

Isaan migrant worker meets his final fate on a South Korean pig farm

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Thai workers die in South Korea the most in the world, at least 522 cases died in the last 6 years, and 86% of them are 'little ghosts'. One of them was Boonchu Prawasanang native from Khon Kaen province.

At the advanced age of 57, Boonchu Prawasanang, a native of Khon Kaen's Waeng Noi district, decided to spend some of his golden years laboring near the city of Pocheon, in northern South Korea.

Khon Kaen is 3,372 kilometers from Pocheon. It was there, so far from home, that in his 67th summer, Boonchu's lifeless body was found lying near a pig farm in the foreign city.

His death is tragic. Worse, reports from South Korean media suggest that Boonchu's living quarters was so appalling that it was basically a pig sty itself.

Mali Prawasenang, Boonchu's wife, said every time she talked with her late husband on the phone, he would say that his work was going well and that he was happy. He sent money home regularly, enough to pay off all of the family's debts and put their son through university.

Mali had prepared for her husband's return. She'd bought some cattle and built a pig farm. He told her he'd come home on March 20.

A 57-year-old 'Little Ghost'

Thai workers eligible to be registered in South Korea must not be older than 39 years old. Boonchu was nearly 20 years over the limit. There'd be no way for him to work legally in South Korea.

So Boonchu went to South Korea as a tourist. He overstayed his visa and went to work on a pig farm about 20 kilometers away from Pocheon city, thus becoming a *phi noi* or "little ghost" - a term commonly used to describe illegal Thai workers in South Korea.

The pig farm was remote, only reachable through a winding path across a mountainous area.

Boonchu stayed there from the very first day of his arrival and never left.

He lived among 100 pigs, receiving a monthly salary of about 2 million won, or 53,000 baht, an amount considered very high compared to the average wage in Thailand.

Boonchu and Mali's son had finished his university education and moved to Bangkok for work. Three years ago, his son asked his father to come home because the family's financial situation was turning for the better. He had told his father he was ready to become the family's breadwinner.

But Boonchu declined. He still wanted to save some more money to build a house for the family.

The tragic discovery

Normally, Boonchu would be on the phone with his wife several times daily. On February 28, Mali felt something had gone wrong. She could not reach her husband. She said Boonchu would pick up the phone almost immediately every time she called, otherwise he would call back everyday. They had never lost contact for so long.

Mali was troubled and worried. She then asked some Thais living in South Korea, Farida Ma and another acquaintance, to help look for her husband.

For days, the two first attempted to track down the farm owner known as “Kim.” They finally got a hold of Kim who told them he had no knowledge of Boonchu’s whereabouts. He suggested to them the worker might have run off.

Farida did not believe him. She knew that Boonchu had worked there for ten years. He never went anywhere. He could not speak Korean. It was improbable that he would leave alone without anyone knowing. Farida decided they would have to go to the farm to see for themselves.

When they arrived at the farm, they were confronted with a closed gate and no-entry sign. Farida tried calling Kim, but to no avail. She then decided to notify the local police.

Police officers arrived at the scene with officials from a migrant worker center. When the owner refused to let them in, the authorities became suspicious and a search for Boonchu began.

They found Kim’s tractor parked about 200 meters uphill from the farm. Boonchu’s body, in his pajamas and a winter jacket, lay just inches away. According to Farida, the area was full of piles of pigs and cattle’s feces. Boonchu had been left there in the open. No grave had even been dug to cover his body.

Although there was no sign of foul play, the police promptly arrested the farm owner and charged him with hiding a dead body without notifying the authorities.

Dead man’s “home”

A shed with an area of just three by three meters stood next to an old pig pen. More than half of the space in the shack served as a kitchen. An old vinyl banner was devised as a door. There was a constant, raucous noise of pigs squealing. The stench reeked so intensely it was hardly breathable.

The police believed the pigs’ feces might have generated gas that was proved toxic. A workplace so unhygienic could have had a serious health impact, and a prolonged exposure of up to a decade might have been enough to be fatal.

When Boonchu died, Kim might have decided to just use a tractor to dump his body away from the farm, as he might have feared criminal charges for hiring an unregistered worker.

An investigation into the cause of death is still ongoing, and the police are looking into whether Kim’s son might have also been complicit.

After Boonchu’s death became news, Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs encouraged Thai workers to find jobs in South Korea through the proper channels that would entitle them to protection in case of illness or death.

Labor Minister Suchat Chomklin said he was working closely with the Thai Embassy in Seoul to determine what remains of Boonchu's rights and benefits, such as unpaid salary.

A little ghost in South Korea

In July 2022, South Korea's Ministry of Justice revealed that the total number of unauthorized [immigrants reached](#) a record high of [395,068](#). At the time, there were 42,538 Thais authorized to stay in [South Korea](#). But there were more than 139,000 undocumented Thais immigrants living there as well - almost three times more than the number of legal Thai immigrants.

Dr. Phaiboon Petasen, head of Thammasat University's Korean Studies program at the Institute of East Asian Studies said despite South Korea's high demand for labor at 5,000-10,000 people per year, it is still not enough to serve the demand of the industrial sector, especially in the suburbs and agriculture sector.

Dr. Phaiboon says, "I once talked to a Thai person who had lived in South Korea for decades who told him they never thought about returning to Thailand." The reasons they gave was that by staying and working in South Korea, "they felt comfortable there, and they were able to feed ten other family members".

He is sympathetic to their plight: "What can they do in Thailand's countryside? What can a middle school graduate do? Would it be better to go to Korea and earn millions of won? These are what those workers are thinking about."

"Isaan people are starting to face the 'Sandwich Generation' condition, where people need to take care of their parents and children, since their parents are getting old and are no longer working," Dr. Phaiboon points out.

It fell on people like Sah to find a way to take care of both her parents and children. Dr. Phaiboon argues that people in Sah's position face a dilemma: "They have a double burden and can't come back [to Thailand]. If they do come back, they won't be able to provide financial support for their families, and everyone will be unhappy. Even though family members miss them, wouldn't it be better if they stay in South Korea?"

Being caught with undocumented workers carries with it a 20-million-won fine [about \$16,000]. If that factory "also employs EPS workers, they will be prohibited from employing EPS workers for a certain period."

But because of the high labor demand, Dr. Phaiboon says, South Korean authorities are being less stringent in enforcing these laws. For economic reasons, South Korea can't afford to "eliminate undocumented workers," instead tolerating the number at "an appropriate level."

Read in Thai version [here](#)