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From the Baltimore Sun

A Sun special report: Part two

Working the water

Thousands of Asian workers on a new global supply line are supplanting an old Maryland-based food chain

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Sun Reporter

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TYLERTON -- On Smith Island, Donna Smith knows there's only one thing for women like her to do once their men have delivered their catch of [Chesapeake Bay](#) blue crabs and the crabs have been steamed and silenced for good.

They have to get to work, the tedious, monotonous work of picking crabmeat. Geography and nature have set the boundaries of what they do as surely as geography and nature have set the boundaries of the island.

Some of the women were born into this life. Others married into it, knowing that their fate for at least six months out of the year would be to separate crabs from their shells with as much speed and dexterity as they could muster, picking fast enough each day to stay ahead of the next day's catch.

"If there's a crabber in your family, chances are you pick crabs," says Smith, a picker who has lived on the island for nearly four decades and raised two sons here. "On Tylerton, there's nothing else for us to do."

The work these women do defines their lives, and yet now it can easily be done elsewhere by others. For every nimble-fingered woman picking crab with a curled knife on Smith Island, there are hundreds of women in Asia doing the same work just as fast. For every crabber on Smith Island, there are thousands from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Myanmar and Thailand. The boundaries previously set by geography and nature have been broken down by the brute force of capital and labor.

The old Maryland-based food chain - small and, at best, static - is being supplanted by a new one, dramatically changing the story of who brings crab to Americans and of how they do it. That new supply chain starts in

waters vaster and deeper than the [Chesapeake Bay](#) and ends in supermarkets and restaurants all over the United States.

How Asian crabs become a packaged American consumer product is a tale of all the humanity that constitutes a global industry, of entrepreneurs taking big chances to make big money, of people exploiting nature and each other for personal gain, of laborers so desperate to pursue better lives that they leave wives and children behind for years at a time.

They are all yoked together by their individual stakes in each 1-pound can of crab, in the nearly \$300 million-a-year industry that brings the world's crabmeat to the American market. On this new production line, a band of itinerant Burmese fishermen living on a wooden boat begins a process that ends with well-dressed suburbanites sitting down to a crab cake meal in the world's richest country. The Maryland crabbers and pickers are increasingly left out.

From a place as isolated as Tylerton, the islanders say, it's difficult to battle with the corporations mass-producing what was once their homegrown specialty.

One of the restaurants on Smith Island has even sold crab cakes made from Asian crab to tourists who come for seemingly authentic Maryland fare. "It wasn't much of a secret when people saw him bring it in on the stern of his boat," says Tina Corbin, president of the Smith Island Crabmeat Cooperative.

Six afternoons a week, from May or June and often until Thanksgiving, the men tie up their boats at Tylerton's rickety dock and deliver the day's catch to the co-op's screened-in porch, where two giant metal steamers will render the crabs just the right hue of orange. The crabs will cool in a walk-in refrigerator. Only then can the picking begin.

Each basket of Maryland blue crabs will yield 6 or 7 pounds of the creamy crabmeat. And each pound of crabmeat sold by the cooperative will bring in \$15. Sometimes the pickers' earnings are limited by how much crab comes in. More often, they are limited by time - there are only so many hours in the day, and the crabs that can't be picked will have to be sold in the shell, for less.

When the room is filled with the women of the island, it feels more like a coffee klatch than the serious job it is. But make no mistake. They are busy, baskets of crabs spilled out before them waiting to be attacked. The women make quick work with thumb and forefinger, popping off the back shells and, with what seems like one graceful motion, scraping out the succulent lumps of crabmeat and tossing them, along with other pieces, into small plastic tubs.

They tell stories. They sing, beautiful spirituals with the striking a cappella of a long-practiced choir. They marvel at the speed with which Robin Bradshaw can pick a pound, creating mountains of snowy crabmeat in minutes. They laugh - a lot. They sit not far from a hand-lettered sign hung above a paper-towel rack: "Some things are worth hearing over and over again."

This isn't a factory for the world. It can't be. In its first year, less than a decade ago, the co-op picked 19,000 pounds of crabmeat. In 2005, it was roughly 10,000 pounds, just one day's work in some plants overseas.

On Smith Island, tucked into the bay a 40-minute ferry ride from Crisfield, they are at the mercy of nature, which provides - but seems to provide a little less each year.

"Unlike farmers," says Christine Smith, Donna Smith's sister-in-law, "we reap, but we don't sow."

The Gulf of Thailand is a much bigger, richer [Chesapeake Bay](#). Hundreds of commercial fishing boats stalk its waters every night as the blue swimming crab hunts for food and instead becomes it.

Working through the night on a Thai boat, hundreds of miles from home, seven men from Myanmar are raising crab traps from the watery depths. Invisible, unpredictable currents have delivered the crew to 9 degrees 39 minutes north latitude and 99 degrees 54 minutes east longitude, the starting point of a global supply chain.

The meat from the crabs that they pull from the water on this night will end up in restaurant kitchens in the United States months later, in cans labeled Jack's Catch.

Before the Thai blue swimming crab becomes a Maryland-style crab cake, a Burmese fisherman named Luktan will secure its snapping claws with rubber bands and throw it in an oxygenated seawater tank, so that it can live to be steamed the next day by a squat man from Rangoon named Taihuen.

Then in another part of Thailand, 18-year-old Chusak Hakrin will rip off extraneous pieces of its shell with a furious speed that seems too mechanized to be human, so that a fellow Thai named Slawut can cook it again in the hot, stuffy steaming room next door.

Khun Yupa, a 24-year-old Thai mother of one, will pick out the crab's precious white lumps of meat as quickly as she can without cutting herself, because she and her co-workers are paid by the kilogram. Still more Thais will can the meat, pasteurize it and load it into a container for shipping to Miami.

The economic structure of this human assembly line begins to explain why, 9,000 miles away, the [Chesapeake Bay](#) crabber is almost as besieged a species as the Maryland blue crab. All the fishermen and laborers who handle the crab will collectively earn less than a few dollars out of every 1-pound can - whether it sells for \$10 or \$30 - the laborers on land earning \$3 to \$5 a day, the fishermen earning more in exchange for living all but several days a month on a 50-foot boat.

Life is a hard and unbending routine in the vicinity of 99 degrees east, 9 degrees north. The crew of seven Burmese fishermen, led by a Thai boat captain, wakes up aboard the Kaseamchai, meaning "Joyful Triumph," about 9 p.m. every evening, after four hours' sleep, to begin collecting and emptying nearly 4,000 nylon-mesh traps.

A motorized winch pulls the rope holding the traps, but these men do the rest of the work, handling the traps at a pace of one every five seconds. On this night, a crewman named Win - many Burmese go by one name - grabs each trap off the line while another crewman stands in the lower hold making sure the rope comes in coiled neatly enough to go back out the next day. Win hands the traps to a crewmate who pries the crabs free from the mesh and tosses them into small plastic buckets.

These crabs, mottled and bluish-green, are noticeably different from their [Chesapeake Bay](#) counterparts. They are feisty and desperate enough to claw through the meshing of some of the traps, so a crewman in a cap sits quietly to one side near the front of the boat, stitching the ripped meshing back together.

Luktan, the chief crewman, takes care of the frantic claws. He pulls the crabs from the buckets with his gloved hands and binds the fierce pincers with rubber bands, and then throws the animals into a tank of seawater.

The men keep pace with the tireless winch until they are finished almost eight hours later, at close to 5 a.m., when they radio for a smaller boat that is making the rounds in the area, picking up the catches to bring back to the port of Donsak. Thirty minutes later and the delivery boat is off, and the men are wolfing down a meal of shrimp, pork and vegetables prepared by a crewman who doubles as the galley cook.

About 5:30 a.m., the crew members each find a familiar spot of floorboard and nap for 90 minutes. Then it's three hours more of sewing traps and baiting them for the night. Later they begin dropping the traps into the sea again for five sunbaked hours.

They clean up and get ready to sleep at 5 p.m. The toilet is the Gulf of Thailand at the stern; the bed, a hard plank of boat.

The cycle begins again four hours later. It continues without letup for three or four weeks, until the boat comes to shore for a few days.

"I am a poor man. I just wake up and do the job that they ask me to so I can make money, and that's it," Luktan says. "There is no other job, so this is the only way for me to make money."

Luktan, 27, has been reliving this same exhausting day for more than seven years and gets about the highest reward of any of the laborers who will handle this catch in Thailand: \$10 a day, much more than any of those who will later sort, steam, pick, can and pasteurize this crab.

Money is the only reason that men such as Luktan are willing to live years apart from their homeland and their families - his wife came from Myanmar to join him only last year - but it is reason enough. Back home in Ware-ka-por, a coastal fishing village, Luktan could earn only a small fraction of what he gets now. The future, he realized, was in Thailand. Crossing illegally 10 years ago, Luktan eventually journeyed to the eastern port of Donsak, a gateway to the waters that had just become one of the wellsprings of a global crabbing industry. The Gulf of Thailand had become this country's [Chesapeake Bay](#).

Bill James' sturdy workboat is practically pacing the Choptank River, on the prowl for someone else's dinner.

He has been catching blue crabs in this very spot not far from the [Chesapeake Bay](#) for most of his 70 years, full time for the past 20. Until recently, the business was regional and played out mostly within a few hundred miles of where James' 40-foot boat, the Valmar Jon, is docked.

The way James does his job has hardly changed over time. He still wakes in the blackness of the morning and checks the Eastern Shore weather forecast. He brings along a sack lunch fixed by his wife and drives his truck to a dock a few miles from home. He still uses the same low-tech equipment he has used for decades - a few 1,800-foot lines of rope with a bait of thawing chicken necks tied on at three-foot intervals, a handmade dip net to snag the critters as they try to race away, some shabby wooden bushel baskets.

His personal market is the same too. Just about every crab he catches is sold to the 116-year-old J.M. Clayton Co. in Cambridge, full baskets delivered to the dock every afternoon to be weighed and carried off to the industrial steamers on site. Clayton's cadre of workers - most of them seasonal employees from Mexico - will have James' catch in 1-pound plastic containers headed for store shelves and home refrigerators by the end of the next business day.

The market forces of the crab industry aren't something James has studied. What he knows is the blue crab. Where it swims. When it is biting. When it isn't anymore. How to lure it - and dozens of its friends - onto his boat.

It's a delicate dance to catch crabs the way James does it. They aren't hooked on James' line. Or trapped in a pot, as most Maryland watermen do it. They're just treading water, snacking on the chicken necks that float enticingly above, holding on as if to a life preserver. When James spots them, he has to act fast, wielding his net

like a lacrosse stick and scooping up the crustaceans one by one. This works only if James sees the crab before the crab sees him. "In the blink of an eye he can be off the line and gone," James explains. "They fly right off."

Some years it's hard to make a living this way. When the crabs aren't biting, there's little money coming in. Other times, the price is so good it makes more financial sense to sell the crabs and dine on steaks. But crab is a more typical meal in James' world.

"You can make some money. I don't know about good money. I've never known a rich waterman," James says.

He starts to separate his first batch of crabs. Males go in one basket, females in another. He can spot the females in an instant. They have red-tinged claws, their manicures setting them apart from the rest. They taste sweeter.

But Clayton offers better money for the males. Restaurants want the males because they're larger and easier for diners to crack open on paper-topped tables. The females - and some males, depending on size and season - will be whisked inside Clayton, where they may be destined for the plate as a crab cake.

On this day, the females, also known as sooks, will go for \$16 a bushel - the lowest price for the girls so far in the season. The jimmies, as they call the males in these parts, will get \$36 a bushel. One week at the start of last summer - when crabs were scarce and tourists came in droves with a hunger for them - each bushel of jimmies earned him \$109.

While on the water, James can't help but tally his expected earnings in his head. By the time he calls it a day, he has 12 bushels of crabs - six of females and six of males. By the time he gets to Clayton's dock, James figures he has earned a solid payday of \$310.

But as he pulls up, his wallet lightens. Today's price stares at him in black and white: A handwritten note posted on a pole at the dock gives him the news. Male crabs aren't fetching \$36 a bushel like yesterday. They're going instead for just \$25. Supply and demand in James' world is local, not global. There's not enough demand for crabs on this day so he must settle for less. This is how it works.

"They cut the price on me," he says, disgusted.

One lesson of globalization is that hardship is relative. The Maryland crab worker's rung on the economic ladder may be rusty and worn, something to be held on to, not climbed. But the crab workers along the coast of Thailand are climbing an entirely different ladder: The rungs are just lesser degrees of poverty.

Taihuen, 26, starts his days in the port of Donsak when the first boats hauling live crabs come in and often finishes 14 hours later. It is a daily marathon of back-bending work, shoveling pieces of rubber and rambutan trees into a wood furnace, dumping bushels of crabs into steel steamers fired by the furnace, then shoveling more wood. His wife's long days of sorting picked crabmeat begin at 6:30 a.m.

Their reward for this work might seem small, about \$50 a week between them, but that's more than Taihuen used to earn in a year back home in Rangoon.

At this dockside crab operation, the only people getting rich are the Choeyklins - Nantanee, the mayor of Donsak, and her husband, Somsak - who run the pier as efficiently and paternalistically as any successful factory boss in the developing world. But whether such bosses are ruthless exploiters or generous heroes is a matter of perspective: The Burmese migrants who work for the Choeyklins would much prefer to live in this poverty than in the poverty they once knew.

The poverty that Taihuen and his wife, Nira, know now is a mattress protected by mosquito netting on a bare concrete floor. They live in a two-room section of a warehouse, with a video compact disc player, a television and columns of empty beer cans. The kitchen is a hot plate, a gas burner and a wok. The air conditioning is a floor fan. There is no furniture.

The only relics of Myanmar are the family pictures, and Nira, 25, lingers over one of them as she stands barefoot in a sarong-like skirt at 5 a.m. It's a portrait of her 3-year-old son, Su, who is back in Myanmar. She says nothing, but her eyes begin to tear.

"I followed my husband," she explained. "We came here just to work, to earn money."

Is it worth it? she is asked. She chooses not to say.

For their individual roles in catching, sorting and steaming tons of crab in the previous 36 hours, each of the Burmese workers will earn just cents - or a fraction of a cent - per pound of crab. The tons of crab they processed will be worth tens of thousands of dollars in the United States, with the premium meat going for up to \$29 a pound.

Some of the laborers wonder how much a single 1-pound can of this Asian crab sells for in America. The answer is an accounting more ruthless than a factory boss: That can would cost many of them more than a week's salary.

Dan Viravong was holding forth in the port city of Trat, near Thailand's border with Cambodia, when he glanced at his Porsche outside his office. His mind switched gears, anticipating his next spin along the coast.

"That's my toy," said the 41-year-old father of three. More accurately, it's just one of his toys. There's also his boat, his huge waterfront house and his SeaRey airplane, which he had shipped from Orlando, Fla. He usually likes to fly it around the neighborhood, he said, sometimes taking it to Bangkok 200 miles away.

Viravong is proud of his toys. They are the material representation of his success as the reigning king of canned crabmeat in Thailand, ever since Baltimore-based Phillips Foods decided to focus elsewhere in the region. Though born in Thailand, Viravong speaks with a bit of a Southern twang from his years in Mobile, Ala. His company, Grand Bay Seafood, used to get its blue crabs from Mobile Bay.

About the time Viravong went to Thailand eight years ago to get crab, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration learned of allegations that he and Grand Bay Seafood had purchased Asian crab, mixed it with domestic crabmeat and labeled it as an American product. Viravong later pleaded guilty to federal misdemeanor charges of misbranding food and was fined \$15,000 and sentenced to two years' probation.

Once he decided to set up an operation in his native country, though, he was instantly successful, he said, with \$5 million in U.S. sales of his Thai crabmeat in his first year. Last year, he had \$30 million in U.S. sales, he said.

He employs hundreds of workers to pick, can, pasteurize and ship about 200,000 pounds of crabmeat a month to the United States under a multitude of labels, including Grand Bay, Gulf Coast Crab and Jack's Catch.

"This place was a shrimp pond when I came here in 1998," Viravong said. It's a factory complex now.

Globalization rewards places that are cheap and well-located and, unlike the [Chesapeake Bay](#), well-stocked with natural resources. Easy access to a nearby container port and a relatively low-cost pool of workers familiar with

crab turned a quaint town of 20,000 into a good place to do business. A major competitor - but smaller, Viravong notes - Blue Star Food Products, has a crab factory on the other side of town.

Both companies have a rigid, standardized way of processing crab - by necessity because they have to pass inspections by the FDA if they want to export to the United States. That means all people handling crabmeat are in uniforms that include rubber gloves, rubber boots and hairnets, and the smell of disinfecting chlorine is almost as prevalent as the smell of crab, which permeates every room.

The 400 pounds of crab caught by Luktan's crew arrives in a refrigerated truck at Viravong's crab factory more than 60 hours after the first traps were pulled from the Gulf of Thailand.

In Trat, the crabs pass through a frenzied human shelling machine. Nearly 70 men and women in two cramped rooms rip apart the extraneous bits of shell and separate the claws and legs and throw the various parts into buckets.

The work will make it easier for the crabs to be picked later, but it makes for a dizzying sight unlike any that occurs in nature: crab parts and detritus in a constant state of midair motion.

The workers get paid by the pound, so they are motivated to work at an almost impossible speed. Chusak Hakrin's hands move so quickly as he twists and shucks each crab that, aside from a goofy smile, he looks like a robot or a special effect. "The more you work, the faster you are," the 18-year-old said without slowing down.

The crab parts then go directly to the steaming room next door, where they are steamed a second time to kill germs before picking, and are eventually placed in a refrigerator again. The picking will take place the next day, more than 72 hours after the crabs were caught.

The tremendous scale of the Asian crab business can be understood in the picking rooms. On a busy day there can be more pickers in this one factory in one Thai town - as many as 500 - than there were working last year in all of Maryland's crab houses combined.

The pickers, virtually all women, work in teams in five rooms: three rooms for Thai workers, one room for Thai Muslims (so, plant workers said, they could observe their religious duties without being disrupted or disrupting others), and another room for ethnic Cambodians with special work permits as refugees or the relatives of refugees.

They will sort the lumps into several sizes - "mega," the largest and most valuable size, "jumbo" and "lump" - and the remaining body meat, claw meat and "finger cocktail" meat as well into separate plastic containers. Then the meat goes back into the fridge.

Two days later, the meat will be packed into cans. The day after that, the cans will be pasteurized in extreme heat in a large steel vat and then quickly cooled.

A week after Luktan's crabs were caught in the Gulf of Thailand, the cans of crab are ready for shipping to the United States.

On a shelf in an upscale grocery store in suburban Minneapolis, LoAnn Mockler, a marketing executive who tries her hand at cooking new dishes whenever she can, finds two 6-ounce cans of blue swimming crab for \$11.99 apiece that are packaged by a company that does its business in Trat.

On the menu at her cooking club's monthly get-together are crab cakes on a bed of greens, a specialty that

Mockler, 51, first made for the group several years ago. Crab cakes weren't common in Minnesota, but she had tried them at a downtown restaurant years back and couldn't get them off her mind.

So she set out to replicate the meal, consulting her floor-to-ceiling bookshelf packed with cookbooks. She tested many recipes, rejecting several. One had some nerve calling itself a crab cake, what with the peppers, celery, onions, even capers.

Many crab cake recipes call for fresh blue crab. Most people need to find a suitable substitute - and not just those living in Minnesota.

In the summer and fall, from the [Chesapeake Bay](#) southward (and in a few upscale restaurants in major cities), it is possible to find the real thing. But even in Maryland in the middle of the summer, local crabmeat can be hard to come by.

"I would say probably 90 percent of restaurants - maybe even higher - are using foreign crabmeat in Maryland," said Noreen Eberly, director of the seafood marketing program at the state Department of Agriculture.

Asian crabmeat is becoming ubiquitous - in tubs packed in Thailand, in cans from China, in pouches from Indonesia, in crab cakes assembled on U.S. soil. The No. 1-selling food item on QVC, the home shopping channel, is crab cakes sold under the brand name [Chesapeake Bay](#) Gourmet and put together in a warehouse in Baltimore County - made mostly with frozen crabmeat imported from Asia.

Purists will insist the only crabmeat worth eating comes from the [Chesapeake Bay](#) (a few will allow for other domestic crab, from the Gulf of Mexico or off the eastern coast of North Carolina or Florida). They speak of its sweetness, of its distinctive taste, of a flavor without equal. They scoff at the notion that blue swimming crab from Asia can even be considered the same foodstuff as the crabmeat they have eaten all of their lives, the same as they themselves extract on a picnic table with a crab mallet.

"Most people see these pretty lumps. They just think because it's a restaurant in Maryland, it's local crabmeat," said Smith Island crab picker Donna Smith. "I've had chefs say, if you put a little mayo and Old Bay in it, people will buy anything."

The question of taste would seem to be a troublesome wild card in the industrialization of the crab. How can a crab that's caught, steamed, picked, canned and pasteurized - and transported 9,000 miles - taste as good as a crab freshly caught in the [Chesapeake Bay](#)?

The answer, unfortunately for the watermen and pickers of Maryland, is that even a noticeable difference in taste is irrelevant. Across the country, diners rarely have the option of fresh American crab.

There is usually only one choice, and it's imported. It tastes enough like the [Chesapeake Bay](#)'s blue crab to work. The proof is not in the crab cakes but in the bills of sale.

"I'll be the first one to admit Maryland crabmeat is superior," said Paul Jarrett, executive chef of the Oceanaire Seafood Room in Baltimore's Harbor East. But this upscale Minnesota-based chain, which prides itself on serving only the freshest seafood, buys tens of thousands of pounds of crabmeat annually from Phillips, an American outlet selling predominantly Asian seafood.

The restaurants must buy Asian because of the volume that they need, Jarrett said. Other chefs say Asian meat's long shelf life also makes it popular with restaurants that want Maryland-style crab cakes on their menus. The lumps of Asian crabmeat are typically larger and whiter than its domestic counterparts - making for a more

visually appealing meal. It can also be cheaper than domestic crabmeat.

"You get what's the best available to you," said Honey Konicoff, a spokeswoman for Phillips Foods.

About a thousand miles from the [Chesapeake Bay](#), Mockler knows there's probably nothing that quite compares to a crab cake made from freshly caught Maryland blue crab. But here she is in Crystal, an inner-ring suburb of Minneapolis, making crab cakes in the kitchen of her split-level house, with her book-publisher husband and her college-student daughter at her side. She has made them for friends before - to rave reviews.

She'll prepare the golf-ball-size mounds of crabmeat and crushed saltines and, of course, Old Bay and mayonnaise, carefully measuring them out with an orange plastic measuring cup. Then she will get into her Toyota and take the crab cakes to her good friends Kim and Jim Lindhal's house, where she'll fry them in a heavy cast-iron pan on a fancy stainless-steel cooktop.

As the crab cakes cook, they turn golden brown, with small and steady bubbles of olive oil licking at the edges. In a middle-class home in middle America, crab cakes are on the menu at a small dinner party among friends, a true sign that they have caught on in a place where they couldn't even have been had a decade ago.

Here, on a dining room table in suburban Minneapolis, is a Maryland-style crab cake made from blue swimming crab caught in the Gulf of Thailand.

Mockler lifts her glass of Wisconsin sauvignon blanc. Then she brings her fork to the crab cake that has landed here, on a bed of greens on a pretty red plate many miles from the nearest ocean. She and the others take a taste. Another culinary success, they agree.

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