

Cross-Border Domestic Service for Chinese Families in Thailand: Demand, Bottlenecks, and the Grey Market of the "Imported Ayi"

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 2010s, Thailand has become a major destination for new Chinese migrants, including corporate employees, entrepreneurs, and middle-class families who relocate for their children's international education. This article examines why these households struggle to obtain domestic help, and why a growing number of them turn to agencies that recruit domestic workers ("ayi") from mainland China. Using qualitative documentary analysis of Thai and Chinese legal texts, labour and immigration regulations, official statistics, prior academic studies, and media and community sources, the article makes three arguments. First, demand is structural: household arrangements centred on an accompanying mother, the absence of grandparent support, and expectations about food, child-rearing, and homework supervision create a need for culturally specific care. Second, the local market cannot easily meet this need because of language barriers, divergent household norms, and low trust, even though Thai and neighbouring-country workers are available and, since 2024, better protected by Thai law. Third, the cross-border "imported ayi" solution sits in a legal grey zone. Thailand's work-permit system and occupational restrictions offer no routine route for a Chinese national to work as a domestic worker, while China's rules on overseas labour services prohibit sending workers abroad under tourist or other non-work pretexts. The result is a high-cost, broker-driven market that shifts legal, financial, and personal risks onto both families and workers. The article concludes with recommendations for families, agencies, and policymakers in both countries.

KEYWORDS new Chinese migrants; Thailand; domestic work; transnational families; migration brokerage; global care chains

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the profile of Chinese people in Thailand has changed. Alongside the long-established Thai-Chinese community, a new group of mainland migrants (xin yimin) has arrived: managers and engineers sent by Chinese firms, small-business owners, retirees, and families who move so that their children can attend international or bilingual schools. Siriphon and Banu (2021)

classify these newcomers into four groups and note that education migrants are often accompanied by a parent, usually the mother, known as a *peidu mama*. The scale of this movement is growing. By the end of November 2025, Chinese nationals held 56,202 Thai work permits, overtaking Japanese nationals as the largest group of foreign work-permit holders (The Nation, n.d.). Kasikorn Research Center (2025) estimated that the number of Chinese nationals working in Thailand grew by an average of 20.8% a year between 2021 and 2024, and that their children often enrol in international schools.

When these families set up homes in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, or Phuket, one of the first practical problems they meet is household help. In mainland Chinese cities, many middle-class households rely on a live-in *ayi* or on grandparents for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. In Thailand, the grandparents are usually back in China, and the local domestic workers that families can hire, mostly Thai nationals or workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, rarely speak Chinese. Chinese-language community platforms in Thailand regularly carry advertisements for live-in helpers who can cook Chinese food (Thailand Chinese Network, n.d.). A visible response to this gap is the use of agencies that bring an *ayi* from mainland China. This option appears to solve the language and cultural problems, but it is expensive and, as this article will show, rarely compatible with Thai or Chinese law.

This article asks three questions. What drives the demand for domestic services among new Chinese households in Thailand? What bottlenecks prevent the local market from meeting that demand? And what legal, financial, and ethical problems arise when families turn to cross-border recruitment of Chinese domestic workers? It contributes to research on new Chinese migration, which has focused on education, business, and lifestyle, by drawing attention to the domestic labour that makes these projects possible.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 New Chinese migration and the accompanying-parent household

Research on new Chinese migrants in Thailand describes a population that is more transient than earlier generations of Chinese settlers. Siriphon and Banu (2021) argue that many newcomers do not intend to settle permanently, and they document the rapid growth of education migration to Chiang Mai, where roughly 2,000 Chinese children held student visas in 2019 and were accompanied by about 1,000 parents or other carers. Niu (2025), drawing on interviews with 38 families whose children attended 23 international schools in Chiang Mai, describes these families as "educational nomadic families" who relocate their households to meet their social reproduction needs. Siriphon and Li (2023) similarly show how middle-class Chinese parents use flexible, temporary migration to pursue their children's education in Thailand.

Studies of accompanying mothers highlight both their care burden and their precarious legal position. Huang and Yeoh's (2005) classic study of Chinese "study mothers" in Singapore showed that these women carry the full weight of daily care while facing restrictions on paid work. In Thailand, Zhu et al. (2024) examine the cultural constraints and social obstacles faced by Chinese guardian mothers, and Li (2025), using a survey of 151 respondents and 13 interviews, finds that many accompanying mothers earn income through informal activities, such as purchasing on behalf of others, private tour

guiding, or catering, that exist in a legal grey area because of visa restrictions. These studies focus on the mothers themselves. Less attention has been paid to the domestic workers whom these households employ, or wish to employ, to share the load.

2.2 Global care chains and domestic work

A second body of literature examines paid domestic work across borders. Hochschild (2000) coined the term "global care chains" to describe how care labour flows from poorer to richer households across national borders, often from women who leave their own families behind. Parreñas (2001) and Lan (2006) showed how Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Asia and beyond experience these chains, including dependence on employers, isolation, and legal vulnerability. Constable (2007) documented how Hong Kong's regulated foreign domestic helper scheme both protects and disciplines workers. Yan (2008) analysed the internal Chinese market for domestic workers, showing how rural women who migrate to cities to work as *ayi* are judged by urban employers through ideas of "quality" (*suzhi*), cleanliness, and trust.

The case examined here differs from the classic care chain in one important way: the employer and the worker share the same nationality, language, and broad cultural background, yet both are foreigners in the place where the work is done. This creates what may be called an intra-ethnic, cross-border care chain. Cultural closeness is precisely what families pay for, while the shared outsider status of employer and worker shapes the legal risks both face.

2.3 Migration infrastructure and brokerage

The third strand concerns the intermediaries who organise migration. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) define migration infrastructure as the interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that enable and condition mobility. They argue that labour migration in Asia has become intensively mediated, and that this mediation can become self-perpetuating, making migration both more accessible and more cumbersome. This concept helps explain why, when formal channels are closed or impractical, private brokers expand to fill the gap, and why the costs and risks of the resulting arrangements tend to grow rather than shrink.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on documentary analysis. No interviews, surveys, or other primary data were collected. The analysis draws on four types of material. The first is legal and regulatory texts, including Thailand's rules on foreign employment and prohibited occupations, Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024) on domestic work, the China–Thailand mutual visa exemption agreement, and China's Regulations on the Administration of Foreign Labour Service Cooperation (2012). The second is official statistics and statements from Thai government agencies and the Chinese Embassy in Thailand. The third is published academic research on new Chinese migrants, accompanying mothers, and domestic work in Asia. The fourth is media reports and publicly accessible community sources, such as recruitment notices on Chinese-language platforms in Thailand and Chinese news reports on comparable grey markets.

The materials were read and coded thematically, following the logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), around three themes that correspond to the research questions: sources of demand,

local bottlenecks, and the cross-border agency market. The study has clear limitations. Because the cross-border domestic labour market operates largely informally, no systematic data exist on the number of Chinese domestic workers in Thailand, the fees they pay or receive, or their working conditions. Where this article discusses fee structures and practices, it describes their general form rather than precise figures, and it relies on analogous, better-documented cases where necessary. Legal provisions are summarised from official and professional sources for analytical purposes and should not be read as legal advice; rules on work permits and visas change frequently and should be checked against current official guidance.

4. Sources of Demand

4.1 The reshaped household

The first source of demand is a change in household structure. In many mainland Chinese families, childcare and housework are shared among several adults, often including grandparents who live with or near the family. Migration to Thailand usually breaks this arrangement. In education-migration households, one parent, typically the mother, moves with the child while the other continues to work in China, creating what researchers describe as a living-apart-together family (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Niu, 2025). Grandparents may visit, but they rarely stay long because of visa rules and their own health and family obligations.

The result is that tasks previously distributed across a family network fall on one adult. Zhu et al. (2024) and Li (2025) show that accompanying mothers face both a heavy care load and a desire, or financial need, to pursue their own economic activities. Paid domestic help is one of the few ways to reconcile these pressures.

4.2 Culturally specific care expectations

The second source of demand is the content of the care that families want. Chinese families often expect a domestic helper to do more than clean. Common expectations include cooking Chinese home-style food every day, caring for infants according to familiar practices, and, for school-age children, supervising homework and Chinese-language study. Some families also seek postpartum care (*yuesao*), a role that has no close equivalent in the Thai labour market. Recruitment notices posted by Chinese families in Thailand frequently specify that the helper must be able to cook Chinese meals and, in some cases, communicate in Chinese with a child (Thailand Chinese Network, n.d.).

These expectations are not simply preferences. For children who attend English-medium international schools, the home is often the main place where they use Chinese, and parents may see a Chinese-speaking carer as part of their strategy for maintaining the child's language and cultural identity. In this sense, the demand for a Chinese *ayi* is tied to the broader family project that motivated migration in the first place.

4.3 Trust and the management of the home

The third source of demand concerns trust. A domestic worker lives inside the family's private space, handles its property, and cares for its children. Yan (2008) shows that, even within China, employers judge domestic workers through complex ideas of reliability and moral character. Abroad, the ability

to talk directly with the worker, check references through Chinese networks, and share a common understanding of household rules makes employers feel more in control. Agencies that recruit from China actively market this sense of familiarity and safety.

5. Bottlenecks in the Local Market

5.1 Availability and the formal framework

It is important to note that Thailand does have a domestic labour market. Thai domestic workers can be employed without immigration formalities, and workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos can be legally employed in domestic work through the bilateral memorandum of understanding (MOU) system and related registration schemes. Practitioner guides for foreigners living in Thailand describe live-in nannies earning from around 15,000 baht a month, with experienced workers paid considerably more (Thailand Starter Kit, n.d.). The legal protection of these workers has also improved. Under Ministerial Regulation No. 15, issued in April 2024, domestic workers became entitled to the minimum wage, an eight-hour working day with overtime pay, a weekly rest day, and maternity protections (ILO, 2024a, 2024b). The minimum wage for Bangkok rose to 400 baht per day in July 2025 (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025). These rules apply to all employers, including foreign households, which raises the formal obligations that families must meet.

The bottleneck, therefore, is not an absolute shortage of workers. It is a mismatch between the workers who are available and the kind of care that new Chinese households want.

5.2 Language barriers

Language is the most frequently cited problem. Few Thai or neighbouring-country domestic workers speak Mandarin, and many new Chinese migrants, especially accompanying mothers who arrived recently, speak little Thai or English. Everyday management of a household depends on constant communication: explaining a recipe, giving instructions about a child's allergy, or resolving a misunderstanding about working hours. Communication problems also make it harder for employers to understand their legal obligations under Thai labour law, most information about which is published in Thai.

5.3 Cultural differences in household norms

The second bottleneck concerns household norms. Thai domestic work culture tends to define tasks clearly and to value politeness and indirect communication. Chinese employers, by contrast, may expect a single worker to perform a wide range of tasks, from cooking and cleaning to tutoring, and may communicate expectations more directly. Differences in diet, hygiene practices, and child-rearing (for example, attitudes towards discipline, clothing in hot weather, or how much a child should study) can create friction. Research on Chinese guardian mothers in Thailand notes that cultural constraints and limited local social networks shape how these mothers cope with daily life (Zhu et al., 2024).

5.4 Information asymmetry and weak intermediaries

The third bottleneck is the lack of trusted intermediaries who can bridge the two sides. New Chinese migrants often rely on WeChat groups and Chinese-language websites rather than Thai agencies. Few

Thai agencies offer Chinese-speaking coordinators, training for workers in Chinese cooking or communication, or clear explanations in Chinese of employers' legal duties. This information gap makes families more receptive to agencies that speak their language and promise a familiar solution, even when that solution is legally doubtful.

6. The "Imported Ayi" and Its Grey Zones

6.1 The legal mismatch in Thailand

Bringing a domestic worker from China runs into Thailand's system for regulating foreign employment. All foreigners need a work permit to work in Thailand, and a list of occupations is restricted for foreigners. The Ministry of Labour's 2020 notification on prohibited work lists 40 occupations: 27 closed to all foreigners and 13 open only under specific conditions. Among the conditional categories, general labour and shop assistance are available only to workers who enter through the MOU system with Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Winrock International, 2022). Domestic work for neighbouring-country nationals has historically been permitted through cabinet resolutions and the MOU framework rather than through the ordinary work-permit route (Winrock International, 2022).

For a Chinese national, there is no comparable routine pathway. Standard work permits are tied to a sponsoring employer, which in practice is usually a company that must meet requirements such as minimum registered capital and a ratio of Thai to foreign employees (ASEAN Briefing, n.d.). An individual household cannot normally meet these conditions. Practitioner guides consistently advise that nationals from countries outside the neighbouring-country schemes, such as the Philippines, generally cannot obtain a work permit to work as a maid or nanny in Thailand (Thailand Starter Kit, n.d.). Although the precise legal position should be confirmed with the Department of Employment, the documentary evidence indicates that most Chinese ayi working in Thai households are not working with a valid permit.

The penalties are significant. Foreign workers found working without a permit or outside its scope face fines of 5,000 to 50,000 baht and possible deportation, while employers face fines of 10,000 to 100,000 baht per worker (The Nation, 2025). Thai authorities have also stepped up enforcement. Between October 2024 and April 2025, the Department of Employment inspected 523,706 foreign workers, of whom 2,575 faced legal action, including 883 charged with working in occupations reserved for Thai nationals (The Nation, 2025). Raids on Chinese-run nominee businesses in Phuket and Bangkok in 2025 show that enforcement increasingly targets the wider Chinese migrant economy (Bangkok Post, 2025; Khaosod English, 2025).

6.2 Visa pathways and their misuse

Because a work-based route is unavailable, workers usually enter Thailand through other channels. Since 1 March 2024, Chinese passport holders have been able to enter Thailand without a visa for up to 30 days per visit, with a cumulative limit of 90 days in any 180-day period. The agreement explicitly requires those who intend to work to obtain the appropriate visa before entry (Beijing Municipal Government, 2024). In practice, visa-free entry and tourist visas make it easy for a worker to arrive, but not to work legally or to stay long-term. Arrangements therefore often involve repeated border

runs, overstaying, or presenting the worker as a relative or travelling companion of the family. Each option increases legal exposure. A precedent illustrates the pattern: in 2023, police in Phuket detained 28 Chinese nationals who had entered on tourist status and were working at a construction site, and the Chinese Embassy warned that Chinese citizens who enter Thailand on non-work visas may not be employed and risk detention, fines, and deportation (Thai PBS World, 2023; NetEase, 2023).

6.3 Fees and the cost structure

The cross-border model is costly. Although reliable price data are not available, the cost structure can be described. Families typically pay an agency fee for recruitment and "matching", airfares, visa-related or border-run expenses, accommodation and food for a live-in worker, and a monthly wage that must be high enough to attract a worker away from China's own large domestic service market. Because the worker cannot be legally employed, many of these payments are made informally, without written contracts that would be enforceable in Thai courts. If the worker leaves, is deported, or proves unsuitable, the family may lose the agency fee with no recourse.

A close parallel can be seen in mainland China's market for Filipino domestic workers. Because Chinese law does not permit foreign nationals to work as domestic helpers, agencies bring Filipino workers in on tourist, family-visit, or business visas, charging employers agency fees reported at 20,000 to 40,000 yuan (China News, 2017). Chinese prosecutors have described these contracts as unenforceable, and employers who hire foreigners illegally face fines of 10,000 yuan per person, up to 100,000 yuan, under China's Exit and Entry Administration Law (Zhejiang Provincial People's Procuratorate, 2025). The Thailand case reproduces this structure in reverse: Chinese families abroad now face the same legal gap that wealthy families in China face when hiring foreign helpers at home.

6.4 Non-compliance on the Chinese side

The problem does not lie only on the Thai side. China's Regulations on the Administration of Foreign Labour Service Cooperation require any business that sends workers abroad to hold a licence from the commerce authorities, to meet capital requirements, and to maintain a risk reserve fund. Article 8 prohibits any organisation or individual from sending workers abroad under the pretext of business, tourism, or study (State Council of the PRC, 2012). Informal agencies that recruit *ayi* in China for families in Thailand, and send them on tourist travel, therefore appear to violate Chinese rules as well. Because these agencies are usually unlicensed, workers lose access to the protections that the licensing system is designed to provide, such as contract review, insurance, and emergency assistance.

6.5 Who bears the risk?

The "imported *ayi*" solution redistributes risk in uneven ways. For workers, the risks are the most serious. Without legal status, they cannot claim the rights granted under Thailand's 2024 domestic work regulation, cannot easily seek help from Thai authorities, and depend heavily on their employer and agent. Their isolation in a foreign country, combined with language barriers, makes them vulnerable to excessive working hours, withheld wages, or confiscation of documents, problems well documented in other domestic worker migration systems (Constable, 2007; Parreñas, 2001). For families, the risks include fines, loss of fees, and the disruption caused if a worker is arrested or must leave suddenly. Table 1 compares the three main options available to new Chinese households.

Table 1

Comparison of domestic help options for new Chinese households in Thailand

	Local Thai worker	Neighbouring-country worker (MOU)	Chinese ayi via informal agency
Legal status	Legal; no immigration formalities	Legal through MOU or registration schemes	No routine work-permit route; usually visa-free or tourist entry
Language	Thai; little or no Mandarin	Burmese, Khmer or Lao; some Thai; little Mandarin	Mandarin; shared dialects possible
Cultural fit	Low to moderate; needs training	Low to moderate; needs training	High (Chinese cooking, child-rearing norms)
Cost	Thai wage rates; minimum wage applies	Wages plus registration costs	Agency fee, airfares, border runs, higher wage
Worker protection	Covered by Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024)	Covered by Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024)	Effectively unprotected
Main risks	Communication problems	Communication problems; paperwork	Fines, deportation, unenforceable contracts, worker exploitation

Note. Compiled by the author from the sources discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

7. Discussion

The analysis suggests that the "imported ayi" market is best understood not as individual rule-breaking but as a predictable outcome of structural conditions. Three features stand out.

First, the market is a clear example of migration infrastructure at work. Where demand is strong but legal channels are closed, brokers create their own channels, combining visa-free travel, WeChat-based recruitment, and informal payment. As Xiang and Lindquist (2014) argue, such infrastructure can become self-perpetuating: the more families rely on brokers, the more brokers become the default solution, and the less pressure there is to develop legal alternatives. The high fees partly reflect the cost of managing illegality itself.

Second, the case extends the idea of global care chains. In the classic model, care flows from a poorer country to a richer one, and employer and worker are separated by nationality and class. Here, care flows from China's domestic service sector, which itself relies largely on rural women, to Chinese middle-class families living abroad. Employer and worker share a language and culture, but the worker remains in a weaker legal and economic position. Cultural closeness does not remove inequality; it may even make informal arrangements seem more acceptable.

Third, the case shows how gendered care burdens travel with migration. Studies of accompanying mothers show that they shoulder most of the work of family life abroad while facing restrictions on their own employment (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Li, 2025). The decision to hire an ayi is often an attempt to reduce this burden. Yet the solution relies on another woman, the ayi, who takes on care work in an even more precarious position. In this sense, the care problem of one group of women is solved by shifting risk onto another.

Finally, the case reveals a gap between Thailand's progress on domestic workers' rights and the realities of a segmented labour market. The 2024 regulation brings Thai law closer to international standards, but its protections reach only workers who are legally employed. Workers in the grey market remain outside its reach. As the ILO (2024a) notes, enforcement in private homes is difficult

even for legally employed workers; it is even harder for those whose status employers and agents have an interest in hiding.

8. Recommendations

For Chinese families in Thailand, the first recommendation is to treat compliance as part of the cost of migration. Hiring a Thai or legally registered neighbouring-country worker, paying the minimum wage, and following the 2024 regulation reduces legal risk. Families can invest in bridging the cultural gap, for example by paying for basic Chinese cooking or language training for a local worker, or by sharing a bilingual helper among several households for specific tasks.

For the domestic service industry, there is a clear market opportunity for licensed Thai agencies that employ Chinese-speaking coordinators, offer workers training in Chinese household practices, and provide employers with bilingual contracts and information on Thai labour law.

For the Thai government, publishing Chinese-language guidance on employing domestic workers, including the 2024 regulation, would help new migrant employers comply. Thai authorities could also review whether limited, regulated pathways for specialised care roles are appropriate, for example by setting clear criteria, skills requirements, and caps, rather than leaving the demand to be met informally.

For the Chinese government and consular services, the existing rules on overseas labour services could be communicated more clearly to both workers and families, including warnings on recruitment platforms about the risks of informal overseas domestic work. Cooperation between Chinese and Thai authorities against unlicensed recruitment networks would protect workers who might otherwise be drawn into these arrangements.

9. Conclusion

New Chinese households in Thailand face a real and growing need for domestic help. This need arises from the way migration reshapes family life, especially in education-migration households centred on an accompanying mother, and from specific expectations about food, childcare, and language. The local market offers workers and, since 2024, stronger legal protections, but language barriers, divergent household norms, and weak intermediaries limit its appeal. The cross-border recruitment of Chinese *ayi* fills this gap at a high price and in a legal grey zone created by Thailand's restrictions on foreign employment and China's rules on overseas labour services.

The article has argued that this grey market is a structural product of strong demand meeting closed legal channels, and that its costs fall most heavily on workers. A more sustainable path lies in strengthening legal, culturally competent local services rather than in expanding informal cross-border recruitment. Because this study relies on documentary sources, future research should use interviews and fieldwork with families, agencies, and domestic workers, carried out with careful attention to research ethics and worker safety, to measure the scale of this market and to understand the experiences of the workers at its centre.

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