Asian American: the Legal Aid offices in Los Angeles, Utah Legal Services, and the Community Justice Project of Pennsylvania were just a few organizations that were critical to the work we were doing. In one case involving trafficked agricultural workers, we were unable to get pan-ethnic Asian American legal aid organizations to file T visas for key witnesses. This may have been because the Thai workers in this case were spread out throughout at least five different rural regions, from Pennsylvania to Hawaii; all of the Asian American pan-ethnic legal organizations we could identify were located in major cities, and all seemed reluctant to take such an irregular case. Time was an important factor: unless an attorney filed quickly for a T visa on behalf of an undocumented worker, that person could be subject to deportation long before she/he might appear in a courtroom as a witness. A legal aid organization that was not Asian American helped during that critical moment.

In the case involving Global Horizons, neither the Department of Justice nor the Department of Labor indicated early on that they would file criminal charges against the company. The United States government typically issued five thousand T visas per year to “crack down” on trafficking into the United States and its territories; the nine hundred Thai workers willing to testify represented, then, eighteen percent of the entire year’s allocation. This was an enormous problem, and those of us at the Thai CDC had to coordinate legal aid, direct service organizations, and other community groups, even as we were trying to build trust with Global Horizon’s workers, though we were not quite sure how every witness would or could get a visa. Unfortunately, we had to do this without partnering with a single pan Asian American partner organization, and once again, organizations beyond the Asian American community proved indispensable.

In that particular case, the Thai CDC's long-term relationship with media outlets within and beyond our community was also significant. We worked with the ethnic press within the Thai community to bring the story to light, and to explain to members of our community the scope and depth of the problem. We also worked with a prominent freelance writer, John Bowe, who had worked for *The New Yorker* and later published his story about the Thai agricultural workers in *Mother Jones*. We had met Mr. Bowe after he was referred to us at a conference on labor trafficking, and although the criminal indictments did spark mainstream interest in that story, his piece reached a national audience, and his sympathetic portrayal of the Thai workers helped government officials and other actors to see many of the witnesses in that case as people who should remain and settle in the United States.

To conclude, we hope that major foundations, government agencies, and more established pan-ethnic Asian American organizations will support the work of ethnic specific collaborators like the Thai CDC. These organizations have struggled: with little government support, and sometimes in competition with more established organizations for private foundation money, we have often felt that we were fighting alone and uphill. We have helped clients who've been treated like disposable, expendable labor, but we ourselves have felt, ironically, that much of our work has benefited the image of the federal government, perhaps even the broader, progressive Asian American community, and yet we have fought human trafficking on the ground and on the frontline but with poor support. We have sought and will continue to seek partnerships with pan Asian American organizations and with just about any other group willing to address the urgent needs of our community, but we believe that we must do so in a way that preserves the distinctive, embedded, and necessary ethnic-specific voice, presence, and skills that the Thai CDC has offered.

## Notes

1. <http://www.thaicdchome.org>
2. In 2000, while the top receiving countries in Asia include Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan, the countries with the highest rate of growth in foreign migrant workers were Taiwan, Singapore, and S. Korea.

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