ESOLS, SOFT POWER, AND NOMADISM: THAI CREATOR CULTURE IN THE SHADOW OF PLATFORM AND CREATOR NATIONALISM

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This research maps the distinctiveness and evolution of Thailand's (or Thai) creator culture. This concept of creator culture refers to the rapidly emerging platform-based economies vitally distinguished by the cultural and commercial practices of social media entrepreneurs, whether referred to as creators or influencers, KOLS or *wanghong*, YouTubers or TikTokers, game players or mukbangers, and/or vloggers or streamers. Our creator industries account maps the structural and material conditions across markets-based conditions, regulatory regimes and polity initiatives, diverse platform operations and services, creator practices of labor and entrepreneurialism, and socio-cultural and political influence. Framed by the concept of platform nationalism, we further account for how Thai creators may proverbially represent canaries operating within the competing digital coal mines of global tech.

This research is framed by the concept of platform and creator nationalism. As first described in *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China* (Craig, Lin, and Cunningham, 2021), platform nationalism refers to the multilateral array of power relations in which tech and platform corporations and national governments persuade and/or deceive social media users, communities and creators into promoting nationalism, whether advocating for soft power abroad, defending cyber sovereignty, and/or empowering populist movements. Closely aligned with theories about American cultural and media imperialism (Schiller, 1976) and conceptions of American soft power (Nye, 1990), the concept of platform nationalism borrows from Charland (1986) who theorized technological nationalism as a rhetorical framework "which ascribes to technology the capacity to create a nation by enhancing communication" (p. 197). C Creator nationalism considers how social media entrepreneurs feature in the

construction and imagination of a nation, while operating across multiple platforms and platform systems to secure varying forms of capital (economic, political, socio-cultural).

Although the rise of digital platforms has problematized U.S.-centric claims of media imperialism (Tomlinson, 1991; Kraidy, 2002), the dominance of the U.S.-owned platforms across the Internet have affirmed fears over U.S. platform imperialism (Jin, 2013), platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2014), and data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2018). In response, global scholars describe the "return of the state" by multiple powers engaging in media control through ownership and governance (Flew, et al., 2016), if also patterns of platform protectionism nurtured by reactionary politics. Similarly, the rise of a global platform society (van Djick et al., 2018) has been accompanied by competing ideologies and contested actors vying over platform power.

Recently, scholars have recognized the accelerated internationalization and global influence of Chinese digital platforms (Jia & Winseck, 2018; Keane & Yu, 2019). In response, a platform and tech backlash has ensued, whether India banning hundreds of Chinese applications since 2019 or Russia threatening to launch its own Internet (Dergachava, 2025). In the U.S., Silicon Valley leaders have enjoined regulators to thwart Chinese platform power and advocated for U.S. platform protectionism. Platform nationalism may expedite the conditions for the splinternet, further decoupling the structural and material benefits of globalization, hindering cultural diplomacy between either nation, while advancing geopolitical risks towards global and military conflagration. Creators around the world are now harnessing platforms from both systems to secure cultural and commercial capital, placing these entrepreneurs precariously at the epicenter of these geopolitical battles. In this regard, Thailand's creator culture, within proximity to China's *wanghong* culture (Anonymized) and precariously built upon non-Thai-owned social media and ecommerce services serves as an ideal site for interrogating this concept.

This research features a multi-perspectival, multi-methodological, "ecological" approach for mapping creator industries with frameworks derived from political economy and cultural, platform, production, and creator studies (Anonymized). Featuring secondary research and qualitative interviews, this model maps underlying economic, sociocultural, and technological market conditions, interrogates the patterns and flow of platform capital and ownership, conducts policy analysis of both regional and national governance, identifies unique conditions of local creator labor, management, and entrepreneurialism through content, communication, and business practices, and examines the broader sociocultural and political impact and influence of national and indigenous creators and communities. Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in both Bangkok and Chiang Mai Thailand in May-June 2024. This included producing a conference with over 1000 participants and a half-dozen speakers plus conducting over two dozen interviews with creators, creator agency executives, and creator scholars.

Based on our preliminary findings, Thailand's creator culture proves vibrant, if operating paradoxically and precariously between both U.S. and Chinese-owned and/or funded, if not necessarily operating, platform systems. One of the fastest growing sectors of Thailand's creator economy is the seller creator, or eSols, as in e-selling opinion leaders. Seller creators are more often using recorded or live streaming social media

and/or e-commerce platforms to promote and sell every category of consumer product from beauty and fashion and lifestyle to appliances, cars and homes, even rocket systems. While this may be a viable economic opportunity for creators, particularly young, under-educated women from lower classes, this phenomenon poses a critical supply chain issue for Thailand as these platforms are not Thai owned. Nor are they American with the removal of Amazon from the market a year ago. Rather the main platforms are owned either by Chinese corporations like TikTok or by Chinese owned or funded corporations based in Singapore, like Shopee, or Chinese investment-owned companies like Lazada, which is funded by Alibaba.

In the wake of the devastating loss to Thailand of cultural tourism from the CoVid-19 pandemic, one of the government mandates to diversify its economy is to promote Thai "soft power" through creator activities across social media platforms. The challenge is that both platforms offer limited support in the way of creator partnerships or funding. Consequently, most Thai creators are highly dependent upon sponsorship and brand deals with Thai-based advertisers that feature little incentive to promote content or communities outside of the geo-linguistic boundaries of Thailand and Laos. Treated like national champions, the Korean-born Cullen brothers are leading Thai creators if also digital nomads, i.e., foreign nationals who live in Thailand due to its affordability coupled with access to Thailand's digital nomad visa scheme. While these nomads may contribute vitally to Thailand's tourism sector, these creators perpetuate Thailand's ongoing dependency upon cultural tourism. This dependency has been further evidenced by the government inviting 100 Chinese "KOLs" to attend Thailand's New Year's celebrations in 2024.

One of the more exportable forms of Thai creator culture is their extraordinary tolerance for diversity and identity and representation particularly around sexual identity. Thai queer creators are some of the most beloved in the country and outside of the country is posing somewhat of a threat where queer culture is banned and forbidden. Yet, Thai queer creators struggle with securing support from their own high gay community, a consequence of deeply fraught divisions within the community around what represents proper queer representation. Thai indigenous creator culture may affirm the values of a pluralistic Thai society and the ambitions of Thai soft power. In the "Hillside villages" of Thailand outside Chiang Mai, indigenous and ethnic creators are taught by local government organizations how to harness social media platforms like Facebook marketplace to sell artisanal products generated by their communities. In sum, this research reflects the unique dimensions of platform-based, creator-led nationalism emergent with localized and bound creator cultures.

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