

Community Reconstruction through Cultural Identity Regeneration- Tourism and Creativity in Phuket, Thailand

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Abstract

The prosperity that arises from tourism has significant effects on a destination such as Phuket, Thailand. Tourism brings monetary profit. However, there are also disadvantages, causing social and cultural disorders, as the pursuit of wealth becomes the primary goal of people living in the area. While the coastal area of Phuket, for example, is now seen as multicultural due to residents and visitors alike having congregated and focused their attention on the advantage of natural coastal treasure, their own original aesthetic identity is fading away. The shifting population density and fading-away of the awareness of cultural identity have created unbalanced city zoning and cultural identity has gradually been left out of sight. In addition, a good quality of life is essentially dependent on aesthetics to upgrade the sensory-emotional standard of people.

Consequently, I did a documentary research project in Phuket about how to handle this issue by using a visual art project titled PLATR, Thailand. This project involved inviting Japanese artists to visit Phuket for a couple of weeks, and allowing them to share their views through diaries and edutainment workshops with local residents about restructuring cultural identity. Moreover further follow-up research and analysis through conducting interviews; together with surveying some of project's participants have been carried out. This paper explores how to achieve cultural regeneration and how to open up people's minds to willingly accept and communicate with each other to revitalize and develop their city in a proper way.

Keywords: cultural disorder, cultural identity regeneration, tourism city, artistic and cultural creativities, arts-based community development

1. Introduction

1-1 Purpose and background

The purpose of this research is to examine and approach the way to ameliorate problems; unorganized inter-related systems of tourism, misleading social values, erroneous cultural identities that are the rarefactions of Phuket resident's communication and cultural identity by methods of art and culture-based community development.

In Phuket almost all private communities, including the governmental section focus on coordinating inter-related systems of tourism with the hard working authorities aiming at improving infrastructure, such as airport runway expansion, widening roads, speeding up internet connections, providing WiFi at island's eateries, bars, cafe and accommodations. Property developments, shopping centers, hospitals and cinemas have improved significantly in order to serve the

needs of incoming tourist arrivals, which while guaranteeing the prosperity of the island's residents also have negative effects on the cultural heritage of the island.

One implication of Phuket citizens' inability to pursue their wealth by earning money if they do not follow this development is the rise of tourism-influenced hospitality that is not traditional to Phuket. This kind of hospitality leads to an irregular life pattern, which is repeated daily and it becomes eventually permanent. Therefore this is one of the primary causes for disrupting the cultural regional cultural identity as well as debasing the quality of cultural life. Arts which is regarded as a cultural axis can address these ideological disorders and so I decided to do a visual arts project entitled PLATR by collaborating with foreign artists who are considered "outsiders" to give cultural and artistic impulses to local residents.

PLATR is a long-term art project, which was launched on 21st December 2006, aiming to give the area direct experiences of various types of ongoing cultural and artistic activities, to encourage the city to promote the sustainable development of self-active cultural resources and environments of its own with public understanding and cooperation. PLATR is an abbreviation for "Phuket Life Access Tracking" which stands for the project organizers' basic stance. PLATR is also a form of "platter" (a turntable). The relationship of PLATR to Phuket and of Phuket to PLATR the other way around becomes clear through carefully looking at what happens between PLATR and Phuket. The project organizers were eager to bring something into the Phuket community observing the reaction between project and community and seeking a key to open up the future of Phuket's culture.

The research process was recorded and partly shared with Phuket residents. This is the first time for Phuket to experience an academic research project of this nature contributing to an art and culture-based community development.

1-2

Research approaches

This art project might be considered as a practical survey attempting to activate the local community. Almost two years were used with learning how to communicate with the people, finding out what the project's impediments were, doing research, collecting data and examining the results through discussions and interviews.

Now two phases of development are planned for PLATR. One is continuing to run the former project and one is passing on to local residents to continue one part of the project called the "artist in residence program".

Research procedures for art-based community development

1. Participant observation, 21st February 2004 – 5th September 2006

After a short visit to the island, I lived in Phuket for three months to take time to understand the society and then applied as a student to the Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus. Afterwards I tried to step into the society to feel the social and cultural attitudes.

2. Practical survey by running art project PLATR 21st December 2006 – 30th September 2007

Information on running PLATR was collected from 30th July 2006 to 5th September 2006 and the project's planning paper was prepared through December 2006. The art project then started on 21st December 2006. Five contemporary Japanese artists were invited to participate during an one year "artist in residence program", named NDL and asked to write a diary with opportunities for creating artworks during their stay.

3. Practical survey in Bangkok's art scene with interview, questionnaire and participant observation about PLATR, 17th January 2008 – 18th September 2008

The Deputy Director of the Japan Foundation, Bangkok, Mr. Hiroshi Uchida assigned me the curative role for Japanese media artists and also introduced me to the major people in Bangkok's art scene. During this time, I started to objectively review PLATR, Phuket's art scene, and the general public from an outsider's perspective with a different outlook from people of Bangkok's art environment.

4. Navigating and transferring a radical part of PLATR, an artist-in-residence entitled NDL with the local residents and further initiated a new project through a reformed concept on 15th September 2008. During the curative work period, I started to guide one local who agreed carry on the program in his home even after my curative works were completed, I started the new reformed program of PLATR at a high school in Phuket from 10th September 2009.

2. Difficulties found in a globalized tourism city, Phuket

2-1 Media and rapid rehabilitations from Tsunami

Having rapidly recovered from various media's harmful rumors and hyperboles about loss and sorrow from the 2004 Tsunami, Phuket is widely accepted as one of the most famous beach resorts in the world. It was furthermore, selected as one of 44th most recommended destinations for travelers in 2009 by New York Times on 11th January 2009. No evidence of Tsunami damage is currently seen right now. There are only public infrastructure developments, newly opened large scale residential and hotel properties to accommodate both short and long-period travelers. On the other hand, overexploitation of natural resources can be seen. The former Phuket governor, Nirun Kalayanamit, noted to the press that we need to find out a more effective way for utilization of cultural resources realizing what role that culture can play in society. Consequently, city zoning has to be reconsidered taking into account viewpoints of outsiders.

2-2 Difference of atmosphere in different areas and changes of local life style

There is a difference of environmental character between city zones, inland and coastal areas. The identity of residents living in the city differs from those living in the coastal area. Local people in the inland area have lived a life style of a slow pace, characterized by social meetings and conversation of people with a convivial mind, sharing with and respecting each other. Hospitality toward foreign visitors is only one of the cultural elements, which coastal area residents now display. It clearly appears that the original cultural background is fading and city life seems changed together with the life patterns of the residents. The shift

from day to night employment affects the daily life of people who work in the Patong area, like taxi drivers, night workers, hotel staff, spa and massage employees and so on.

Consequently tourism in Phuket disturbs the rhythm of residents' lives of all ages, revenue and competition for the revenue from tourism has come to define their cycle of thinking

2-3 Capability of Phuket's cultural life

When I started running PLATR, two museums, one being the Talang National Museum, in Phuket there were public institutions but they actually did not really work at all. The facilities, lighting, setting and information services were unorganized. The displays were small and local transport insufficient, making it quite inefficient as a good place to educate adolescents about the precious culture of Phuket. The other living museum, Baan Kanean Cultural Village in Talang District is one example of a cultural attraction focusing on the sufficiency economy philosophy of His Majesty the King. Villagers have gathered and preserved local traditions to present to the young generation and visitors who are interested in the art of traditional culture, life-style and cuisine that brought the seniors of the village together and earned them extra income. Recently a new museum, named Phuket Mining Museum, located on the road between Loch Palm Golf Club and British International School, is run by the Kathu Municipality Administration Office. The museum's buildings and its compound were designed by Asst. Prof. Sommai Pinut and officially opened in August 2009 although it is still under construction and is not 100% ready for the public. Only a few tour companies include this museum as a part of their day trip programs as insufficient information and display materials were available for visitors due to the incomplete construction and lack of a contact person. It was also hard to get information of how to get to the museum or what is displayed



Fig.1

Phuket Mining Museum

There is also an annual old town festival, Old Talang Road, at Talang Road, Phuket City, where some antique residences were transformed into a guesthouse for 3 days a year. Its purpose is to boost the artistic and cultural heritage of Chinese ancestors who created the wealth for Phuket but its period is too short. There is also a lack of organization and cultural information for visitors. As a whole it appears more like a food festival than a cultural event.

For these reasons it is quite hard to predict the future of Phuket culture. One way that can promote the museum nationally and even worldwide is tourism and hopefully this museum will be one of the most significant cultural sites in the future. Anyway, the cultural legacy of Phuket should be an independent-minded stance for actuation of the region, but the deficiencies in cultural facilities may indicate that the public administration does not realize that culture is one of the most indispensable elements in an city's overall improvement policy.



Fig. 2

Talang Road; 3pm on weekday, cars and motorbikes gradually enliven the city landscape as numerous Sino-Portuguese shop houses; a kind of mixed architectural style of the Chinese and Portuguese.



Fig. 3

Talang Road. On an early weekend night only two facilities, a Thai restaurant and an art-house are open. This is a vacant place for culture and it needs to be filled up.



Fig. 4

The Old Town Talang Festival challenges the serenely sleeping Sino-Portuguese residences.

2-4 Local government and private outsider's aggressive attitude

One of the outsiders is the editor of "Pulse English Education Magazine", Miss Eva Mooney from Australia. Miss Mooney has resided in Phuket for over 10 years and she founded a publishing company to create an English education magazine to improve the English proficiency of the local people. She offered her editorial

services without financial effort, but could not reach the goal because the community did not like to share. This is just one example of well meaning outsiders trying to contribute to the Phuket community. This Australian tried to promote English education but the local residents could not understand her intention of contributing to the community.

As for my own case, I used to ask for a grant for my art project from the former director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Osaka Office, Mr. Pasakorn Supannapan. I informed him about my concept, which was "cultural activity can be a tool to promote tourism", but he told me "Actually tourists will arrive easily without cultural activities". This means he has a negative attitude not realizing how important culture is.

Another example of the lack of public awareness of the place of culture in the community is the attitude of the former Phuket Governor, Nirun Kalayanami. On 20th October 2008 he expressed in the Phuket Gazette that he cared for cultural resources and regional culture and that we have to provide some policies for cultural improvement. So he had a plan to create new cultural tourism programs, but nothing happened. This shows that the Thai government acknowledges the need for cultural improvement. On this backdrop cultural development in Phuket has come to a stand still.



Fig. 5

Income from tourism mostly come from several thousands of foreign night surfers, gathered at Bangla Road

2-5 The prospects for artistic and cultural activation of local communities

Two culturally involved people that should be applauded for vitalizing and supporting Phuket culture are based off of Talang Road that is currently the most active cultural site in Phuket. The first is the pure southerner, Mr. Nil Paksnavin, a medical doctor and a well-known writer in the Bangkok art scene. His two-storey house, located at Talang Road in Phuket City is well known in both Phuket and Bangkok as an art venue for shooting several Thai films. I also chose his place as an event site for my art project and in 2009 I passed the artist-in-residence program, NDL over to him.



Fig. 6

Art workshop on collaboration between PLATR and the art house owner Mr. Nil Paksnavin

The second personality is an attorney, Mr. Phuchong Tirawatana, who is a jazz aficionado and eagerly hopes to bring a jazz festival to Soi Rommanee. This soi is a small road with Sino-Portuguese buildings and colorful lighted decorations. Since 2007, he has arranged a prominent annual jazz event on the last Sunday of the high season months (November – April). He has tried to push Soi Rommanee as a jazz venue together with being earnestly involved in raising some funds and sponsorships from various public and private enterprises. However, he does not get any support because most Thai companies are not seriously attuned to the idea of corporate philanthropy in the arts.

He still carries on his activities by uniting the community through music. Sometimes he holds some small events in the nighttime by asking local amateur musicians to join in. One of Phuket's newcomers is, Miss Kawin Tassamasatien who voluntarily joined the jazz sessions at Soi Rommanee during her first visit there. Nowadays, Soi Rommanee can draw a big crowd. When the question of where we can enjoy jazz is raised, the answer from various people is often "Soi Rommanee".

It has been proven how hard it is to get financial support for the arts from Thai enterprises, especially in Phuket. I also used to try to ask for a grant from different companies but it did not work at all. At least there are some people who are alert and have tried to improve their own city's arts and cultural heritage. They are like radical navigators who are ready to lead the way for the others.



Fig. 7

Daytime at Soi Rommaree, a small road separated from Talang Road. Here a small-scale cultural renovation is being attempted in the field of music and drawing, but only a few groups are alert to the possibilities of cultural upgrading.



Fig. 8 A band session at Soi Rommanee at night.

3. Art project planning and hindrances

3-1 First program NDL, communication and publicity

The first initiated program of PLATR was NDL - a short artist-in-residence program. NDL is short for "needle", that reads out the "signal" on the "platter" (needle on a music record metaphor). That means NDL keeps reading "something" from the life in Phuket throughout the period of PLATR. "Something" is illustrated in a form of diary. NDL is also an abbreviation for "Nesting Diaries in the Loop".

Communication between resident artists and the people in Phuket is one of the essences of this project and both NDL and PLATR seek a way to develop a meaningful relationship with each other.

The community communication aspects of NDL as follows:

- Residency

Young Japanese artists who are motivated to do something untried and creative were invited to stay at a certain room for a couple of weeks. Artists' residence is located near the Phuket campus of Prince of Songkla University, midway between Patong Beach and Phuket City. The residence was always open and all other residents could visit when a visiting artist was present. There was always excitement about meeting a new person who was a foreigner and what's more, an unfamiliar kind of character - an "artist." For the artists, it was a remarkable experience to reflect upon what they could do for the people as an artist in an unfamiliar environment. Seeking to develop new relationships with each other, they started a dynamic process of re-examining their own roles. The artists could sometimes trigger a cultural rebirth in an area of the community.

One obstacle was that when an artist was in the apartment, only residents were allowed to visit, foreigners were not; hence the confined opportunity for public communication and relations.



Fig. 9

The convenient and well-furnished residence for visiting artists

- Diary
- Artists who join NDL were asked to write their own diary every day to keep an exact record of what happened at different places and times. Different artists pick up different events and venues and then created a document. This is an essential method for a research project exploring community activation and the relationship between artists and community. A diary was regarded as an artwork, which makes "something happen", and a tool of intercommunication that intends to show what artists think about the community and what reactions from the local people they had encountered. Each artist was free to make their own decision on what they want to write. This challenged the originality of the artists and encouraged them to experiment.
- The first resident artist Shunsuke Takawo employed a method of carrying a voice recorder all day. He recorded memos at every moment in his life in Phuket and wrote a diary after reviewing them everyday, which gave his diary a lively sensation of time. The second artist Shigeo Arikawa chose the creative style of a kind of fiction. First he wrote a short memo and then wrote about the memo as if someone who had just found it. The duality of the subject expanded the possibility of interpretation. The artists of today are people who redefine the ordinary and the boring to make something new. While the 5th artist Sudo Takaki was staying in Phuket, he asked one artist, whom he did not know, to stay in his residence in Japan to write a diary as he did in Phuket. This created an exchange of memos of what happen at the same time in different places.

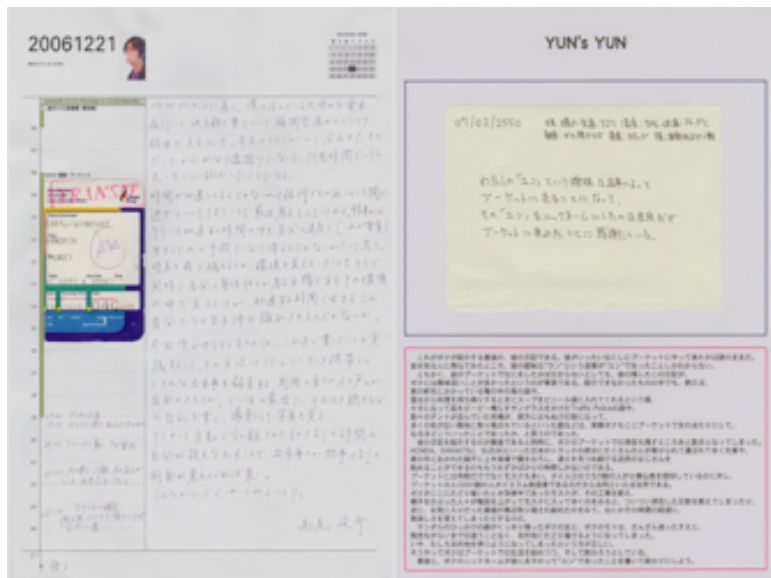


Fig. 10
Example of artists' diaries

-Welcome party

Each resident artist held a welcome party at his room and had an artist conversation discussing and exchanging opinions about their past artworks, their artistic thoughts or concepts, impressions or feelings of Phuket. Feedback from the participants was first and main focus of the artists. The interest of local people intrigued by these visiting foreign artists lead to a desire to know what they are thinking and doing, further defining their conception of "artists" or "arts". So in these talks the topics ranged from the personal, international, cultural, and artistic to the philosophical. These provided for a richer and more multilayered communication between artists and people in the community. The number of people who visited the artists' room increased and the communications became smoother.



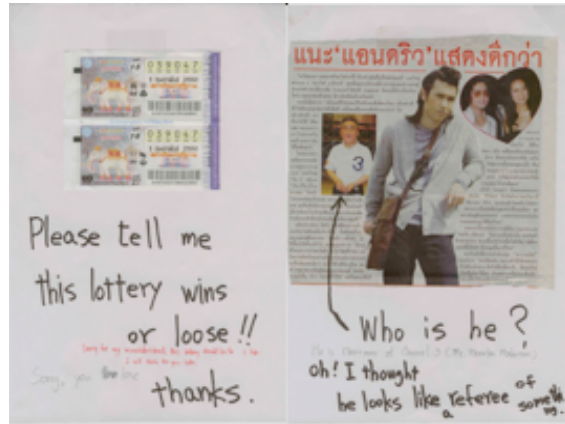
Fig. 11 Warm welcoming party of 1st artist, Shunsuke Takawo

-On the wall in front of the artists' room their diaries written in Japanese were put out in order to create curiosity about the content and its author. A variety of other things were also being put on the wall. The 2nd resident artist, Shigeo Arikawa, put the photos of his face taken after he washed it every morning. He also put the lottery ticket he bought or a torn scrap of some magazine with questions for the people to see. These mysterious things on the

wall functioned as media of indirect communication that created more spaces for people to be in and curious. This wall became the stage for the development of the creativity between artist and people.



Fig. 12 “NDL’s” sign, daily update news Fig. 13 The way of communication from artist dairies were displayed on the hallways of the residence



-Workshops

A more communicative channel opened up when each artist created their own workshop at educational venues, like high schools and universities to communicate with host residents and examine their reaction. These edutainment oriented workshops aimed at explaining the special proficiency of each artist while engaging participants in group work and brainstorming on arts and culture



Fig. 14

Workshop of the 5th artist, Choreographer; Mika Akashi, at Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus

- Artworks
- Artists had the opportunity to create their own pieces during their stay and kept writing about the progress of their ideas of their artworks on the web. It was not mandatory, but artists tended to not only write dairies, but also tried to make some work of art based on their experiences in Phuket. The duration of the stay was not always enough to allow for that. So this process could sometimes be continued after NDL. Some artists’ works were shown

know about outside viewpoints and internalize them. NDL is a way to do this in a relaxed atmosphere by using the inconspicuous media of these diaries. Diaries kept by artists provided the next visiting artists with different points of view as well. So the process was repeated like a loop. The NDL's visitors nesting structure in Phuket became a supportive backseat player for PLATR and the city's future cultural development.

3-3 Arts management represented through PLATR - strength and weaknesses

PLATR is an art project for an unspecified numbers of citizens and the intercommunication with the public was not that effective. There were only small communicative paths. The most important links to society were overlooked. It means the intermediary between communities and PLATR were only "diary", "apartment", "art-house" and "education places". When the motivation for creating new events and promotion comes, financial support will be needed to really connect with the community. The organizers of this art project only received financial support from the 120th Anniversary of Japan – Thailand Diplomatic Relation 2007 fund. It was authorized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Royal Thai Consulate-General Osaka, Japan.

In addition, the Chief Intern of the Toride Art Project 2006, Miss Sonomi Osawa noted that it is difficult to get financial support from companies even if this art project cooperated with Toride City and Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. They received only small grants from 10% of the big companies in Japan. This shows that most of Japanese enterprises still lack incentives for corporate philanthropy. Clearly a better understanding of arts is needed.

Nevertheless when workshops were held at the art house, high schools and universities, it was realized that educational institutions are most suitable for improving the communication between locals and this project due to the trustworthiness of these institutions and the deferential attitudes of the general public. We have to provide and maintain the provision that everyone should benefit culturally. This will also prepare and educate artists for this kind of experience in the future.

3-4 Indirect art based environments

Indirect art based environments are important as long as the general population believes that they can live without art. They cannot precisely measure what art can really contribute. Artists can give the public a signal, making people wonder, inspiring them to pose questions. We need to find local residents who can play the role of art managers and educators able to adapt and navigate through the artistic and cultural landscape created by the confluence of outside and local traditions.

Conclusion

An inter-related system of tourism, misled social values, and confused cultural identity characterizes life in modern Phuket. Meanwhile, most of the island's

population is concerned with tourism's profitability. Just a few locals and outsiders are aware of the cultural disorder and display their cultural awareness through hosting a few artistic and cultural activities. One of these is the visual art project PLATR, which tried to nudge the locals' awareness. But a lack of attention, understanding and two-way communication with the increasing pace of life together with pecuniary concerns are like a wall, blocking an outsiders' intervention. Only the development of art and culture-based community projects can alter people's minds. It has to take time, mutual understanding and more communication redressing what has been overlooked.

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Map of Phuket Province

