

Case Study: Mr Phas Ngarn-dee (Shoemaking)

Mr Phas Ngarn-dee (a fictitious name) was 59 in 2011. He lived alone in Ratchaburi province's Photharam district. Both his parents were dead. Occasionally, his nephews and nieces would visit him. After finishing his four-year schooling, Phas spent his time in the village working as a waged worker. At 17, his uncle suggested that he work at a shoe shop named Sithichok located in Bangkok's Wong Wian Yai area. Phas agreed to try his hand at it. First, he was assigned to mix a solution of glue and do the upper portion of a shoe (called upper leather/shoe upper). Then he was taught to sew the shoe soles and create a shoe pattern. After a number of years, Phas was adequately experienced and decided to also freelance, creating shoe patterns for various shops and earning a daily income of 600 THB(20 USD). When there was no freelance work, he would work with the old shoe shop.

Phas had worked with the shop for about 30 years when, in 1999, the employer began to have economic problems. Citing the customers' failure to pay their debts and a slump in shoe sales, the owner no longer could pay Phas' wages. At the time, his parents were also taken ill, so he decided to quit the job and return home to take care of his parents in Ratchaburi.

When Phas came back home to Ratchaburi, he began to take shoemaking orders from a factory located in Buddhamonthon 4 Road area. He and 4-5 neighbours organized themselves into a group, which would make leather shoes and sneakers. The employer would provide all the necessary materials for them.

The production process started from drawing patterns onto the leather, cutting the leather according to the patterns, sewing the upper leather, gluing the shoe upper and sole together, and sewing the shoes. Each step would earn 4-5 THB (0.13-0.167 USD) per pair of shoes. Group members could earn a daily income of about 400-500 THB (13.3-16.7 USD). However, the economic slump in 2002 resulted in reduced orders from the factory. Phas had to contact a few more employers so that his group members would be employed. Over time, some of the contractors had to fold because they had to pay higher material cost but could only sell at the same prices. For instance, the price of a can of glue went from 200 THB(6.67 USD) to 400 THB(13.3USD) while the cost of a centimeter of leather went from 5 THB(0.167USD) to 6-7 THB(0.2-0.23 USD).

During the time when the work was not plentiful, a new employer delivered his jobs to the group. At first, he won the group's confidence by paying advances wages. But eventually, the payments were delayed and frequently had to be demanded. Still, Phas was optimistic that his group would not be cheated. His hope was shattered when the contractor collected the last lot of work and has never paid or showed up again. Phas went to his house but did not meet him. Filing a complaint to the police was impossible because all the work had been collected by the contractor. He admitted that he was so eager to take the jobs that he did not give them careful consideration. In addition, he had no legal knowledge about how to demand the unpaid wages. Neither did he know where to ask for any advice or help, thus he just let go of the problems and used them as a lesson for his next employment.

Phas continues to take shoemaking work, which is not plentiful enough to share with other members of the group. Some of the group members have had to find work with other employers. Others became odd-job workers. During the low-season for shoemaking, particularly from May to August, Phas takes odd jobs in the village. He gets back to shoemaking when the orders come in.
