

# Developing Creative City through Networking Immigrants in Phuket

Nicha Tovankasame\*

Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, Thailand

Corresponding author: E-mail: [nicha.t@phuket.psu.ac.th](mailto:nicha.t@phuket.psu.ac.th)

Jakraphan Chaopreecha

College of Computing, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, Thailand

E-mail: [jakraphan.t@phuket.psu.ac.th](mailto:jakraphan.t@phuket.psu.ac.th)

## Abstract

Since 2000s, there has been a development of creative economy concepts in which the new ideas and new business domains are supported. In this regard, such creative economy becomes the main mechanism driven a formation of creative city. Key discussions on the formation is the migration of flexible laborers and their enthusiasm in contributing ideas to the local economic sphere. In global societies, many creative cities are developed and interconnected in order to exchange resources – laborer, technology, and knowledge. It could be seen that the endorsement of creative economy requires two significant factors; the mobility of creative laborers and their opportunity to become parts of economic development. However, these factors can play the roles differently from one locality to another in social integration due to the cultural patterns and the government policies. In order to observe the factors in the locality of Thailand, this research has collected ethnographic data in Phuket, one of the UNESCO creative cities. Through anthropological views, the research reveals how creative people construct their networks in which the new ideas and knowledge have been exchanged and circulated. This exchange creates a network of immigrants which introduces the new creative arena to the locality as a result.

**Keywords:** People Climate, Networking Immigrant, Creative City, Phuket

## Introduction

In 2015, Phuket city has been registered as a creative city, gastronomic category<sup>1</sup>. The local culinary culture influenced by Hokkien Chinese immigrants becomes the main resource for the present business development. Many Phuket people have inherited recipes, terms, and techniques in cooking among family members who might start their own restaurants in accordance with the advent of tourism industry since the 1990s. Local scholars have strived to accumulate the information revealing the identities of Phuket recipe, and submitted it to the UNESCO in order to receive the status as a creative city. This permits Phuket locality to access the network of creative city and receive opportunity to be promoted among the network of global tourism industries.

In order to maintain a status of creative city, the local government has to implement the policy to support the growth of creative economy. UNESCO likewise designates the criteria or checklist to indicating a status of the city which becomes a framework for the city development. However, the term ‘creative city’ has been variedly interpreted. There has been a discussion what creative city should really be. In 2010, the National Economics and Social Development Council (NESDC, Thai: สำนักงานสภาพัฒนาการเศรษฐกิจและสังคมแห่งชาติ) had studied and summarized the

---

<sup>1</sup> There are seven categories of the UNESCO creative city – crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts, and music (UNESCO, n.d.).

concept of creative economy by applying the definitions written by UNCTAD, UNESCO, and British government. NESDC divided creative industries into three sectors – main, minor, and non-applicable sectors (The Creative Economy, 2010). The main sectors comprise of creative media and creative services industries, such as, broadcasting, software development, design, advertising, film and videos. Food industry is recognized as related industry in the non-applicable sector which do not directly propel the creative economy. NESDC further mentioned that the concept of creative economy written by UNESCO recognize merely cultural value of products, and not include the creativity and innovation factors (Ibid, 2010). This creates a paradoxical practice in locality. According to the UNESCO, The Phuket local government have tried to preserve the cultural value of local foods as a way to promote the creative economy without mentioning a mobility of creative laborer.

By not mentioning the importance of creative laborers, business owners face difficulty in developing a new idea and creating a solution to implement their business models. The current tourism industry –mainly promoting natural sightseeing places – attracts an influx of domestic immigrants who mostly are unskilled laborers to become bus drivers, daily employees, or stall sellers. This situation has eventually transformed Phuket to be a competitive-based-price market. In order to develop high-value industries, the representatives of local business associations propose that Phuket should persuade creative laborers from other provinces and other countries. They potentially support a development and bring an investment to locality. In fact, there has already been a large number of creative laborers who tends to influence or support the emergence of new businesses. The immigrants are not recognized since the government seems to focus on the blooming of new business firms rather than the cooperation among creative laborers. In order to find the perspective of what are the factors to develop Phuket creative economy through a cooperation among creative laborers, this research has strived to answer two questions: 1) how do the immigrants influence an emergence of new creative business resulted from the interaction between them and local people; 2) Is the city open to newcomers to become creative laborers regarding the policies, laws, and local cultures?

## **Literature Review**

In the early 2000s, the concept of creative economy had been constructed in accordance with the British government's new 14 industry promotions – advertising, architectural design, art, craft, design, fashion, films, music, performing art, publishing, software development, toys, televisions and radios, and video games (Howkins, 2013). The creative economy has been developed because of the emergence of the three factors – new communication technology, transportation, and new production process interconnected along global supply chains. People having a new idea for creating product are able to access a micro production system to produce prototypes and distribute them via the internet. A new producer does not need to invest monetary resource to build a factory. As a consequence, private places like houses, schools, garages, living rooms become the small units in the production system in which new technology, ideas, knowledge, and techniques are transferred.

The laborers working in creative economy have roles in producing products which have quality to satisfy emotional needs of the customers. In the production process, they utilize both material and immaterial resources – communication technique, signs, symbols, services. Florida described such laborers as a group of “creative class” who has an ability to create new things by utilizing their intense knowledge and problem-solving methods (Florida, 2019). Thus, a concern of diversity of creative labor comes to be a center of the development process (Hospers and Dalm, 2005). Such laborers should be supported to extent their connection and to exchange necessary resources and knowledge which become a foundation of creative industry (Sasaki, 2010). The creative laborers commit particular workstyles to the system, for examples,

responding to flexible tasks and office hours, undertaking fluctuant incomes and unstable contracts, and utilizing a creative ability. They also claim that their practices are different from workers in the industrialized era which becomes a burden for them to establish union and to negotiate social security and pension with a government (Kim, 2019).

There has been a discussion about what persuades creative people mobilized to the city. To answer such question, Florida proposed a concept of “climate people” which persuades creative laborers migrating to the city. As of then, the concept of climate people comes to be debatable. There was a demographic research revealing a data that opportunity to enter a job market is a main reason for creative immigrants (Hansen and Niedomysl, 2009). However, from the personal interviews, social inclusion – open to immigrants to be societal members – is still a main factor to retain a stay of creative immigrants (Lin, 2019).

The implementation of state policy on promoting creative cities is one of the mechanisms to build the environment of creativity and attract transnational global labors (Kong, 2014). Paris is known as one of the creative cities based from the cultural economy where the global trends originated. Aside from the networks of specialized production, professional workers, and associations, the governmental authority also plays the vital roles of providing funds and subsidies to production houses of creative industry. It helps stimulating the growth of creative laborers and flexible firm networks of design domain to serve the large demand of domestic market (Scott, 2000). Another discussion is to embed the concept of ‘neoliberal creativity’ with the regional development policy (Gibson and Klocker, 2005). The Australian government has planned to develop the regional city through utilizing the universal assessment of the problems and seek for the best-practice knowledge of being creative model for other clusters to follow. However, such the benchmark exertion was criticized as the neoliberal application that hinders the importance of subjectivity, meanwhile ignore the basis of creativity in which the distinction of productivity is the key. Another social impact happened when the idea of recruiting more creative professionals and lifestyle immigrants, to revitalizing the cultural industry and regional economy, may take over the lower-income residents, instead of alleviating the local communities. In this regard, the creative-based policy in many regions of Australia is expected to output the fast-track development with less considered of the negative outcome occurred with local citizens.

Yeoh and Lam (2016) also describe the similar consequence of creative city in Singapore where has been historically constructed from different groups of global labors working from high-waged professional and managerial workers to creative freelancers due to the policy of skilled-immigrant privilege offered by the government. Ideally, the massive mobilization of various innovatory clusters creates the environment of idea circulation and knowledge transfer in the city. As the accelerating population of immigrant and transnational flows of people appeared, the citizens interrogate on the degree of social responsibility that the immigrants can burden in the long run. Many have felt insecure as if their home (nation) started to be encroached which may lead to the loss of national identity. In this regard, the main challenge for the government is to find a way to social integration and to balance “free market competition and social solidarity” (p.17) in the city of where cultural plurality and national formation are historically significant.

From the literature reviews, it could be seen that the concept of people climate is significant for the incline of creative industries. The industries need new ideas from creative laborers as a supply for the development. However, there is still a need to comprehend the mechanism of how laborers are able to participate in the industries, exchange resources, and propel the process of development. It is a complicated process in which cooperation among private sectors, local governments, and laborers have to be constructed.

## **Research Methodology**

The researchers have utilized two anthropological methods – participant observation and in-depth interview. The data has been collected periodically from 2017 to 2020. The places where Phuket creative people – writers, artists, environmentalists, designers – has been gathering are observed. Co-working space and coffee shop become the center of such people since there are no public creative places like museum, design center, and organization supported by government or private sectors. Most of Phuket creative people are flexible laborers who tends to change their jobs in accordance with the opportunity in accumulating financial profit. Moreover, they also need to exchange ideas and extend their network. The public places as such thus become a center of creative laborers. According to anthropological views, this research has utilized the concept of people climate as a lens to answer the research questions. The network among creative people and opportunity to participate in supporting Phuket economics are the main focus.

## **Research Results**

From the participant observation, two cases have been chosen. The first case is a group of domestic immigrants who fabricate their own business in the old town area of Phuket. This case reveals how business domain can become a center of creative people's network. The second case is an international knowledge worker who has financial, cultural, and social capitals; however, under the legislation law, he faces difficulty in formally distributing his knowledge. The case reveals a situation when immigrants have to adjust their practices to locality. They still have ability in extending their network through the casual relationship in which cultural capital is needed.

### **Case 1: Creative Production of Domestic Immigrants**

Networks of knowledgeable workers play an important role of transforming the social space in the city. The Sea was the pioneer of co-working space in Phuket located at the center of Phuket Old Town nearby the long-standing clock tower landmark. It was founded by two environmental researchers, Oh and Keaw, who immigrated from Bangkok since 2014. The initial aim began from the owners' dream of doing co-working space business, as well as, creating the environmental hub to share the knowledge of different aspects related to ecosystem to customers. Since the social trend of natural conservation gradually emerged, the owners wished to attract more of staff or volunteers from environmental organizations to conduct activities or display the work of environmental conservation in the space in order to raise public awareness. However, the concept of co-working space was unknown by the locals in the first place. It took quite sometimes for Oh and Keaw to explain people who passed by her place and wondered what the space was about. The Sea had opened daily from 8am to 8pm, therefore it was not a successful model of co-working space in term of profitable business. Though they discovered a new opportunity to reorganize the space by allowing the extension of environmental subject to other areas. In this regard, visitors from different professions and interests could flexibly connect to the space with assorted activities.

The first client that change their mindset of operating the co-working space is a South Korean expatriate traveling in Phuket while working online and his offering a pack of Korean instant noodle. As the expat always visited the Sea, he started to have a good relationship with Oh and Keaw. One day, his brother, who was a chef in South Korea, flew to visit him at Phuket for holiday, thus he proposed a free workshop of homemade Kimji cooking instructed by his brother to other visitors who are interested in joining the event of Korean food tasting. Meantime, Oh and Keaw attempted to connect visitors from each of the individual interests.

They invited a Thai client, who worked in government office, to participate in the event. His amateur interest was to create a website of database to store the knowledge of new cultures or activities, so he joined the event and made a video recording in the method of homemade Kimji cooking. After the first workshop, Oh and Keaw found that kitchen would be another sharing space for their visitors to bring about something experimental and creative.

Additionally, the owners' way of thinking supports the connectivity among creative laborers. They do not need only run their business, but also learn to create a community by connecting their customers' interests.

“We had tried to introduce our customers to each other in order to match their activities. For example, two of my friends brought musical instruments to our shop. We had thought that who else loves to play music. This was we try to do. Another case, we had one customer who was high school students. She wanted to study in architectural design school. Then, we introduce her to a group of architects, and support her decision. She finally entered the architectural school.” (Interview with Oh, July 5, 2020)

Since anyone could share their personal interest and could be supported by each other, the Sea became where people talk about their dream.

“At the beginning, I and Oh wanted our dream come true. We created a space which was new to the locality. It then persuaded people who want to know this place. Some of them could maintain relationship. As they saw that we could run our place, they had started to expose their dream too. Since we did not burst their bubbles, they started to find their inspiration.” (Interview with Keaw, July 5, 2020)

Tookman, one of the architects, found her skill of making organic bread as she spent most of the time with researching for ingredients. She conducted workshops to share the knowledge of bread baking to other participants at the Sea's kitchen. As she spent times experimenting with different recipes, she then became a bread cognoscenti and opened her own home-baking shop delivering to houses in Phuket and Bangkok. Chy, a male architect who loves yoga. He started a small yoga classroom at the 3rd floor of the Sea building with several students and later he became a yoga master for bigger classes at a yoga school. Kay, a female freelance architect who wanted to conduct the urban farming at the roof top by cultivating various consumable plants. Few years later, all of them have opportunity to start their own business.

The Sea was closed in 2016 because the owners cannot provide financial budget for the increase of the rental cost. However, this co-working space made a contribution to locality. The ideas of new business, connection among people, and the share of knowledge had been initiated. This results in the extension of the local creative domain. Moreover, people climate – opening to new members and tolerating to personal practices – is central to the Sea. The owners of the shop become supporters of the local creative network even though they are domestic immigrants.

## **Case 2: The Potentials of High-skilled Immigrant**

Phuket is one of the globalizing cities that have not only interested international tourists, but also attracted a large number of long-stay expatriates, retirees, seniors, and immigrant workers from different nationalities. Although the Thai policy related to the work permit of foreign workers issued since 1992, the concept of “immigrant workers” just began to mention in the Tenth National Economic Social Development Plan (2007 – 2011) in 2007 (Aoki, 2019). It was the first time that the Thai state formally announced a proactive strategy to manage the phenomena of ‘free human movement’ due to the approach of global economy in Thailand, as well as to safeguard internal security from the influx of unskilled immigrant workers from neighboring countries. After years later, many professional workers from developed countries started to immigrate to Thailand due to various reasons, namely, low-living costs and preferences of Thai cultures (Howard, 2009). As observed, there were around 15,000 expatriates

in Phuket earned their living from teaching languages, working in tourism sector, and transnational investment.

Charles, a 50-year-old retiree originated from Hong Kong, has become Phuket resident since 2017. Before relocating to Phuket, he worked as a senior corporate banker experiencing sales & client management and corporate finance structuring for multinational corporations based in Greater China regions and the Middle East. As he described, such career shaped him to be ambitiously hard-working in building up teams of regional managers to manage valuable asset portfolios for many leading clients. After the six-year working in the financing management, he encountered stress and tension from the high expectation to gain greater profits. Although he earned quite a lot of income and live his life luxuriously in Hong Kong, it is not easy to maintain life under pressure and revolve around financial calculation. He finally decided to emigrate to and settled in Phuket with his spouse. His source of income was not disclosed during the interview, but his expertise in financial management on his personal portfolio can be assumed as a possible way to earnings. Charles is passionate in exploring cultures and discovering new things like learning Thai language and experiencing Thai specialty coffee and other types of cuisine culture. This gives him opportunities to connect with Phuket locals and other expatriates or foreign residents. Currently, he is recruited as a volunteer officer in the Phuket Immigration Office, working in the section of interpretation and assistance to foreigners in the checking required documents for visa run.

While residing in Phuket, Charles does not get to work in the field of his profession and never pursued to be employed in any financial institutions. One day, he was offered a job as part-time lecturer instructing principle finances course 6 hours/week in a university for a semester. The course interested him at first because it allowed him to share knowledges based on his past experiences of finances in the banks to Thai university student. When it came to the employment process, Charles asked for the work permit and other required documents from university staff, so that he could carry on the application procedure with the immigration office. However, the university staff told him that he could work normally without the work permit, like other cases in the past. They would not issue the documents of work permit for any part-time lecturers.

“I understood the practice of university, but I work at tor mor (Immigration Office). My job is to communicate with foreigners and assist them to make a living in Phuket legally. If I am not doing it myself, how will I ever retain in that kind of position?”  
(Interview with Charles, June 16, 2020)

The concise message from Charles can be construed as a holding of integrity in employment status. At some point, he did not want the job because of the financial necessity, but the knowledge transfer with official certification on profession. Finally, the university mishandled the recruitment of high-skilled expatriate with a lot of experiences, and Charles had no chance to utilize this expertise in appropriate domain. However, his knowledge has still been circulated unofficially in the forms of translator skills, specialty coffee knowledge exchange with Thai baristas and roasters, and food tasting experiences and discussions.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

According to the concept of creative city, the cases reveals 4 factors which influence the mechanism of the development. (1) people climate with a common public space supporting creative laborers to practice their production process are necessary. Creative laborers need an exchange of ideas and practical experiences in trialing their business model. Being in the network of the creative laborers, people have more strategies to start their business although some resources – cultural, economic, and social capitals — are absent. (2) The creative domain is supported by personal interests. Business owners could accumulate profit from the creative market if they could create unique services and products. Thus, they need to learn the process

of production and consumption by prototyping a product or simulating a service. The members in the network of creative laborers potentially support trial and error process which results in the plan to conduct a new business. This process occurs in the private realm. (3) The immigrants are able to have main role in fabricating a network of creative laborers. Even though the development of the city is at the local area, immigrants moving from the other places likewise have opportunity to be a leader in the network. Moreover, it could be seen that localness comprises local materials, labors, ideas, and cultures. This permits the immigrants to be connected in the local network without repudiating the characteristics of locality. (4) The policy of the government is still important in supporting the immigrants to participate in the domain of the creative city. The creative laborers start their business in accordance with their private interests; however, after the period of trial and error, they need to conduct their business unit which is influenced by economic and political domains. With this regard, the practices of creative laborers could be defined as formal and informal; the former need a support from the government. In the first case, the creative laborers have a problem with a rental cost which is overpriced by the tourism market. In the second case, the laborer is restricted to be a formal knowledge worker by immigration policy. In order to lubricate the process of creative city, the government need to find an intervention to alleviate the creative laborers. In conclusion, Phuket has a potential to become creative city since there has been creative laborers from various industries immigrated to the locality; however, the government needs to comprehend how such laborers produce the creative domain initiated by private interests. The government likewise needs to reduce a burden in a process of immigration laws. This could endorse the development of Phuket creative city.

## References

- Aoki, M. (2017). "Thailand's Migrant Worker Management Policy as Regional Development Strategy", in N. Hatsukano (ed.), *Rethinking Migration Governance in the Mekong Region: From the Perspective of the Migrant Workers and Their Employers*, ERIA Research Project Report FY2017 no.19, Jakarta: ERIA and IDE-JETRO, pp. 175-199.
- Florida, R. (2019). *The Rise of Creative Class*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. New York: Basic Books.
- Gibson, C. and N. Klocker. (2005). The 'Cultural Turn' in Australian Regional Economic Development Discourse: Neoliberalizing Creativity. *Geographical Research*. 43(1): 93-102.
- Hansen, H. K. and T. Nedomysl. (2009). Migration of the Creative Class: Evidence from Sweden. *Journal of Economic Geography*. (9): 191-206.
- Hospers, G. and Dalm, van R. (2005). How to Create a Creative City? the Viewpoints of Richard Florida and Jane Jacobs. *Foresight*. 4(4): 8-12.
- Howard, R. (2009). The Migration of Westerners to Thailand: An Unusual Flow from Developed to Developing World. *International Migration*. 47(2): 193-225.
- Howkins, J. (2013). *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kim, C. (2019). The Political Subjectivization of Korean Creative Workers: Working and Living as Urban Precariat in Creative City Seoul. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 25(6): 701-713.
- Kong, L. (2014). Transnational Mobilities and the Making of Creative Cities. *Theory, Culture, & Society*. 31(7-8): 1-17.
- Lin, J. (2019). (Un-)becoming Chinese Creatives: Transnational Mobility of Creative Labor in a 'Global' Beijing. *Mobilities*. 14(4): 452-468.
- Sasaki, M. (2010). Urban Regeneration through Cultural Creativity and Social Inclusion: Rethinking Creative City Theory through a Japanese Case Study. *Cities*. (27): s3-s9.

- Scott, A. L. (2000). The Cultural Economy of Paris. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 24(3): 567-582.
- The Creative Economy. (2010). *Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board and Thailand Creative and Design Center* (online).  
[https://www.nesdc.go.th/article\\_attach/CreativeEconomy.pdf](https://www.nesdc.go.th/article_attach/CreativeEconomy.pdf), October 13, 2020
- UNESCO. (n.d). *Creative Cities Network* (online). <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>,  
October 1, 2020.
- Yeoh, B. S. and Lam, T. (2016). Immigration and Its (Dis) Contents: The Challenges of Highly Skilled Migration in Globalizing Singapore. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 60(5-6): 637-658.