

Digital nomads and social responsibility in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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*Abstract Increasing numbers of young, educated adults are leveraging digital technologies and global wifi access to combine work and travel interests. Originating from the United States, Europe or Australia, these young workers 'on the move' are often referred to as digital nomads. As a digital generation in tune with social responsibility values, they offer the potential to break with traditional local/foreign relationship patterns and contribute to the building of global community values in places such as Chiang Mai, Thailand. The project will consider how digital nomads can actively contribute to this process, through the sharing of ideas, digital skill sets and language skills with the local community. A combination of interviews and participant observation will take place over two months in Chiang Mai; further interviews with social responsibility advocates and digital nomads will be held online. Findings of the project will be disseminated through conference presentations and journal articles. The aims, methods and findings of the project will serve as a transferable case study for other places, in Asia and beyond. Collaborators will be sought, with a view to applying for larger, multi-sited research grants.*

#### Introduction: project summary

This project set out to explore how and in what ways digital nomads or location independent professionals can contribute to the building of a fresh set of social and community values in the world today. Increasing numbers of young, educated people, in their 20s and 30s, are leveraging digital technology to combine work and travel interests. They travel with diverse skill sets and work interests, as software developers, online teachers, entrepreneurs and digital marketers, as examples. The project specifically asked how these 'workers on the move' could build relationships with local communities, perhaps by working with local charities, schools, or

organisations, or collaborating with local entrepreneurs. The findings of this project derived from ethnographic research conducted in the prominent digital nomad hub of Chiang Mai, Thailand. This research was augmented by participant observation at a Coworking conference in Penang, Malaysia, and through extensive online engagement and interviews with digital nomads and their social worlds, of blogs, vlogs, Facebook groups and other online mediums of communication.

Results from the project have highlighted the ongoing social impact that some individual nomads have made in places like Chiang Mai. Research has also revealed the real and potential importance of coworking spaces, that can act as a mediator and conduit for connecting nomads to local projects and initiatives. Digital technology is also playing an important role in the facilitating of such connections, through Facebook groups and the development of online social impact initiatives. The ability of nomads to appreciate place and local community, on these terms, is compromised in part by immigration and visa frameworks which categorise nomads as short-term travellers or tourists. The project has nevertheless yielded two institutional avenues through which worker-travellers may be able to establish new values, both now and in the future, in places like Chiang Mai. Firstly, research highlights the institutional significance of a digital location professional agency in Chiang Mai, which encourages the building of social, legal and cultural bridges across a ‘digital expat’ and Thai workforce and local communities. Finally, and building on a concept of active participation in establishing new values in society, the lead researcher of this project has co-instigated the development of an entrepreneurial association in Chiang Mai. The association, built around the shared values of its Thai and foreign co-founders, aims to make Chiang Mai an inclusive space for entrepreneurs of all nationalities to learn, connect and grow.

## Research context and methodology

This project builds on pilot ethnographic research that explored the digital nomad lifestyle and identity concerns in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2016. Research for this project specifically was conducted across several months during 2017 and 2018. Research findings were established through a series of online interviews with digital nomads and social responsibility advocates in various locations during this time. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation with digital nomads and other relevant actors and stakeholders, took place in Chiang Mai in early 2018. The lead researcher and author of this report also attended a Coworking conference in Penang, Malaysia in early 2018 and gained further, relevant insights through an exploration of online social spaces – Facebook groups, blogs, vlogs, medium articles, as examples – that play a central role in connecting nomads and providing online avenues of communication amid their hypermobile lifestyle.

### What is a digital nomad?

In its most general sense, the term digital nomad is used to refer to an increasing number of individuals who are leveraging digital technology to combine work and travel interests. Such people tend to be millennials, in their 20s and 30s. They are often, if not always, university educated and originate from the United States, Canada, numerous European countries and Australia, as primary examples. The digital nomad lifestyle has gained significant media attention in recent years – The New York Times, The Daily Telegraph and The Age, as just some examples,

have ran feature articles on digital nomads living their dream lifestyle in some of the world's leading tourism destinations. There is growing academic interest in this lifestyle (Reichenberger 2018; Thompson 2018). Such concerns feed into questions about the growing role and relevance of digital technology, the relationship between technology and work, and questions about the future of work and travel (Cohen et al. 2015; Gregg 2011; Pink et al. 2017).

The term digital nomad is relatively new, in terms of its social usage, though scholarly discussion of this concept can be found in a book, *Digital Nomads*, by Makimoto and Manners, published in 1997. Some individuals attracted to or embedded in this lifestyle point to Tim Ferriss' *The 4-Hour Workweek*, published in 2007, as inspiration for transitioning away from traditional workplace and office-bound activities, often in their country of origin. Ferriss has, in this sense, inspired digital nomads to think about ways of making travel, and the availability of time to travel, central to the goal of living a fulfilling life, of working to live, instead of succumbing to a life built around work and work responsibilities in one place.

It is fair to say, however, that the term has really gained traction, in social, media and global terms, within the last five years. The influential website, *Nomad List*, for example, was developed in late 2014. It provides a range of relevant working, lifestyle and practical data on nomad destinations across the world. It currently has over 55, 000 members, who can also access chat room services through their membership (<https://join.nomadlist.com/>).

It is nevertheless difficult to estimate or quantify the current size of this digital nomad community. Such individuals have gained little recognition, in terms of immigration or visa policies. One

notable exception to this is in Estonia, which now offers an e-residency program, that also allows individuals to run a global business in what they term as a ‘trusted EU environment’ (<https://e-resident.gov.ee/>). More generally, these workers on the move are relying on tourist visas, or other similar non-visa options, that ensure they are statistically invisible as a distinct group of individuals crossing national borders to engage in a digital nomad lifestyle. Their status, in terms of globally situated taxation policies, remains complex and at times ambiguous, though as discussed in this report, such concerns may be offset in the future through the emergence of digital professional relocation agencies, who are at hand to provide such individuals with clear legal standing in given lifestyle destinations.

Any attempt to quantify or statistically capture the size of this community is compromised on a number of other levels. This community, for example, is incredibly diverse. It comprises of remote workers, and especially growing numbers of freelancers with a variety of skill sets and/or occupational backgrounds. They may be skilled in digital marketing, software development, public relations, business or health coaching, or graphic design. Numerous individuals in this field are entrepreneurs, who have set up their own business, perhaps in ecommerce. Such individuals might be found teaching English online, to children in China. They may be travel bloggers or writers. Some digital nomads may be involved in numerous, diverse projects, or use income gained from teaching online for example to support efforts to build or bootstrap an online business.

The term digital nomad is not embraced by all. Some individuals distance themselves from the label, preferring instead to self-identify as location independents, or location independent professionals, or simply entrepreneurs. The term sometimes carries negative connotations, and

may be associated with particular understandings of masculinity, and/or with newcomers, who are attracted to the 'glamour' of the lifestyle yet have few sustainable skills and experiences to fully transition into a long-term life of traveling and working on the move. The term nevertheless serves as a unifying concept in the growth and proliferation of 'digital nomad' Facebook groups. The term also serves as a way of talking about and identifying whether a given lifestyle destination has the facilities and infrastructure to meet the working and lifestyle needs of this workforce. In this way, we can think of how particular locations across the world become viewed as digital nomad hubs, in that they are then recognised as being able to cater to and indeed attract large numbers of digital nomads, or location independents. Chiang Mai has certainly been viewed as a prominent digital nomad hub in this sense. It has numerous, flexible and affordable accommodation options, a wide range of food and café options, a number of coworking spaces, and excellent wifi and 4G connectivity.

#### Digital nomads and social responsibility: a viable relationship?

As already noted, some digital nomads are entrepreneurs. In this, they may be heavily focused on building or scaling up a business. In January 2018 I attended a digital nomad conference in Chiang Mai. The conference attracted over 400 participants. The Nomad Summit, as it is called, is an annual event and the conference organisers now plan to hold a similar conference this year in Las Vegas. In important ways, these events provide insight into the importance for some digital nomads of the financial rewards that can be gained from this lifestyle. One speaker at the 2018 event gave insights into how he was making \$2 million a month in sales through ecommerce, whilst another similarly focused on building a similar profit-focused and driven business from

nothing. The event focused heavily on income, or as one speaker suggested, of ways then to develop a successful businessperson's mindset.

The focus and popularity of the conference potentially highlighted the extent to which some digital nomads may have little interest in thinking through the lens of social responsibility, of engaging with local communities, or local community projects. There have been conversations and debates about such concerns in Digital Nomad Facebook groups. Some posters have spoken of a digital nomad culture which focuses primarily on self-gain and increasing profit margins, in ways that seem opposed to a desire to make the world a better place. Some respondents have alternatively suggested that building profit-centred businesses and being socially responsible are not mutually exclusive ideals for digital nomads. For some digital nomads it is important to question why they, as a group or community of people, should need to think about social responsibility, or others in this sense. Such a question raises a follow-on concern, of why digital nomads should be expected to give back or participate on such terms more than other people.

Digital nomads also value travel; many want to travel extensively and gain a lot of experience from extensive travel. It is travel, more than an ability to stay in given places, that currently defines the digital nomad lifestyle. Some nomads argue that if a person is not moving, or travelling extensively, if they are instead staying for a significant time in a given place, then they can no longer be defined as digital nomads. This valuing of mobility, of mobility as central to one's identity, complicates the extent to which such individuals may wish to commit to place and community. For some nomads, community is in fact defined by their travel and work experiences. They may, in this, greatly value building relationships with other digital nomads. Indeed, such

individuals often value the knowledge, insights and experiences that other workers on the move may give them. As an entrepreneur, for example, there is much to gain from learning from others of their own attempts, experiences and perhaps failures, in trying to develop successful ecommerce businesses, for example. If community is defined by travel and mobility rather than place, then it is perhaps understandable that some nomads have little incentive to embed themselves in and learn about a particular place, its language, its culture, let alone participate in local community projects.

It can be also argued that the digital nomad lifestyle encourages an exploitation of local resources, the local context. As Thompson suggests, in terms of travel destinations, nomads ‘often choose comfortable, warm, scenic places that are also quite affordable and welcoming for Westerners’ (Thompson 2018, 3). These destinations, however, are primarily located in the global south. Digital nomads may travel and stay in cities and locations in western Europe, for example, but it is no coincidence that places such as Bali, Chiang Mai and Medellín have become prominent ‘go to’ destinations or hubs for nomads. Such destinations provide a form of economic and geographical arbitrage, allowing nomads to take advantage of cheaper costs of living, labour and resources in order to live a relatively privileged and, has been argued, a neo-colonial lifestyle on the move (McElroy 2019).

For some nomads, these cheaper costs and, with it, lower business overheads provide them with a basis to be more competitive in a global ecommerce market, as one example. Working from a cheap rental property in Chiang Mai similarly allows some individuals the time and financial space to start up or bootstrap a new business, at a point or early stage of business development when they yet to gain little income from their project.

For those inspired by the likes of Ferriss' (2007) book the lifestyle may also involve a notion of outsourcing life, or rather labour, by paying the likes of virtual assistants and digital labourers located in the Philippines hourly rates that seem appropriate in a local context yet nevertheless build on historically-constituted and exploitative global hierarchies and inequalities. The hiring of cheap sources of digital labour, often from on-demand online platforms which offer workers few privileges in relation to labour rights, are clearly a form of exploitation which then perpetuate these inequalities on a global level. Indeed, some nomads that I have met have little interest in engaging with a local context of people, place and culture. They primarily value building relationships, and forming definitions of community, with people 'like them,' that is other digital nomads. The place is merely a setting, or jumping point, that facilitates and serves this hypermobile lifestyle on a global stage.

Digital nomads nevertheless face governmental barriers in building connections to place. They tend to rely on the same visa options and arrangements as tourists. Such visa options vary, according to immigration policies in specific nation-states. It is possible for nomads from the UK and Australia for example to enter Malaysia on a 3-month tourist visa on arrival. The same visitors to Thailand, however, will only be given a 30-day visa on arrival, though a number of foreign nationals can get a 60-day visa if they apply for it in advance at a Thai Embassy, and there are options to extend this visa by another month. Many nomads embark on visa runs, that is they leave and then return on the same day or after several days to the same country, to renew their visa. This process of crossing national borders to maintain a connection to place comes with challenges. A community manager I spoke to in one co-working space in Penang noted that some digital nomads

were encountering problems in trying to renew their tourist visa and return for a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time to Malaysia. The manager suggested that some nomads were being informed that this would be ‘the last time’ they could return in such haste. Such encounters with immigration officials, then, actively encourage nomads to keep travelling, and moving to new places, even if they may wish to stay in the likes of Penang and commit to building relationships over time in this local context.

### Individual impact

As already noted, digital nomads are typically of the millennial generation. It is important to recognise, in this, the extent to which this generation is attuned to social responsibility concerns and causes. A recent article in *Forbes* (11/08/17), for example, describes millennials as ‘an idealistic, altruistic generation.’ The article points to numerous studies which highlight the extent to which millennials want to make the world a better place. This is a generation, also, that is comfortable with using social media platforms to connect to and raise awareness and perhaps money in relation to causes that are important to them. The article also discusses the extent to which millennials can make an impact at an individual level. On one level, this is because millennials want to be distinct individuals. This valuing of individualism, the article notes, is shaping corporate social responsibility programs, which are taking the lead from the interests and values of their millennial employees.

During my research, I encountered numerous examples of digital nomads engaging, on their own individual terms, with social causes and concerns that became important to them during their travels. The impact of this engagement varies. At times such concerns have a serendipitous quality

to them. Digital nomads may simply find themselves in a specific place and respond to a specific and relevant local concern and challenge whilst there.

Take the following example. Mount Agung, located in Bali, Indonesia, erupted several times in 2017, and did the same in 2018, affecting flights to and from this popular tourist destination. Ongoing and potential seismic activity also had great, or rather greater impact, on local communities. With the threat of a large eruption in November 2017, the Indonesian government called for 100, 000 people living in communities near to the volcano to evacuate the area (Lamb 2017). Such large-scale movement of local communities resulted in the setting up of numerous evacuation camps, and shortages in basic food and water supplies.

Such concerns came to the specific attention of a small group of digital nomads living and working at the time in Bali. The group included a German entrepreneur, Meike, in her 20s, who I had previously interviewed during the pilot stages of a related project about digital nomads in 2016. Through personal and other nomad-related Facebook pages Meike and her friends raised awareness of the acute and general need for supplies in evacuation camps and elsewhere. They requested that friends and digital nomads either make financial donations via PayPal, or if based at the time in Bali, provided the likes of rice, towels, blankets, milk for both adults and babies, and general medicine. They also added notifications about their efforts on a Ubud community Facebook and were then contacted by some of those in need from villages in the vicinity of the volcano.

The group then arranged to meet at a co-working space in Ubud, before then setting off the next day in the direction of villages and camps close to the volcano. Other nomads were then welcomed to join them in their efforts, with the group setting off from the car park at the co-working space at a designated time in the afternoon. As Meike posted the group had managed to raise over 450 euros at this point. With local contacts involved, they were able to drive with a carload of supplies and take them to some specific temporary camps, meeting the immediate needs of some 1000 people living in the area. The group recognised that their efforts were ‘small scale’ but offer an example of how digital nomads can respond to a particular crisis, and have impact at this local level.

As Alexandra, an American social entrepreneur and writer in her 20s suggests, these seemingly small and insignificant impacts can gain traction and have long-term influence in particular places. Alexandra’s story begins with a single lunch. In 2016, Alexandra posted in a Facebook group for female digital nomads and asked if anyone wanted to join her for lunch. As she points out there was relatively little interest at the time in this offer, though several other nomads wrote online to say they would like to join her another time. Just as important to this story is the lunch venue. The venue or café was also a social enterprise and Alexandra hoped to go there and interview the owner of the café and write an article about the café for a digital travel magazine. The café, which served vegetarian and vegan food, invests 100% of its profits into a non-profit organisation, Thai Freedom House, which supports the varying needs of Burmese refugees and minority groups in Thailand. Alexandra got her interview.

Another meal followed. This time there were ten female nomads at the table instead of just three. It became a weekly meet up, with the meal always taking place at the Free Bird Café. Whilst this meet up could have taken place at different venues, there was a growing and collective desire to support the efforts of the café. When Alexandra decided to spend some time outside of Chiang Mai another female nomad took the lead with arranging and organising the weekly meet up. As Alexandra said to me, via Facebook messenger, the Facebook group had played a crucial role in providing a base for communication and allowing the weekly meet up to gain traction. As we spoke in early 2018, the weekly meet up was still going strong, with different individuals, including the café owner, stepping in to maintain and keep the event alive. At times there may be a handful of women involved, in other cases they may effectively take over the whole café. The meet up has thus fed financial resources into the café and thus its social enterprise, with numerous participants coming back at other times of the week, perhaps with other friends, including male friends.

This particular case study highlights the overlapping power and influence of individual desire, digital technology and the role of existing social enterprises in shaping a larger, collective will to contribute to the needs, in this case, of Burmese refugees and minority groups in Thailand. Importantly, it can also be said that the weekly event has inspired and embedded a culture of giving back to local communities amongst this evolving group of digital nomad women, and their friends, in Chiang Mai. The impact has been long term, allowing participants to contribute to a local social enterprise and forge understandings of community amongst digital nomads over time that is inspired by and embedded in the local social, economic and cultural context. With the lifestyle being relatively new, such efforts and influences cannot be understated. They provide the values

and social template for digital nomads to engage with social enterprises and local community concerns as part of what they do, of how to live life as a digital nomad.

Alexandra's story offers an inspiring example of the power of seemingly small, serendipitous events to gain larger influence. As I suggest in the next section, however, it is important to ask how individual efforts, desire and also skill sets and experience can be channelled more effectively at these local levels. Nomads, as suggested, have an inherent desire to keep travelling, which both limits and complicates how they can and are able to engage and connect to social responsibility concerns in particular places. As increasing numbers of individuals are attracted to both the lifestyle and travel possibilities in Chiang Mai and Southeast Asia more generally, it is important to assess the growing institutional role and influence of co-working spaces and digital relocation agencies in serving as a supportive bridge between digital nomads and the potential connections they can make and build with local communities and enterprises within the region.

#### Co-working spaces as conduits for social responsibility

Digital nomads possess a range of skill sets and experiences that can be of potential benefit to local communities, social enterprises and other relevant projects in the places they travel through. They nevertheless face particular challenges in connecting to these concerns and projects. As frequent travellers nomads are often unfamiliar with these places and their social moorings. They often lack connection to or have knowledge of enterprises and may have little understanding of how to connect to such projects. At the same time, there is a challenge in terms of a continuity of connection in such cases, of how such enterprises or projects can benefit, especially over time,

from the input of nomads. Put differently, if a digital nomad plans to spend a month or longer in Chiang Mai or Siam Reap then what happens, in terms of their efforts and contribution to a particular project, when they leave? Where does continuity exist in relation the longer term aims and plans of specific social and community-based projects?

The answer, in important ways, may lie in the form of co-working spaces that are increasingly present in tourism destinations frequented by digital nomads. Co-working spaces provide a varying range of support services and flexible infrastructural and membership arrangements such as desk and offer space, skype booths, and kitchen space for individuals and companies seeking an alternative to traditional office environments and cubicle spaces (see Fuzi 2015). These spaces may vary in terms of design space and focus, and business model, but they play a central role in the working lives of many digital nomads, who often rely on such spaces to access material resources such as desk space and quality internet speeds and ‘community’ in the form of other digital nomads. Coworking spaces, in other words, have become central infrastructural elements of this lifestyle.

One can find numerous co-working spaces in places such as Chiang Mai, whilst particular Thai islands for example have become popular destinations for nomads simply because of the presence of a co-working space. Put differently, the very presence of such spaces plays an increasingly important role, in the imaginings of nomads, of what constitutes a ‘go-to’ destination for such people. Nomads, generally, will be less likely to want to visit given ‘off the path’ destinations, that lack basic infrastructure in terms of good wifi connectivity for example. A place that lacks co-working spaces will similarly be viewed as a less desirable place to visit and stay for a while, not

least as such spaces are also valued in terms, as mentioned, of their ability to facilitate social connectivity and community amongst nomads.

Whilst global cities such as Kuala Lumpur are home to a thriving, localised co-working space industry it is important to recognise that nomads tend to favour and frequent spaces that are popular with other nomads, which are often found in smaller cities like Penang in Malaysia and Chiang Mai, Thailand, or coastal/island locations. It is notable also that popular co-working spaces, in Bali, parts of Vietnam or Thailand, as examples, are also run and owned by foreigners. Such spaces are valued by nomads, with their local experience then being managed and facilitated by seemingly like-minded foreigners, who have much in common in terms of nationality, language skills, passport strength and often, extensive shared experiences of living, working and travelling overseas. Co-working spaces increasingly offer 'co-living' options, in which nomads can then have all their needs in terms of a room, common living spaces and co-working facilities provided in one space and/or business model.

The popularity of co-working/co-living facilities owned managed by foreigners reinforces the extent to which understandings of 'community' are built around a shared racialised and national background/s of foreigners from the West. This also has implications for how nomads can or even want to build connections with and collaborate with, within and across local ecosystems in places such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

This constitutes a significant and real challenge in the lifestyle. Whilst it is important to focus on how nomads may contribute to the likes of social enterprise and community projects there is a

danger that such projects reinforce historical and global hierarchies, imaginaries and inequalities, with predominantly white digital nomads literally flying into a given destination to ‘save’ the most needy and vulnerable communities. During my research I met very few digital nomads who wish to contribute and collaborate with like-minded, educated local entrepreneurs, for example, in such destinations.

At the same time, we can nevertheless see how a co-working space popular with nomads, and perhaps owned by foreigners, may serve as potentially important conduits and gatekeepers in building and facilitating connections between local communities, relevant projects, non-profit organisations and digital nomads. It is important to recognise that a number of co-working spaces in Southeast Asia, for example, may be in close spatial proximity to such projects. With nomads often attracted to established tourism destinations, we can also see that some relevant projects may arise as a result of tourism, and the impact of tourism on a range of social, economic and environmental issues in such locales and areas.

With such concerns in mind, Dojo, a popular co-working space with nomads, located in the south of Bali, hosted a sustainable impact hackathon across a weekend in April 2017. The hackathon brought together digital nomads, other participants, such as foreigners living and working in Bali, and stakeholders involved in relevant projects on the island (Wong 2017). The specific theme of the hackathon was ‘Build the bridge between coworking spaces and sustainable community projects’ (Bond 2017a).

Hackathons come in various shapes and guises. They can nevertheless be viewed as collaborative, problem-solving or ‘hacking’ events set over a designated period of time. Hackathons may typically last a day, or longer. In this case, an introductory session on a Friday evening was used to provide context to the theme, where the Australian owner of Dojo and founders of three local community projects highlighted needs, spoke of challenges and ways in which nomads volunteers may help or otherwise in the ongoing running and developing of such projects (Bond 2017b). A subsequent 48-hour timeframe was applied, whereby small teams of participants and mentors to brainstorm and put together ideas, solutions and ultimately pitches, before presenting them on the final day (Sunday) to a panel of judges and a wider audience. Three of the six judges were foreign owners, or part-owners, of coworking spaces in Bali, reflecting in part the extent to which Bali has become a prominent destination for digital nomads (Bond 2017b).

As Theresa Wong, a mentor involved in the Hackathon points out, the majority of the pitches perhaps unsurprisingly focused on technological concerns, ‘platforms, apps, visualisation tools for bringing digital nomads and organisations with needs together’ (Wong 2017). This focus certainly then highlighted the potential for coworking spaces to use online platforms, for example, to bring together the needs and skill sets of various stakeholders. One team suggested a ‘Magic Wall’ solution which would instead work on the idea of a physical presence and interactive wall within a coworking space, that would then list potential opportunities for volunteers, who could sign up for specific ‘missions’ (Bond 2017c).

Theresa’s team, ‘The Sustainables,’ focused more specifically on values or rather principles that may underpin and drive relationships and collaborations between given projects and coworking

spaces. Whilst technological solutions may be important here, a focus on values or principles perhaps starts to drive at an underlying, long-term concern of how human beings from potentially different social and cultural backgrounds can come towards the same collaborative space, build important levels of trust and belief, and develop or work with principles for working together in these relevant projects.

The Sustainables, moreover, thus recognised also that whilst digital nomads may be central to these collaborative concerns, it is the relationship between project and coworking space that holds the potential to build relationships in place, over an extensive period of time. With such concerns in mind the team developed a number of principles that worked outwards from the positioning and notion of a co-relationship, of this relationship being mutually and equally built on notions of a co-vision, co-benefits, and principle of co-creation, and co-learning. As Wong points out, the final concern here highlights and prioritises ‘knowledge transfer both ways’ (Wong 2017). On one level this means providing local staff with knowledge and skills that can then be used and applied at that local level, even as and when a digital nomad with say a background in social media marketing has left Indonesia.

A focus on values and knowledge transfer, on these terms, is important, though as one community manager of a co-working space told me, the ongoing desire of nomads to repeatedly move from place to place ensures that challenges remain in building sustainable relationships across co-working spaces, community projects and nomads. As this community manager noted, it can be tiring and disheartening, for example, to continually provide different nomads with the same basic understandings of ‘local culture’ as they relate to and underpin projects and relationships in

specific places. Such views highlight the importance of recognising how values exist and evolve in a wider cultural and place-based context that cannot be divorced from such projects. Questions of global inequality and hierarchy thus remain, with hypermobility and the privilege of choosing when to move, and how long to stay, ultimately leading to a devaluing or lesser valuing of place, and values relating to place and cultural context.

Whilst co-working spaces can serve as conduits and mediators of relationships between local projects and digital nomads, it must also be noted that such spaces are often compromised in their ability or desire to place such projects and related values at the heart of their business and lifestyle model. Most co-working spaces tend to understandably be profit-driven enterprises that are serving and meeting the needs of digital nomads with different interests and, it must be noted, various lifestyle, leisure and work-related expectations. In this, they will offer the likes of wider ‘community’ (digital nomad community) events and provide facilities and amenities which only serve to reinforce ways in which a self-serving desire for personal growth and development through travel and relatively cheap costs in tourism destinations in the global south enable what McElroy terms as ‘fantasies and materialities of location independence’ (2019, 8). Co-working spaces that cater to digital nomads in Southeast Asia, more generally, offer a flexible business and membership model that reinforce the value and practice of hypermobility. Such business models, then, feed into and further compromise the potential role of wider knowledge transfer and a valuing of place and culture that may, across time, lead to more sustainable relationships and collaborations *in place*.

## Moving forward

As suggested above, it is important to recognise that the potential for the likes of digital nomads to contribute to the development of new values in society rests, in significant part, in their ability to value place, to stay in place, and build relationships that may contribute to social responsibility initiatives, but also to the growth and strengthening of local entrepreneurial ecosystems. The building and valuing of place, on these terms, offers the potential to transgress and unsettle historically-constituted global hierarchies, inequalities, and associated values, that otherwise may be sustained, in notable part, through the desire of digital nomads to celebrate personal growth and hypermobility as sustained elements of a lifestyle built around choice, freedom and strong passport status.

Whilst most co-working spaces are complicit infrastructural elements in the shaping of this hypermobile lifestyle, my research offers two examples of how place can be incorporated into a value system relating to local social and cultural context and the skills and interests of incoming foreigners, such as digital nomads or remote workers.

The first example relates to the notion of a digital professional relation agency. In some ways such an agency provides similar facilities to a co-working space, in terms of office space for example. Yet the agency I encountered in Chiang Mai, for example, was otherwise a vastly different proposition, in terms of what it offers to foreigners, especially those with relevant digital skillsets. This agency offers remote workers already working for a company overseas, or foreigners in search of employment in the digital services sector, with an opportunity to be legally employed,

with an appropriate working visa, in Thailand. This agency has since expanded beyond Thailand, but at the time of my research it was then able to provide foreign ‘employees’ with opportunities to live and work in three different parts of Thailand.

The agency promoted a way of thinking about place and local context that, I suggest, is crucial to the development of a new set of values in relation to how foreign workers or nomads may be able to build sustainable relationships in place, and with respect to this local cultural context. Foreign workers, for example, had opportunities in the agency to learn Thai, which thus encouraged them to deepen their relationship with and knowledge of place across time. The agency also held a strong social responsibility ethos, which I argue sets a particular tone for how incoming workers can or may want to relate to place. The agency developed computer recycling initiatives, for example, which were part of a longer-term vision to bring IT skills and computers to rural areas and schools in the Chiang Mai area. The agency was also encouraging of building a sense of community amongst its Thai and foreign employees, thus promoting the transgression of a local/foreign divide that is so prominent in the digital nomad lifestyle and associated social networks.

Such agencies provide an important social, bureaucratic yet value-driven anchor for foreign and remote workers to stay and want to stay in place. Whilst they cannot enable and thus encourage a broader community of digital nomads with a wide variety of often non-digital related skill sets to do this, they represent an excellent example of what can be achieved if certain consistent values and initiatives relating to language tuition, internal community building and long-term social responsibility initiatives, are or become central aspects of workplace or workspace culture. Opportunities to travel for work, and with work in hand, are growing because of digital technology.

In this, a wider net of individuals are becoming attracted to some version, their own version, of this lifestyle. The digital nomad lifestyle is relatively new, and in this, there remains a possibility that alternative versions and visions of a work-travel lifestyle will become popular, with values of hypermobility being sidelined by an importance given to connecting on deeper levels with place, and people in place.

This brings us to my second example, and its connection to the grant theme and notion of building and also, from a researcher perspective, actively instigating new values in society. During my time in Chiang Mai I met numerous foreigners and Thais, variously involved in digital and entrepreneurial work, social responsibility initiatives, and the running as CEOs or owners of a local digital employment agency and co-working space. We came together through a shared concern of how to transgress a local/foreign divide that was being reinforced by the digital nomad lifestyle, and of how also to think of ways of strengthening a local ecosystem through global connection, and of Chiang Mai's place as a digital and entrepreneurial hub in Thailand. In this, thinking extended beyond the relevance or importance of social responsibility initiatives alone, and into the realm of creating a value system of equality, togetherness and collaboration that created common work and entrepreneurial ground for people of different nationalities to build and grow across time.

The Chiang Mai Entrepreneurship Association was built from these initial thoughts and ideas. Whilst I had little involvement beyond initial meetings, and online discussions, the Association developed with specific goals and values in mind. Our initial meeting brought together the need to develop an online presence through a Facebook group, and of the importance of holding regularly, perhaps monthly meetings, at a specific location in Chiang Mai. The importance of cultural

difference was also acknowledged – of how to bring together individual entrepreneurs for example from different national backgrounds, who may engage and feel comfortable or otherwise with given styles of communication and relationship building practices. As an Entrepreneur Association discussion also centred on potential distinctions between foreign entrepreneurs and digital nomads, with questions raised as to whether self-identifying digital nomads could add any specific value to the growth and development of the Association.

From here the group discussed and identified a core set of values to work with and promote outwardly as the steering committee of the Association. The Mission Statement and core set of values of the Association are reflected on its Facebook page:

*We care about Chiang Mai. We are entrepreneurs. We want to create a difference.*

*We are a healthy blend of Thai and international entrepreneurs who care about our city of Chiang Mai, Thailand.*

*Our mission is to make Chiang Mai a hub for value-creating entrepreneurs of all nationalities who believe in sharing knowledge and creating ties with the local community.*

*We will continue to accomplish this mission through creating opportunities for entrepreneurs to meet and find each other (know who is in the space) and by promoting educating/mentoring of entrepreneurs.*

*We want Chiang Mai to be a city where people can come to learn, connect and grow.*

*We intentionally are blending Thai and non-Thai languages/cultures because we want this to be a place everyone can feel comfortable in.*

*We are confident we can continue to create spaces for everyone to learn and grow in this amazing city.*

[\(https://www.facebook.com/ChiangMaiEntrepreneurs/\)](https://www.facebook.com/ChiangMaiEntrepreneurs/).

The Chiang Mai Entrepreneurship Association continues to grow, promote and encourage the above values. Regularly, usually monthly meetings, are held in Chiang Mai, bringing together Thai and foreign nationals together with such values in mind. The Committee has also played a key role in raising media awareness and engaging in discussion with relevant tourism and government stakeholders about the importance of improving visa options for the likes of digital and remote workers in Thailand. The Association, in short, offers an important example and case study of how to build sustainable social, entrepreneurial and working relationships across national boundaries, with a common vision and shared set of values. It is through such inspirational efforts and collective initiatives, that a new set of values can emerge in a digital era involving local ecosystems, communities and relationships that transgress national boundaries and differences.

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See also:

<https://e-resident.gov.ee/>

<https://join.nomadlist.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/ChiangMaiEntrepreneurs/>