

# Digital Nomadism in Southeast Asia: Its Cultural Identities and the New Labor Model



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**Digital Nomadism** ในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้:  
อัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมและตัวแบบใหม่ด้านแรงงานที่เกี่ยวกับกระแสความเคลื่อนไหวนี้



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By    Miss Wenjue Zhong  
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เหวินเจี๋ย จง : Digital Nomadism ในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้:

อัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมและตัวแบบใหม่ด้านแรงงานที่เกี่ยวกับกระแสความเคลื่อนไหวนี้. ( Digital Nomadism in Southeast Asia: Its Cultural Identities and the New Labor Model) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : ชีระ นุชเปี่ยม

วิทยานิพนธ์นี้ได้ศึกษาเรื่องของอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของนักเดินทางดิจิทัลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ และผลกระทบที่เกิดจากแบบแผนงานแรงงานที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างต่อเนื่อง ด้วยการสำรวจสัมภาษณ์คุณภาพและการศึกษาเอกสาร การวิจัยนี้ได้สำรวจแบบชีวิตของนักเดินทางรุ่นใหม่เหล่านี้อย่างละเอียด

การวิจัยได้ค้นพบปรากฏการณ์ที่น่าสนใจ: คือ ถึงแม้ว่าจะเดินทางไปต่างประเทศ นักเดินทางดิจิทัลก็ยังคงความสัมพันธ์ที่แข็งแกร่งกับอัตลักษณ์ชาติของพวกเขา สิ่งนี้เป็นอิสรภาพที่ยั่งยืนถึงความคงที่ของมรดกวัฒนธรรมที่มีส่วนร่วมในการสร้างเอกลักษณ์ของพวกเขาเอง

นักเดินทางดิจิทัลไม่เหมือนกับนักเดินทางระดับโลกทั่วไป พวกเขามุ่งหมายในการใช้สิ่งที่มีประโยชน์มากขึ้น โดยที่แบบชีวิตของพวกเขาเป็นส่วนประกอบที่สอดคล้องอย่างลึกซึ้งกับสถานะการทำงานของพวกเขา ด้วยเหตุนี้ นักเดินทางดิจิทัลกลับเป็นแบบแผนงานแรงงานที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ ซึ่งยั่งยืนถึงลักษณะการเปลี่ยนแปลงในธุรกิจในยุคดิจิทัล

การศึกษานี้ยังเน้นให้ความสำคัญในเรื่องของการมีความพอใจในด้านจิตใจซึ่งเป็นหัวข้อที่สำคัญในการเดินทางของนักเดินทางดิจิทัล สิ่งนี้สอดคล้องกับแนวโน้มที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลงในยุคหลังโมเดิร์นและการเสริมสร้างตนเองของบุคคลที่นักเดินทางรุ่นใหม่พุ่งกับการค้นหาความหมายและการเติบโตส่วนบุคคลในการเดินทางของพวกเขา

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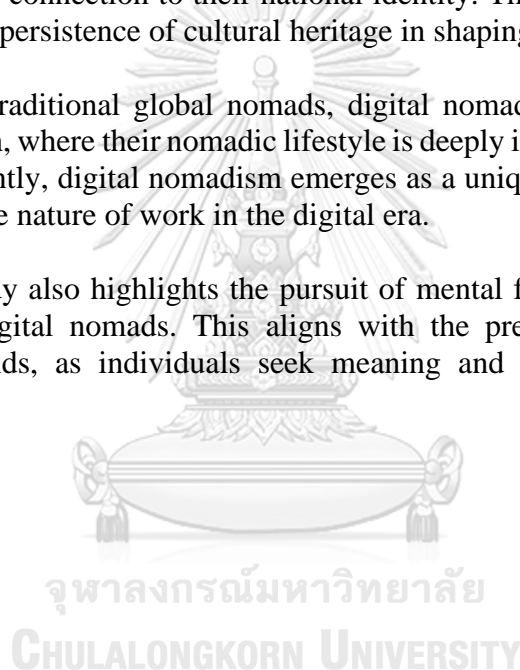
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This thesis examines the cultural identity of digital nomads in Southeast Asia and its impact on their evolving labor model. Employing qualitative interviews and document research, the study investigates the lifestyles of these contemporary nomads.

The research reveals a finding: despite roaming abroad, digital nomads maintain a strong connection to their national identity. This intriguing phenomenon demonstrates the persistence of cultural heritage in shaping their self-identity.

Unlike traditional global nomads, digital nomads display a more utility-oriented approach, where their nomadic lifestyle is deeply interwoven with their work status. Consequently, digital nomadism emerges as a unique labor model, reflecting the transformative nature of work in the digital era.

The study also highlights the pursuit of mental fulfillment as a prominent theme among digital nomads. This aligns with the prevailing post-modern and individualist trends, as individuals seek meaning and personal growth in their nomadic journey.



Field of Study:	Southeast Asian Studies (Interdisciplinary Program)	Student's Signature .....
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# Chapter One: Introduction

## *Introduction*

Digital nomadism is one of the most popular terms since the post-covid-19 period. The term became a sensation and sparked lively discussions in countless different industries. Especially in conjunction with the dramatic layoffs of web 2.0 and the rise of web 3.0, the feasibility of digital nomadism is being actively wondered about for a while, whether in the financial field, especially cryptocurrency finance, or in the Internet industry, or by anyone working in any industry with telecommuting possibilities. Curfews, city closures and quarantines in some countries and regions during the epidemic have all contributed in part to igniting a desire to travel freely.

Makimoto and Manners coined the phrase "digital nomad" in 1997 to characterize the impact of technology on people's life (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). Digital nomadism is the lifestyle that these independent workers with highly mobile locations have adopted. The term "digital nomad" denotes a category of mobile professionals who execute their telecommuting work all over the world using digital technologies. By arranging their own vacations and short-term project-based work (also known as gig work), digital nomads have greater freedom to travel.

Digital nomadism is described as a threat to the nation-state idea because it is "in-between" migration and tourism, despite homeland-centric identities (Hannonen, 2020). The local industrial structure is evolving as a result of their gathering, which is

also fostering contact between the local, national, and digital nomad cultures. This group is not strictly adhering to the conventional immigration procedure. They are partially free from the obligation to bow to local tradition because they are independent of the local economy.

Southeast Asia is well-known as a tourist destination with its tropical climate, exotic atmosphere, and affordable spending, attracting many travelers to the region. Some countries, such as Thailand and Indonesia, have introduced long-term visa policies to attract these travelers and obtain their long-term consumption in the region. Many people from high-spending countries have come to settle in Southeast Asia and have started the FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early) attempt. Some cities such as Chiang Mai and Bali have already taken the lead by bringing together some of the “digital nomads” in communities based on the concept of “utopia”. At the same time, some in the cryptocurrency space are beginning to pay close attention to Southeast Asia. With the rise of Southeast Asian internet companies represented by Sea and the famous Singapore FinTech Festival, Southeast Asia has caught the attention of investors and entrepreneurs on the internet and crypto finance space. All of these factors prove that Southeast Asia is a popular destination for digital nomads, and this trend will continue to grow in the future.

However, Nomadism, especially a cross-cultural or cross-ethnic one, also possesses an element of uncertainty. It is an activity that falls between migration and tourism, and therefore cannot be assessed by any of the established criteria of either. Digital nomads, as high-income groups migrating from developed regions, also enjoy

privileges from their national identity and economic status at their destination.

Research Objectives:

1) To provide a perspectival understanding of the cultural identity of nomadism in terms of tourism or migration, drawing on nomadism in history for the impact it had on destinations.

2) To identify the reasons for modern people to become digital nomads.

3) To understand why Southeast Asia has become a major destination in the world for digital nomads.

4) To explore the interactions between digital nomads and Southeast Asia and the impacts, positive as well as negative, digital nomadism has had on this region, especially in terms of potential opportunities and challenges digital nomadism presents for the latter's future.



### ***Digital Nomad***

Remote workers known as digital nomads are frequently employed in technical disciplines like web design, programming, or internet marketing (Thompson B. , 2019). Makimoto & Manners' vision has been gradually achieved by the rapid development of Internet technology over the past two decades (1997). Teleworkers who opt to work from wherever are known as digital nomads; they have a continuous, interspersed life of work and travel (Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Cahalane, 2018). Along with the capacity to do so, the "desire to roam" is a necessary component of the digital

nomad lifestyle (Makimoto & Manners, 1997).

The contemporary group known as digital nomads is an intersection of different groups with other names. Digital nomads span multiple categories and types of employees, who may be freelancers, self-employed, or telecommuters, or even travelers on multiple intermittent vacations unencumbered by financial pressures (Hannonen, 2020). Regardless of the method of employment, "international travel" is a core part of the digital nomad (Thompson B. Y., 2018).

### ***Cultural Identities***

Digital nomads may seem to have a deeper interaction with the local area than tourism, yet some studies suggest otherwise (Thompson B. Y., 2018). They do not learn the language or customs of the country in which they live, but form communities with other sojourners that are independent of the local society.

While not necessarily interacting deeply with the local area, digital nomads also have the label of being global citizens apart from their home country nationality (Dobrinskaya, 2016). This label has led them to advocate free choice of government and the concept of individual sovereignty. Moreover, it's compared with "traditional" nomadism, and been sought in a historical review as a new Wanderjahre (Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Cahalane, 2018). Digital nomads were compared to an earlier concept, the global nomad. One of the key commonalities is that nomadism is different from migration. Migration is a movement of people that is discussed in a utilitarian perspective based on the setting of the nation-state. But nomadism often means giving up otherwise good conditions and valuing the need for self-fulfillment

while downplaying some of the more basic and primitive needs such as stability and security (D'Andrea, 2006). The rejection of "home" is also a new identity characteristic of nomadism.

Coincided with the development of digital nomadism, the concept of Lifestyles of Mobility has been proposed by Cohen et al. as a new-age continuation of the "lifestyle" itself as a shift to post-modernism/late modernity (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). From this aspect, digital nomadism as lifestyles of mobility is also a trend challenging the traditional nationalist identity and become de-centralized to highlight the individuals.

However, the detailed reason of why people choose to abandon their homeland, and whether it's related to some global political or economic trend, is a scale that needs to be disclosed.

### ***Crypto Finance, Gig Economy, and Geographic Arbitrage***

Davison and Rees-Mogg brought the concept of internet economy in the book "*The Sovereign Individual*", along with a wonder of de-centralized finance, and the increasing value of individual's capabilities (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 1997). With the invention of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, people are equipped with a way to settle their accounts independent of nationality, territoriality, and banking systems. On this basis, crypto wallet holders can then more easily travel to different parts of the world. This is the new type of facility that digital nomads are actively seeking (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017).

Web 3.0 entails concepts such as individual control of personal data, cryptocurrencies, and decentralized record keeping on the blockchain. It is characterized by a total immersion in the digital experience. Web 3.0 uses cryptocurrencies and a decentralized finance (DeFi) paradigm, whereas Web 2.0 relies on fiat currency (Burdova, 2022).

Another element of freedom for digital nomads lies in the combination of gig economy and internet platforms, exempting them from the constraints of the people who provide the work (Richter & Richter, 2020). Gigs are one-time employment that can be obtained by employees who are customers of a certain website or phone-based application, which enables them to bid on jobs (Thompson B. Y., 2018). It allows workers to decide when and where they want to do their work, and to be free to schedule work and vacation time.

With the reasons above people can start to travel while working at the same time, which allows them to live in a cheaper country with a higher income than local average, this is called geographic arbitrage or geo-arbitrage, termed by *Forbes Magazine* (Hayes, 2014).

### ***Southeast Asia as Destination***

Southeast Asia, especially Thailand or Indonesia, are among the top digital nomad destinations in multiple rankings. Chiang Mai and Bangkok in Thailand, or Canggu, Ubud in Bali, Indonesia, or Hanoi, Vietnam, are mentioned often as examples

of digital nomad's destinations (Polwasit, 2022; Thompson, 2019&2018; Ehn et al, 2022; Hannonen, 2020). In a way that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure, digital nomads choose exotic places and see them as temporary habitats for deeper experiences (Thompson B. , 2019). Compared to the high cost of living in the home country, Southeast Asia is relatively affordable, both in terms of labor and consumption.

As Thompson also mentioned: digital nomads and tourists sometimes have similar consumption behaviors. The tourism industry, an important part of the Southeast Asian economy, would naturally welcome the spending of digital nomads too. Officials in Thailand and Indonesia have responded by introducing long-stay visas that can be purchased for a fee, or electronic visas that are easy to apply for (the elite visa in Thailand or the B211A visa in Indonesia).

At the same time, the arrival of digital nomads from higher-income countries to Southeast Asia creates a phenomenon of privilege (Thompson B. , 2019). There is sometimes a distance between digital nomads and the local population, and this distance leads them into cultural peripheries and gives them a sense of superiority. Although Thompson does not directly address the "Western centrism" of Western countries with respect to the local culture of Southeast Asia, this privilege may be a reflection of the clash of power between cultures, based on the fact that the vast majority of developed countries are Western countries and travelers view destinations as exotic. Without regard to the neo-colonial concept mentioned by Thompson, Geert Hofstede had defined culture in dimensions, and someone defined Western culture as masculine and Thai culture as feminine according to the cultural dimension of masculinity-femininity

in this theory. Such cultural differences can also lead to a tendency toward privilege in cultural intermingling.

## *Scope of the Study*

The social, economic, and cultural environments of Southeast Asia provide it with a potential to attract digital nomads. The presence of digital nomadism in this region has implications not simply in terms of tourism and migration. This research thus seeks to analyze this phenomenon and thereby provide a fundamental understanding of how digital nomads define their cultural identity in relation to the local people, as well as the impacts they have had on the region: how the digital nomads present the local people with new challenges and opportunities for their social and economic life, including their career and employment opportunities.

## *Research Methods*

Qualitative research is used in this research. Documentary research is mainly used to portray the horizontal and vertical vision as an understanding of digital nomadism and its relationship to Southeast Asia.

Field investigation is done in gathering cities of digital nomads in Southeast Asia, including Bali in Indonesia, Chiang Mai and Bangkok in Thailand. These cities are most shown from multiple rankings about “destinations for digital nomads”, and the most reachable places during the research. The semi structured interviews are conducted and



remained digital record with their consent. A comparative study is introduced in this research on a scale of several cases, to better understand this phenomenon. A total of 24 informants were interviewed, including 21 people who self-claimed as digital nomads, and 2 as managers in co-working and co-living spaces, another as a restaurant owner in a digital nomadism destination. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in the entire research paper.



## Chapter Two: Cultural Identities of Digital Nomads in Southeast Asia

### *A Review of Nomadism Pursuing*

People's desire to roam is not a rare even in human history. Even before the rise of digital nomadism, there are already multiple cultural phenomena of people abandoning the concept of homeland and searching for a roaming life. Some literature described digital nomad as a new form of *wanderjhare*, or journeyman year, which refers to the traveling years the craftsmen did after finishing their apprenticeship in medieval time (Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Cahalane, 2018). This comparison can disclose the motivation for people to travel with professional skills, but it's not completely representing the cultural understanding.

#### ***Romanticism***

People's desire and romanticization of travelling can be tracked back to the period of Romanticism, or even earlier. The birth of nomadic desire in Western culture can be traced back to the Romantic era (late 18th to mid-19th century). Romanticists like William Wordsworth and Lord Byron emphasized emotion, imagination, and a return to nature. Their works often glorified the 'wandering poet' archetype, whose nomadic journey served as a metaphor for personal growth and spiritual quest. This period marked the beginning of a sociocultural shift, placing value on individual expression, imagination, and freedom, traits intrinsic to the nomadic lifestyle (Jarvis, 2004). In the

statement of Buckton-Tucker, even if not all travel writing belongs to the Romantic style, there are many similarities that may be seen and ascribed to a shared philosophy (Buckton-Tucker, 2010). Romanticism prized emotion, individualism, and the beauty of the natural world. Many Romantic writers and artists were fascinated with the nomadic lifestyle, viewing it as a form of freedom and escape from the restrictions of industrialized society.

Inheriting the discoveries of the Age of Exploration, people romanticized travel and created a wide range of travel literature. Some famous writers of that time, such as George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, were widely quoted by later movements of nomadism, such as the Beat Generation and the Hippie movements. For example, among the Beat Generation, Gregory Corso was buried next to Percy Bysshe Shelley's grave in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome because he regarded the English Romantic poet as a hero. In his poem *Kaddish*, Allen Ginsberg praises Shelley's poem *Adonais* as having a significant effect on the creation of one of his most significant poems (McClure, 1994).

### ***The Hippie Movement***

Contemporary nomadism also took many forms before the rise of the digital nomad, and most of them were influenced by the hippie movement (D'Andrea, 2006). Due to this reason, this movement is worth mentioning here.

The Hippie movement was a cultural revolution that once again emphasized freedom, exploration, and an escape from societal norms. Hippies sought to reject the

constraints of mainstream culture, embracing communal living, free love, and an itinerant lifestyle. The celebrated 'van life' of the Hippie era was a clear manifestation of nomadic desire, a physical and symbolic journey away from consumerism and towards a simpler, more authentic existence (Kliem, 2011).

A fundamental aspect of the Hippie movement was the rejection of mainstream American life, which was seen as rigid, conformist, and dominated by materialism. Hippies opposed the consumerist values promoted by mainstream society and sought to create alternative communities based on sharing and cooperation (Miller, 2012).

For hippies, travel doesn't even just include spatial movement. They also use drugs and pursue spiritual experiences that they describe as a kind of identity "travel" at the same time. They are accustomed to self-transcending activities like cathartic therapies, retreats for meditation, cult spiritualities, hallucinogenic shamanisms, and psychedelic raves, all of which are thought to be more potent when carried out in far-off places. These Techno and New Age events are frequently referred to as "trips" within and outside of oneself (vertical mobility), in keeping with the journey concept (D'Andrea, 2006). Hippies sought authenticity and spiritual growth, drawing on a diverse range of spiritual traditions including Eastern religions, Native American traditions, and esoteric western mysticism (Gemie & Ireland, 2017).

Many hippies moved to rural communes in a bid to create utopian societies based on ecological sustainability, communal living, and self-sufficiency. This back-to-the-land movement reflected a desire to escape urban life and reconnect with nature

(MacFarlane, 2015).

Another concept, "backpacking", has also emerged from this movement.

### ***The Backpackers***

The modern phenomenon of backpacking has its origins in the 1960s and 1970s. Hannam observed a growing disillusionment with mainstream values and a desire for more authentic experiences during this period of increased prosperity and leisure time in Western societies (2010). The famed 'Hippie Trail' from Europe to South Asia was an early example of this phenomenon (Gemie & Ireland, 2017).

But what's noteworthy is the most notable origin of the backpacker phenomenon, in Khao San Road, Bangkok, Thailand. Thailand experienced an influx of "backpackers" beginning in 1982. This resulted in the establishment of a "backpacker mecca" on Bangkok's Khao San Road, where local Thai people began operating inexpensive "guesthouses" and "homestays" to accommodate this new type of solo traveler (Schlagwein, 2018).

Similar to the earlier Hippie movement and subsequent neo-nomadism, backpacking symbolizes the desire to wander, experience diverse cultures, and live an unconventional lifestyle. The pursuit of authenticity, personal growth, and retreat from routine are essential components of the backpacking ethos (Young, Stevenson, & Wearing, 2009).

Over time, backpacking has evolved to encompass various forms of travel, including eco-tourism, volunteer tourism, and adventure tourism. Backpackers are often highly connected, using technology to plan their journeys, connect with other travelers, and share their experiences. The rise of the internet and social media has transformed backpacking, making it more accessible and popular. In this process, backpacking has experienced a shift to more digital (Adkins & Grant, 2007).

### ***Global/Neo-Nomadism***

As reviewed by Hannonen, digital nomadism can be tracked back to multiple understandings for travelers and has an overlap among the concepts (Hannonen, 2020). Global nomads emerged at the end of the 20th century and, in contrast to immigration, this trend has an opposite identity pursuit. The tendency of migrants is to acquire a new local identity while retaining their homeland identity, while nomads reject their homeland affiliation and allow themselves to become displaced individuals.

D'Andrea argues that it is not enough to consider World Nomadism or Neo-Nomadism as subcultures (D'Andrea, 2006). In this regard, global nomads comprise a negative diaspora, as they view themselves as members of a transethnic dispersion of people who despise homeland-centered identities. Their identity as a global formation is not founded on ethnic or national nostalgia but based on a shared commitment to counterhegemonic practices and way of life. For consciously rejecting dominant ethnonational apparatuses, their centrifugal moves do not configure diasporic alienation; on the contrary, despite possibly heralding a 'homeland' ideal, their utopian drives are motivated by a practical individualism, which is predicated on reflexive

modes of subjectivity formation.

Korpela defined neo-globalism as counterculturalism (2020). Korpela argues that bohemianism is inherited by neo-nomadism because these phenomena contain a resistance to mainstream society. The counterculture is not a new phenomenon, but rather inherited from history.

Moreover, the resistance to mainstream culture in neo-nomadism and global nomadism does not lead to an alternative home, but rather to a postmodern deconstruction of the concepts of home and belonging. Cohen et al. also discuss the fluidity of nomadism identity and lifestyle, undermining the dichotomy between home and away (2015). This mobility is contained within the self-identity and becomes stable mobility (Terranova-Webb, 2010).



## *The Nomadism in Digital Age*

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Understanding the brief historical continuity allows for a better understanding of the identity of the digital nomad and its unique characteristics. Digital nomadism in many ways overlaps with other nomadism in history. But where it differs most is in its attribute called digital, where people use technology to combine work and travel. Nevertheless, other phenomena also help to interpret digital nomadism.

### *Co-working and Co-living*

There are countless co-working and co-living spaces in Chiang Mai and Bali.

Modern co-living can be traced to shared living models of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as tenements in the United Kingdom, lodging houses in the United States, and chawls in western India. Wells Coats established Isokon, a communal living space in north London, between 1933 and 1934. It provided comparable facilities, including a shared communal space and workspace (Stewart, 2016).

The co-living space can help digital nomads overcome the isolation of travel and build deeper connections to the local area (Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Cahalane, 2018). Because of this, co-living spaces often like to advertise the social value and human connection they offer and use specific features to attract digital nomads to spend money (Thompson B. , 2019).

Digital nomads who choose to reside in co-living spaces experience a strong sense of community (Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). Digital nomads actively participate in sharing knowledge to help others succeed not only to avoid being mislabeled as having negative connotations, but also because they perceive the group as interconnected. Digital nomads are motivated to participate in routines within co-living spaces by their desire to conform to communal ethics.

It was found that “utopia” is a concept that digital nomads often mentioned to describe co-living spaces. For example, Ding and Pan, a couple of influencers from China who have travelled while working for three years, would introduce co-living



projects by describing those places as idealized utopias<sup>1</sup>. The operators of these co-living spaces are often described as people who have escaped from urban life and longed for farmland, or as enlightened people who love yoga and spiritual activities and live in seclusion in the mountains. This feature also coincides with the tendency of global/neo-nomadism, which can be seen as a rebellion against mainstream values inherited from the hippie era. A notable point is that the couple favors joint living spaces based on certain hobbies, such as yoga. While living in Ubud, Bali, which is famous for its yoga, they were happy to meet more friends with common interests.

The origin of coworking spaces dates back to 1995 in Berlin, Germany (Mente, n.d.). Co-working spaces bring together individuals and teams, whether employed by a company or self-employed, in shared spaces where they can collaborate and create a sense of community (American Library Association, 2018). Co-living is presented as a utopian response to a swiftly changing society, providing affordable housing for young people priced out of the market while also pooling resources, fostering community, and catering to a more mobile generation (Coldwell, 2019).

Digital life and Internet technology have made telecommuting and mobile work possible. Therefore, more digital workers started their travelling life with personal computer. As reviewed by Schlagwein, co-working space emerged in Southeast Asia from 2010 following the spread of social media and crypto currency (2018). In Thailand and Bali, these "destination coworking spaces" served as a physical fulfillment for

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<sup>1</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

digital nomads.

Co-working spaces offer essential infrastructure and amenities that digital nomads need to work effectively. These include reliable high-speed internet, desks, meeting rooms, and often also additional services such as printing, mailing, and even refreshments (Spinuzzi, 2012).

One of the challenges of the digital nomad lifestyle can be isolation. Co-working spaces offer a sense of community and social interaction, mitigating feelings of loneliness and helping digital nomads to feel more connected to their surroundings. These venues bring together a diverse range of professionals, hailing from various industries, specialties, and backgrounds (Putra & Agirachman, 2016). For digital nomads, this diversity can be a rich source of inspiration and opportunity. Digital nomads, who may not have a traditional office environment or team, can interact with professionals from an array of fields. This can broaden their professional networks and increase their visibility in different sectors, enhancing the potential for future partnerships or collaborations.

Learning is another key aspect of the co-working environment. By interacting with other professionals, digital nomads can gain insights into different industries, trends, and work practices. This exchange of knowledge and ideas can spark innovation and inspire new ways of thinking, allowing nomads to stay up to date with recent developments and improve their own work practices. They can learn about the challenges and solutions encountered by professionals in other industries, thereby

expanding their problem-solving repertoire. For example, a co-working space called outpost in Bali holds regular networking events and workshops for co-working members to bring digital nomads closer to and understand the local language and culture, and to facilitate communication and collaboration between them. Many people in the same industry or experience get together to discuss professional and tax knowledge, as well as to exchange local insights.

### ***Outsider or Insider? The Cultural Identities***

Many digital nomads are drawn to Southeast Asia, where low costs of living and a vibrant cultural scene offer an attractive environment for work and travel. We will first explore the cultural identity of digital nomads in Southeast Asia, drawing on the experiences of Louis<sup>2</sup>. Louis is a French software developer who lives in Bangkok. He considers himself as freelancer. Louis has gig works because he wants to save time for his own project. Louis said he has already been living in the Philippines for years before he came to Thailand. Following his own statements, the reason why Louis came to Southeast Asia is that he prefers Asian culture.

In the beginning, Louis chose to live in the Philippines with the idea that the locals spoke English, which gave him the convenience of the language. What he did not anticipate was that being of mixed black and white descent, he was often mistaken for a local, and people would try to speak to him in the Filipino vernacular. Hence, even being overly accepted was troubling for him. Which is more, he didn't really expect to be involved into local communities. During the conversation, it was clear that Louis

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<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

still did not speak Thai even though he had lived in Thailand for three years. Such an identity fits Thompson's description of an outsider (Thompson B. , 2019). Living in Bangkok, Thailand, he can live normally even if he only speaks English. So, he still maintains a certain distance from the local culture.

Louis, in general, remains attached to his identity as a French. He spoke that if he gets married or builds a family, he will still consider moving back to France. Louis describes his greatest experience while living in Southeast Asia as having no social network or family, or no "root". This feeling, combined with his high income and the obvious class disparity in Manila or Bangkok, can lead to a lack of restraint when it comes to local spending. But while feeling disconnected, he feels easily attracted to intimacy with local people.

Alex, another French software developer who lives in Bangkok<sup>3</sup>, has different experience and views from Louis. Alex also defines himself as a freelancer but provides service from a fixed client for more than one year. Both informants can be seen as transnational individuals whose cultural identities are shaped by their experiences living and working in Southeast Asia. However, Louis's identity is more strongly influenced by his Western background, while Alex's identity is more fluid and hybrid, reflecting a desire to understand and connect with the local culture.

Alexis used to live in Budapest as digital nomad identity before he came to

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<sup>3</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

Thailand. As a white male, he wouldn't be mistaken as not wester, and from his own statements, he became more popular among people in Asia. But he was more actively involved in efforts to integrate into the area, including learning to use Thai language, as well as buying a motorcycle and riding and touring many parts of Thailand, such as the Isan area. According to Alex, he has come to see his residence in Bangkok as a place to belong to. Alex considers Asia to be safe and easy to live in. He has complaints about his home country and believes that France is becoming less and less livable as time goes by. He prefers to live in Asia for a long time. However, this does not mean that he wants to abandon his national identity. On the contrary, he considers France to be a great country and is proud to be a French.

Both informants can be seen as transnational individuals whose cultural identities are shaped by their experiences living and working in Southeast Asia. However, Louis's identity is more strongly influenced by his Western background, while Alex's identity is more fluid and hybrid, reflecting a desire to understand and connect with the local culture.

The theory of transnationalism can help us to understand how Louis's experiences of mobility and flexibility shape his cultural identity as a digital nomad in Southeast Asia (Calvin, 2005). As a digital nomad, Louis likely maintains social and professional networks that span multiple countries and cultures, and he may draw on a variety of cultural influences and experiences in his daily life. His experiences of mobility and flexibility may also play an important role in shaping his sense of self, as he integrates new cultural influences and experiences into his identity.

Ding and Pan agreed on not giving up on their root from where they were born. “Of course, there is a root for us.” Ding says so, though they doubt if they can accept a settled life, but rather prefer to take a life travelling, even if they come back to China. It’s more a choice of lifestyle instead of an identity. They have grown their horizons and become more international in their travels. But they don't see national identity as something to be discarded.

It has also been explored to study how different cultural identity backgrounds can bring about different identity changes in travel (Lee & Gretzel, 2014). The study is based on the social identity theory that people from different cultural backgrounds produce different conceptual changes during travel, distinguishing mainly between collectivism, individualism, the East, and the West. This study argues that the identity change produced by travel is more like a change in the expansion boundary of a retention center (shows in figure 2 in Chapter Two). Especially among the digital nomads contacted in this study, the view of abandoning the original national identity is rare.

Harman’s point well described this identity<sup>4</sup>. Harman is an Egyptian, teaching English online. He works for a Chinese company, and his students are primary school children. This is how he described his identity: “Still an Egyptian, but an international one.” He is sojourning in Southeast Asia by working online. The main reason for choosing Southeast Asia is the ease of visa. He sees himself as having difficulty fitting

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<sup>4</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

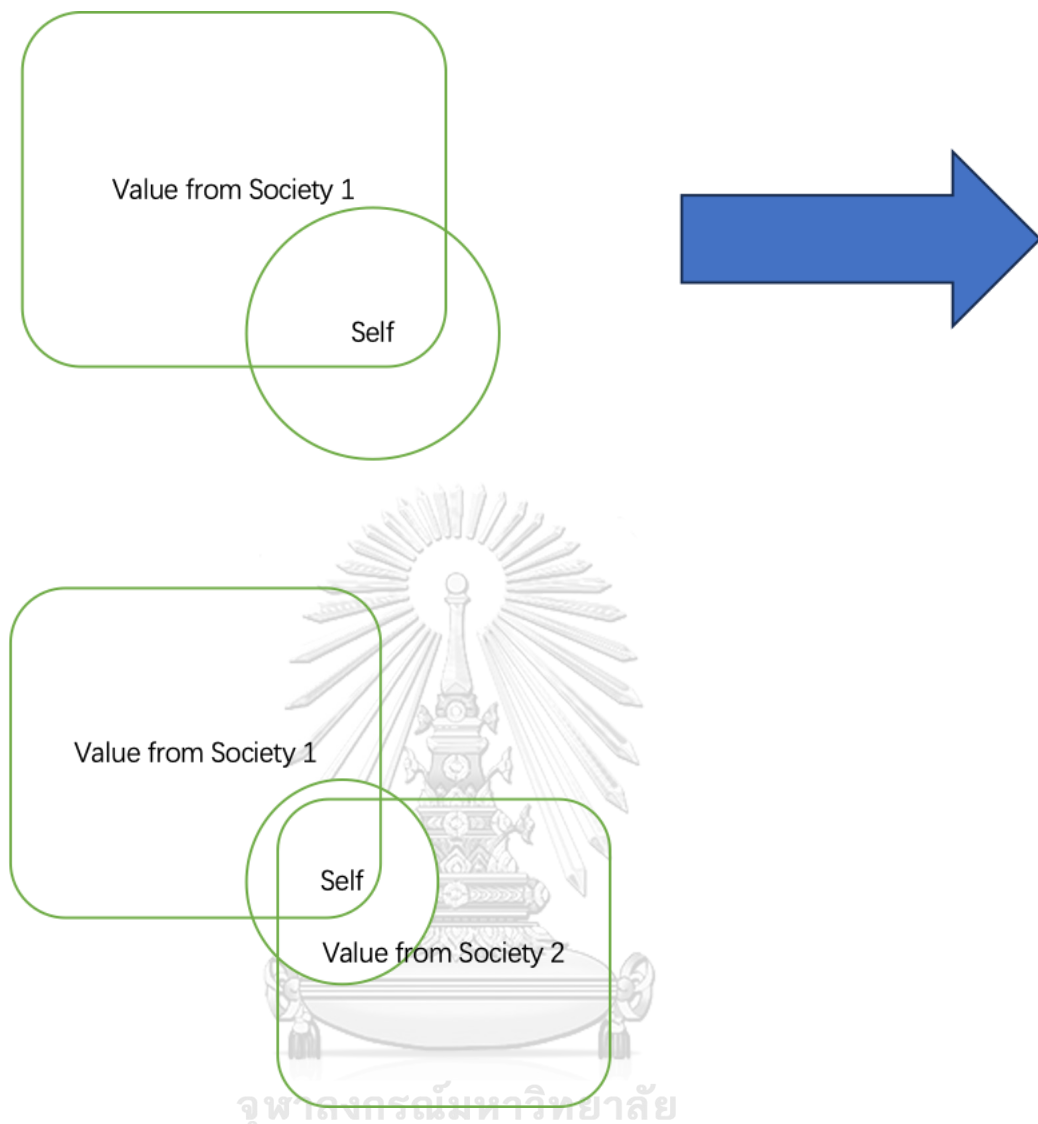
in with his surroundings back home and thinking differently than traditional Egyptians such as his own family. However, as a Muslim, he still retains the food taboos inherited from his family and agrees that Indonesia is a good place for him to travel to and live in as a place that is exotic but retains the Muslim lifestyle.

Harman is not alone in his choice of destination because of his lifestyle. Simon, who is from Russia, has lived in Ubud, Bali, for over a year and works remotely as a data analyst for a living<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the other interviewees, he does not believe that the income of a data analyst in Russia would allow him to make a better life in Bali. The main reason he chose to live in Ubud is that Bali is very friendly to vegan diet. When a person goes to a distant place, besides seeking to explore the unknown, he can also be understood as seeking the integrity of his self-identity.

The understandings provided by these sojourning digital nomads, who have visited destinations in different countries, show plurality of self-identity in different social expectations and values. This society of discovery of diversity exists as an imaginary ideal country before they travel, and upon arrival, they will use the local area as a new yardstick and mirror to rediscover themselves. This awareness does not mean that they will abandon their original identity, but rather that they will gain the tolerance to value themselves in multiple ways.

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<sup>5</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



*Figure 1: The identity change of digital nomads*

As shown in Figure 1, the digital nomad pursues a different cultural experience by discovering a self-identity that was once not part of the symbolic session. According to Lacan's theory, this is also a kind of integration for identity and thus a repair of trauma. This is perhaps the key reason why people desire to travel: to find a different perspective on the self (Han, 2008). Later on, we'll discuss more the motivations of becoming a digital nomad in Southeast Asia.



### ***Change Under Uncertainties: New Trend After Covid-19***

As mentioned earlier, leaving the old order and value, and seeking a new perspective on oneself is a motivation for digital nomads. The choices that digital nomads make have not only been influenced by the cultural context in which they engage in this activity, but also by the dynamic nature of the global scenario and the growth of covid-19.

Covid-19, a so-called "black swan" occurrence, has, as we are all aware, had a significant impact on the political landscape of the world and has also contributed to a certain amount of unease among individuals regarding their ability to continue living. In order to gain a better understanding of human decision-making, the fields of psychology and economics have come together to form the field of behavioral economics. "Variety seeking" and "loss aversion" are two fundamental ideas that can be used to shed light on the phenomenon of digital nomadism. Both theories are more applicable to people who chose to become digital nomads during covid-19.

Many digital nomads are driven by an intrinsic yearning for new experiences, which fuels their interest in discovering diverse cultures and settings. This urge often compels them to move from place to place in search of new adventures. According to the behavioral economics theory of "variety-seeking" (McAlister & Pessemer, 1983), people seek out new experiences because they want to keep their lives interesting. As a nation's population becomes more mobile, digital nomads begin to view government services and benefits as consumable items.

The COVID-19 pandemic created economic uncertainty, leading many people to prioritize financial security. Digital nomadism offers a potential solution, as it allows individuals to work remotely while reducing living expenses by moving to countries with lower costs of living. This behavior aligns with the principle of "loss aversion," where people are more motivated to avoid losses than to acquire gains (Schmidt & Zank, 2005).

Emily, a Chinese media practitioner, found herself seeking a change in her life during the lockdown in China in 2022<sup>6</sup>. Feeling a strong desire for a more stable and secure future, she decided to move to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Influenced by social comparison and a fear of missing out on a better quality of life, Emily saw this move as a stepping stone in her plan to eventually immigrate to Canada. From her perspective, she is worried about the living conditions in China and sees other countries as her ideal land. When Alex describes his idea before he came to Thailand, a similar expectation on ideal land is expressed. But the difference is that Alex regards his roaming as more an adventure, taking a risk on stability, but gaining the view to make progress on his saving plan. However, they both share an anxiety about their home country, having complaint on the policy changes.

The field of social psychology examines the ways in which people are impacted by both the people around them and their surrounding social environment. A connection can be made between digital nomadism and two social psychological phenomena: social comparison and the fear of missing out (also known as FOMO).

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<sup>6</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

People tend to judge themselves in relation to others in their social circles, and the achievements of the earlier digital nomads have motivated others to pursue a similar lifestyle. According to Dijkstra et al. (2008), one of the most effective ways to motivate oneself to become a digital nomad is to observe others reaping the benefits of the lifestyle.

The fear of missing out on rewarding experiences can also drive people to become digital nomads. Social media platforms can exacerbate this feeling by showcasing the adventures and successes of digital nomads, which in turn can create pressure to adopt the lifestyle (Przybylski et al. 2013).

In the year 2023, Chinese travelers have shown an increased interest in visiting Indonesia. Because to the effects of covid-19, the whole economy of the society is in a state of stagnation. The idea of "consumer downgrading" was presented, and individuals started concentrating their attention on locations with lower costs. Because going outside of the country was so difficult during the two years that the border was closed, many people felt envious of those who were able to do so. Also, due to layoffs in the internet business and the downturn in other industries, some people who are unemployed want to relocate a location where they will live for a short period of time that is low-cost and environmentally friendly so that they may think about what their next step should be. Wan was interviewed in Tumpak Sewu, Java, Indonesia. She is a former product manager who resigned from a big company in Chinese internet

industry<sup>7</sup>. She began to doubt the value of her work because it was too intense. Influenced by the covid-19, she was anxious about whether hard work would necessarily provide a good future. So, she decided to live in Indonesia and consider applying to study abroad as her next step.

Meng is a photographer from China, and the biggest reason she lives in Chiang Mai is because everyone around her is proud to talk about sojourners or digital nomads<sup>8</sup>. The low rent, low cost of living, and similar tastes to China in Chiang Mai makes it a great place to live in. Chiang Mai has a number of temples that offer meditation activities and is a great place for digital nomads to meditate, described as "high energy". Similarly, Ubud, Bali, is visited by countless yoga enthusiasts and by people who travel there to take their children to the local non-traditional school, like Ye from China<sup>9</sup>. While living in Bali with her children, she was active in yoga and meditation, experiencing small-town life, and says she received a lot of spiritual healing.

### ***Freedom and Success: Motivation Before Covid-19***

People escaping from homeland can be due to the anxiety level that rose after covid-19 (Lakhan, Agrawal, & Sharma, 2020). However, the phenomenon of digital nomadism has existed long before that. As described by the comments of some YouTube channels, these people are defined as “brave to make the move”.

Digital nomads praise Tim Ferriss's book "The 4-Hour Workweek" for helping

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<sup>7</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

them free their minds and sparking original thought processes in them (Ferriss, 2007). The book promotes the idea of "lifestyle design" and rejects the traditional notion of retirement, instead advocating mini retirements throughout life. Ferriss suggests outsourcing and automating tasks to save time and focus on interests and passions. This idea resonates with digital nomads who value freedom, flexibility, and financial independence.

The book "The 4-Hour Workweek" advocates the idea of concentrating one's efforts on activities that provide high returns and delegating or eliminating the remainder of one's responsibilities. This strategy is suitable for digital nomads since it satisfies their need for independence. Digital nomads like Alex and Louis can optimize their work hours and free up more time to explore their surroundings, pursue hobbies, or simply enjoy the flexibility of their lifestyle by streamlining their job.

Another essential component of the "4-Hour Workweek" is the idea of geo-arbitrage, which refers to relocating to a location in which the value of your money is increased. Digital nomads can considerably cut their costs by relocating to nations with a cheaper cost of living, such as Thailand or Indonesia, and keep up with or even improve their standard of living. This is possible when they opt to reside in countries like these.

Even for Harman, one of the primary draws of being a digital nomad is the opportunity to break free of the psychological and social confines of a traditional home setting. " In Egypt," he explains, "neighbors mind each other too much, and families

are too tightly knit." He is under the impression that continuing to live as a transient will enable him to feel liberated from his obligations to maintain interpersonal relationships.

## *The Privileges*

Digital nomads often enjoy a certain degree of privilege in their destinations due to a variety of factors. Here are a few key aspects:

**Economic Privilege:** Many digital nomads come from wealthier countries and work in industries that offer higher-than-average salaries, such as the tech or consulting sectors. This can afford them a higher standard of living in countries with lower costs of living, enabling them to afford accommodations, services, and experiences that may be out of reach for local residents (Hannonen, 2020).

**Mobility Privilege:** The ability to travel freely across borders is a form of privilege that is not universally shared. It is largely contingent on one's citizenship and the passport one holds, with citizens of wealthier countries typically facing fewer travel restrictions (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015).

**Technological Privilege:** Access to reliable internet and digital devices is a prerequisite for digital nomadism, but this is not universally available. Digital nomads, therefore, are beneficiaries of a "digital divide" that favors those with better access to digital technology and skills (Chen, 2013).

Cultural Privilege: The digital nomad lifestyle is often romanticized and valorized in media and popular culture, and digital nomads themselves may be seen as adventurous, innovative, or trendsetting. This can contribute to a sense of cultural superiority or entitlement, which can affect their interactions with local communities (Molz, 2012).

Those privileges might not be sensed by every digital nomads. McIntosh argues that privilege is often invisible to those who possess it, and that it can be difficult to recognize and challenge without intentional effort (McIntosh, 2019). Tiara is the local manager of a coworking space in Bali, where, as she expresses, the price of the coworking space membership is high, so if it's not purchased by companies, Indonesian people won't come and work in it<sup>10</sup>. However, for the digital nomads who work for companies of developed countries, the life expense, including the price of coworking space, is still affordable. Even though Alex never tried to go into a relationship with local girls, he expressed that during his motorbike trips in Thailand, not few owners from the gas stations or restaurants are happy to introduce their daughters to him.

The digital nomad subculture has been described as male-oriented. According to Thompson, there are a great deal of networks of digital nomads that are, in and of themselves, sexist and male-centered. In a co-working space in Canggu, Bali, there is a banner that presupposes that all consumers are male: directly calling everyone gentleman or handsome.

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<sup>10</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

The perception is that it is safer for men to travel to locations with lower spending than it is for women to do so. On the Chinese website RED, you can find many useful travel tips, such as those for visiting Indonesia or Thailand. In general, when the tips are geared toward female readers, there is an additional emphasis placed on safety. Avery is a freelance illustrator who works from home<sup>11</sup>. She goes on to explain that when she travels by herself, she frequently receives compliments from complete strangers regarding the difficulties she has overcome "as a girl."



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<sup>11</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



## Chapter Three: The New Labor Relationships and Economic Scenario

### *Mental Pursuit, Geo-Arbitrage and Mini Retirement*

The idea of "mini-retirement" was brought to widespread attention by Timothy Ferriss in his book "The 4-Hour Workweek" (Ferriss, 2007). Mini retirements are shorter periods of leisure, relaxation, and/or travel that are interspersed throughout one's working life. In contrast to the conventional notion of retirement, which occurs after decades of employment, mini retirements are taken more frequently. The goal is to release oneself from the constraints of the traditional 9-to-5 workday and, instead, schedule sabbaticals at regular intervals to pursue personal interests or simply enjoy life.

A financial strategy known as geo-arbitrage is one that takes advantage of the variance in the cost of living that exists across various areas around the world (Hayes, 2014). The idea is to maximize one's wealth or lifestyle in another location while taking advantage of cheaper living costs in the first location. For instance, a person could work and earn money in a high-income country such as the United States, and then move to live (or retire) in a lower-cost country such as Thailand, essentially making their money go further.

In her study, Mancinelli insightfully noted that even though the notion that individuals have such extensive freedom of choice is undeniably appealing, it is important to recognize that individualization is both a possibility and a burden. This factor is frequently neglected when analyzing lifestyle mobility. In late modernity, social differentiation can be liberating, but it requires a new form of social engagement to its risks and burdens (Mancinelli, 2020).

Existing research on digital nomads tends to understand the inner impulses and spiritual pursuits of digital nomads, describing and analyzing them as a subculture. However, from what I have learned from the digital nomads or groups aspiring to digital nomadism that I have encountered in my fieldwork, digital nomadism is not as idealistic as the neo-nomadism described by D'andrea, which even possesses a pure pursuit that inverts basic needs and self-actualization (2006). More digital nomads are utilitarian based and even very pragmatic in their considerations. This paper argues that when the phenomenon of digital nomads comes into the public eye and becomes a new buzzword, its meaning goes beyond subculture and reflects the current Zeitgeist and the new needs of the people that emerge.

### ***A Shift to Individualism and Mental Pursuit***

First, the informants in this study were essentially people who did not form a family or traveled around as a family unit. As can be seen from the historical account of nomadism in the first chapter of this paper, the whole process of nomadism embodies a shift from society to self and from collectivism to individualism. This shift corresponds to the historical changes of humanity.

Postmodernism is a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in 20th century. Postmodernism is distinguished by its skepticism of major theories and ideologies and its stress on individual experience and interpretation. According to Beck (2002), academics contend that globalization, technological improvements, and transformations in economic systems have all led to an increasing attention on the individual. These shifts have resulted in a process known as "individualization," in which old social categories and groupings have become less significant and individual identity and the ability to express oneself have gained more significance. The emphasis on individual experience, choice, and interpretation that characterizes the shift from society to self, aligns closely with digital nomadism. Digital nomads prioritize personal experiences and individual agency in their work and lifestyle choices (Reichenberger, 2018). They take advantage of technological advances to construct their own identities and lifestyles, detached from traditional societal structures and constraints.

Over the last century, many Western cultures have shifted toward a more individualistic society. According to Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, civilizations differ along a continuum from collectivism to individualism (Hofstede, Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values, 1984). Those in collectivist cultures belong to "in-groups" that take care of them in exchange for loyalty, whereas those in individualistic society are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families. This trend has been influenced by a number of factors, including urbanization, mobility, and the expansion of market economies (Greenfield, 2013). Digital nomads value independence and personal freedom highly and see their

lifestyle as an expression of these values. Digital nomads often navigate between their need for autonomy and connection with others, reflecting both individualistic and collectivist values in their lifestyle (Korpela, 2020).

The emphasis on mental health and mindfulness has grown in importance, replacing the previous emphasis on financial success. The emergence of the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), in which value is generated from experiences and changes rather than material things, is indicative of this. Additionally, this shift in society's emphasis on mental health and wellbeing is reflected in the popularity of mindfulness and meditation as well as the emergence of positive psychology. The transition away from worldly riches toward mental well-being and mindfulness is something that resonates with the motives of many digital nomads. According to Makimoto and Mersch (1997), many digital nomads place a higher value on the pursuit of experiences, personal development, and mental well-being than they do on the accumulation of financial riches. This is in line with the growth of the "experience economy" and the increasing importance that society places on mental health and overall well-being.

With economic development, people are increasingly concerned about mental health. This is a historical turning point, both in policy making and in business management. Between the years 2002 and 2021, the number of adult residents of the United States who got some form of therapy or counseling for their mental health rose from 27.2 million to 41.7 million (Statista, 2023).

In terms of the state of mental health, this topic may not be taken as seriously as it needs to be. Major depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, yet it is not effectively treated (Thornicroft, 2017). In 2020, only 51% of WHO's 194 Member States reported that their mental health policy or plan complied with international and regional human rights instruments, well below the target of 80%. And only 52% of countries met the goal for mental health promotion and prevention programs, which is also significantly below the target of 80%. The only 2020 goal achieved was a 10% reduction in the suicide rate, and even then, only 35 countries reported having a separate prevention strategy, policy, or plan. In recent years, the proportion of government health expenditures allocated to mental health has remained relatively constant at 2%. In addition, even when policies and plans included approximations of required human and financial resources, only 39% of responding countries claimed that the required human resources had been allocated and 34% indicated that the funds that were needed had been provided (WHO, 2021).

Nomadism is often seen as a rebellion against mainstream culture. However, more important than what it rebels against is what causes it to rebel. Digital nomadism cannot be truly understood when the pursuit of the spiritual world or the pursuit of mental health is perceived as a vain and impractical theoretical discussion.

The desire to become a digital nomad can be tied to several aspects related to mental health. Here are a few points which can illustrate this connection:

**Work-Life Balance:** One of the most cited reasons for embracing digital

nomadism is the flexibility it offers, allowing individuals to achieve a better work-life balance. The strain of maintaining a healthy work-life balance can take a toll on mental health, and digital nomadism provides an alternative lifestyle that potentially mitigates this (Makimoto & Manners, 1997).

**Reducing Stress:** Traditional work environments can be stressful due to long commutes, rigid schedules, office politics, among other factors. The freedom to choose when, where, and how to work as a digital nomad can significantly reduce these sources of stress, which is beneficial for mental health (Spinuzzi, 2012).

**Personal Fulfillment:** The ability to travel, experience new cultures, and meet new people can provide a sense of personal fulfillment and happiness that may not be easily achievable in a traditional 9-to-5 job. This, in turn, can enhance mental well-being.

**Empowerment:** Digital nomadism can also be empowering. The act of breaking away from societal norms and taking control of one's work environment can boost self-esteem and personal agency (Thompson B. , 2019).

**Mindfulness:** Locations popular among digital nomads often promote mindfulness and wellbeing. For instance, Ubud in Bali is known for yoga and meditation retreats. Engaging in such practices can improve mental health. As Ye spoke, she felt “everyday living in Ubud is paying for healing”.

When people give up their stable lives or leave their hometowns to drift far away,

they are not necessarily “pursuing self-fulfillment without fear” but may be a trade-off after weighing the utilitarian benefits. Mental condition is an important part of human well-being.

### *Freedom and Empowerment*

Empowerment is a topic that is often explored in business management. It is increasingly crucial for businesses to give their employees and customers the ability to communicate directly with technology suppliers when a trend toward telecommuting emerges.

Matt,<sup>12</sup> a Canadian doing business for Australia, has just started his life as a digital nomad less than two months ago. He submitted his resignation to his company because he wanted to become a digital nomad, and the company signed a freelance contract with him to let him continue working for the company.

It is increasingly crucial for businesses to give their employees and customers the ability to communicate directly with technology suppliers when a trend toward telecommuting emerges (Golden & Gajendran, 2019). 1 (Bailey & Kurland, 2002):

**Flexibility:** Working remotely offers additional flexibility, allowing people greater control over the timing and way work is accomplished. This flexibility can provide individuals with more agency by enabling them to arrange their schedule in accordance with their own unique productivity cycles and other responsibilities.

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<sup>12</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

**Autonomy:** Working remotely frequently means having more autonomy in making decisions about work processes, task management, and problem-solving, which in turn fosters a better sense of control and ownership of one's work. Having more autonomy in making decisions regarding work processes, task management, and problem-solving.

**Location Independence:** Possessing the capability to operate from any location might be liberating because it eliminates the requirement of being bound to a certain geographical area. This paves the way for opportunities such as travel, settling down in areas of one's choosing, and striking a better balance between one's personal and professional lives.

**Skill Development:** The nature of working remotely typically requires a high level of competency in digital technologies, as well as self-discipline, communication, time management, and the ability to solve problems. Skill development includes these areas. The acquisition of these abilities can contribute to the development of a greater sense of personal competence and empowerment.

**Work-Life Integration:** Because it saves time spent traveling and makes it possible for more fluid transitions between different life roles (parent, professional, partner, etc.), working remotely can make it simpler to combine work and personal life. This can contribute to a higher feeling of equilibrium and personal fulfillment in the individual.



**Well-Being and Health:** Working from home offers the option to maintain better habits such as eating meals made at home, engaging in regular exercise, and getting enough sleep, all of which can be challenging in typical office environments. This may lead to improvements in both one's physical and mental well-being, both of which are empowering.

Working at a distance necessarily means empowerment, and such empowerment is easier to achieve in large companies with good systems, while it may be more difficult in smaller, relationship-dependent companies. Wendy worked for an education agency and when she returned from a year-long residency, she found that her authority had been hollowed out, even though she was still in the same position<sup>13</sup>. Even if these things might be liberating, it is essential to keep in mind that working remotely does not come without its share of difficulties. It calls for self-discipline, clear and efficient communication, and an environment that is conducive to productive work, and it may result in feelings of isolation or excessive effort. Consequently, to reduce the likelihood of these possible problems, people and organizations need to adopt preventive measures.

### ***Geo-Arbitrage***

Geo-arbitrage is an important reason why people choose to travel or live in Southeast Asia. 85.7% of informants (n=18) said they benefit from Southeast Asia because it was cheaper, with 13 of them intending to use it to save money, while the other 5 said it reduced their workload or improved their quality of life.

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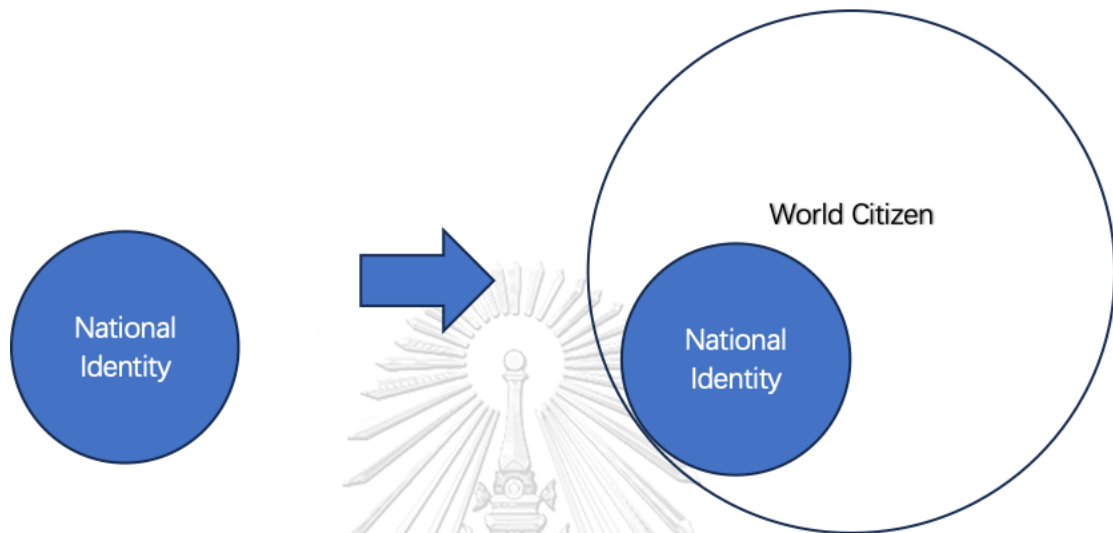
<sup>13</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

This is where digital nomadism is more pragmatic compared to global/neo-nomadism. When people talk about global/neo-nomadism, they tend to think of it as a spiritual exile that reverses basic needs and self-satisfaction (D'Andrea, 2006), or as a rebel who completely abandons mainstream social values (Hannonen, 2020). Although digital nomads also live in bohemian communities and sometimes experiment with global/neo-nomads' lifestyles, this is not necessarily representative of all digital nomads. Even when the concept of digital nomad identity is associated with "geo-arbitrage," the two identities are the opposite of each other.

While global/neo-nomads have as their fundamental aim to despise mainstream social values with a new one, digital nomads are more focused on escaping from mainstream social expectations, but not abandoning them completely. As described in Chapter 1, digital nomads are not abandoning their former identities in their travels, but simply adding new parts of their identities in their travels. Former identities include nationality and hometown. Even if they become internationalized or globalized, national identity is still not abandoned by them.

And can digital nomads really achieve financial freedom easily with the help of cheap local consumption? For Louis, the high quality of life in Manila or Bangkok is not really any cheaper than in Europe. First, only a few large companies can agree to employees telecommuting across borders. Thus, becoming a digital nomad requires becoming a freelancer, which means they will quit their permanent contracts and seek short-term immediate income. Second, if digital nomads start a company or sign a

freelance contract in their own country rather than some low-tax country, it will likely mean higher taxes from their own high-welfare developed country. For Alex and Matt, figuring out their financial status is a very complicated matter.



*Figure 2: the national identity*

Despite this, they were successful in saving some money by simply formulating a strategy to do so. Some even see it as a means to start a business, socializing in co-living spaces or co-working spaces and exchanging insights and resources. The illustrator Avery believes that it is easier for people to open up mind as tourists in a foreign country.

### ***Mini Retirement***

People have the need on mental stability, and geo-arbitrage can fulfill the need on traveling with low cost. That is how people planned their mini retirement.

Teachers, software engineers, illustrators, or data analysts, are all providing packed service based on their profession. So, if they fully work as freelancers, they can

choose certain time to finish one project, and rest for the other time. It is a similar concept as students' gap year, but it happens during the profession.

## ***Crypto Finance, Web 3.0, and Digital Nomads***

Countries like Singapore have emerged as key hubs for cryptocurrency and blockchain businesses, driven by a favorable regulatory environment. Singapore's Monetary Authority (MAS) has implemented a progressive regulatory approach, establishing clear licensing requirements for cryptocurrency businesses while ensuring robust consumer and investor protection measures (MAS, 2022).

On the other hand, countries like Thailand have also established clear regulations for cryptocurrencies and digital assets, which include licensing requirements for crypto exchanges and ICOs (SRUPSRISOPA, 2018). The Philippines has a particularly interesting landscape, with cryptocurrencies used for remittances and by digital nomads, and the Central Bank of the Philippines (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas) has implemented regulations for virtual currency exchanges (Office of the Governor, 2011).

Practitioners of crypto finance are often secretive and therefore more difficult to reach and interview. This paper can only research and understand through those who can be reached.

### ***Digital Nomadism and Crypto Finance***

Evie is a graduate student from a business school in Singapore and actively searched for a job in web 3.0<sup>14</sup>. As a Chinese who is looking for something new, she is eager to catch the trend under the name of web 3.0 or digital nomads. From what she said, there are also some people who are very knowledgeable about web 3.0 and have purchased long-term visas and settled in Bangkok.

I may not have met the professional she was talking about, but I did meet Ninj, an American in Bangkok who used to work in a restaurant, then started investing in cryptocurrencies and made money, and quit his job to live in Bangkok<sup>15</sup>. He runs an online YouTube channel dedicated to cryptocurrency investments. He has been living in Bangkok for 3 years now.

Although they may be an exception among digital nomads, keeping cryptocurrency in a wallet is not something that is rare for digital nomads to do. In their own channel, Ding mentioned the tips on how to create a crypto wallet. While travelling and doing gig works, easily exchange from different currencies can make their life convenient.

### ***Chinese in Crypto Market***

It's worth taking note of the Chinese who actively participated the crypto Market in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>14</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> the interview was conducted on the date of June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

Xargin is a senior Internet Architect who worked at Baidu before moving to Singapore-based Sea Ltd. His channel on platform “Knowledge Planet” shared the information about how to work overseas and reflected the anxiety of Chinese people during covid-19. While China's Internet industry is approaching saturation, a lot of software engineers saw the rise of Southeast Asian products such as Shopee, decided to find a job in Singapore.

However, after their active application, Sea Ltd laid off more than 6000 employees after November 2022 (Reuters, 2022). Some of the technicians even got their offer canceled when they just arrived at the airport of Singapore (Liu, 2022). News about web 3.0 spread rapidly on Chinese Internet platform, and people even used the slogan: “How hard web 2.0 layoffs are, how much web 3.0 is craving for talents.”

For further understanding, web 1.0 refers to as the world wide web, which is a compilation of inert pages, whereas web 2.0 begins when end users produce information and interact with others (Silva, Rahman, & Saddik, 2028). When it enters the web 3.0 era, the crypto finance and VR or AR technologies made the virtual world more real, so that people can be more engaged in it.

The Chinese technicians are actively seeking for a chance in web 3.0. However, the crypto finance is no longer an easy field in China. In September 2017, China shut down Bitcoin exchanges and ICOs (Riley, 2021). What’s worth noticing is that the world’s largest cryptocurrency exchange company, Binance, was once a Chinese company, but moved out after the law changed (Wikipedia, 2023).

TOKEN2049 is an annual event hosted in Singapore. In the event of 2022, one Chinese investor called Zhao Chen proposed one point which widely spread through all the Chinese in this industry. “Chinese,” He says, “are the Crypto Jews.” (Ye, 2022) What he means is that in the cryptocurrency space, the Chinese have left their homes and wandered around. They can only go outside their own country to find space for investment and entrepreneurship. As a result, the "pan-Chinese region" is home to many Chinese crypto entrepreneurs and investors. Southeast Asia is close to China and is home to many Chinese, so this region has become a new destination for Chinese crypto practitioners. Singapore is their first choice, while Thailand, with its large Chinese population, is also a popular destination for them.

### ***Labor Requirement: What to Bring to Local?***

As a local Indonesian, Tiara, the co-working space manager in Bali Ubud, had not heard of the idea of digital nomads before she came across this job. Through her communication with the local Balinese people, she said that the local Balinese people are very welcoming to the people who come to live in the island because of the new jobs they provide in the industry. However, through her statements, local people don't really have much knowledge about the concept of “digital nomad”.

Meanwhile, Ye, the owner of a well-known Chinese restaurant in Bali, spoke about the change of Canggu during the time she stayed<sup>16</sup>. She says there were not many

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<sup>16</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

people at the beginning, but with more people coming with the purpose of surfing, there started to be more co-living and co-working space, restaurants of international cuisine, or well-decorated bars. She thinks as a tourist destination, the economy of Canggu is promoted by digital nomads. In the other hand, since Canggu became internationalized, more domestic tourists are attracted. Ye mentioned that during the covid-19, even though the border was shut down, her business was still doing well under the luck that domestic tourism was encouraged during that period.





## Chapter Four: Why Southeast Asia? – a Discussion

### *Reasons to Choose Southeast Asia*

Southeast Asia is often the number one favorite among digital nomad destinations around the world. It gathers a variety of advantages: livable weather, low prices, abundant tourism resources, and safety.

#### *Similarities and Communities*

According to Ding and Pan, it is not easy to create links and common topics between people if they choose the community they live in simply as digital nomads. Therefore, people's clear interests to choose the community makes it easier to create a deeper connection with the local area.

Southeast Asia is just the place for people looking for a hobby. Southeast Asia's digital nomad hubs all have their own features for screening tourists. For example, Koh Tao in Thailand is known for its diving, Ubud in Bali is recognized as the yoga center of Asia, Canggu in Bali is famous as a surfing spot, and Chiang Mai in Thailand has been chosen as a destination for meditation and hippie culture (Szuster & Dietrich, 2014; Susanti, 2020). The professional facilities and staff, as well as the good prices, make it possible for people with specific hobbies to come back, thus increasing the number of foreign residents.

As for big cities such as Bangkok, they have become a place where people live for the purpose of saving money. It is not the only reason. Xi is an entrepreneur and a triathlon athlete<sup>17</sup> from Beijing. When she chose to stay in Bangkok for two months, she found that the equipment she can access here is high end and brand new. The telecommuting workers such as software developers or data analysts also choose this city for the world top internet speed (Dorger, 2022).

Cultural similarities are also a reason for people to choose here. By the heritage of history, Southeast Asia is suitable for people from almost all the culture. Chinese can find connection with large population of ethnic Chinese; people from western countries can find cultural assimilation between western and local; Muslims can that find Southeast Asia is a place where they can easily integrate their identities, as well as the Hindu heritage from India in the history (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). People of all cultures can find a certain sense of belonging here, which is surely an important reason for attracting people to live here.

### ***Tourist Resources***

Southeast Asia is a world-renowned tourist destination, and each country in Southeast Asia has attractive tourism resources.

Southeast Asia is home to many UNESCO World Heritage sites, reflecting the region's rich history and diverse cultures. This includes ancient temples such as Angkor

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<sup>17</sup> The interview was conducted on the date of April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia, historic cities like Hoi An in Vietnam, Pyu Ancient Cities in Myanmar, or Historic City of Ayutthaya in Thailand (UNESCO, n.d.).

Southeast Asia is known for its stunning natural beauty, including tropical rainforests, beautiful beaches, mountains, unique wildlife, and marine biodiversity. There are 143 national parks in Thailand, 54 in Indonesia (Thai National Parks, 2023; Brookes, 2022). Southeast Asia straddles the equator, with well-preserved species diversity and a rich variety of landscapes and climates.

The growth of local agricultural products and craft industries, as well as the preservation of food history and culture, are influenced by tourists' interest in various cuisine cultures (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). The unique and diverse cuisines of Southeast Asian countries are also a major attraction for tourists. Each country has its own distinctive food culture, often based on a mix of indigenous traditions and influences from other countries.

There are numerous festivals celebrated throughout the year in Southeast Asia. These provide tourists with opportunities to immerse themselves in local culture, such as Thailand's Songkran water festival and Bali's Galungan festival.

## ***What Can Be Expected by Southeast Asia***

### ***Advantages as Digital Nomads' Destination***

Firstly, digital nomads often contribute to the local economy by renting accommodations, dining, shopping, and paying for other services (Paudyal, 2012). This can be especially beneficial in places that may not see as much traditional tourism. The foreign population boosts the economy by spending locally and completes the inflow of currency. At the same time, the tax revenue generated by the consumption and residence of the foreign population can contribute to local finances.

Secondly, digital nomads often possess high-level skills, particularly in fields like IT, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship. They can bring these skills to their temporary homes, offering new perspectives, teaching locals, and providing networking opportunities. For example, Ninj likes to introduce others about his YouTube channel when staying in Bangkok.

Thirdly, digital nomads can contribute to a global exchange of ideas and cultures, leading to a more diverse and cosmopolitan local culture. They can also enhance a location's global reputation as a desirable place in which to live and work.

### ***Disadvantages as Digital Nomads' Destination***

The most common concern can be the inconvenience brought to accommodations. The influx of digital nomads can cause local real estate values to rise, making it more difficult for residents to locate accommodation that is within their price range. This can result in gentrification, which is the process by which native residents are driven out of their own areas (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021).

Also, because digital nomads are transient by nature, they can create instability in local economies. If a significant number of digital nomads leave during a downturn, it could exacerbate local economic problems.

The last is about the cultural privileges as well. While cultural exchange can have a positive aspect, there can also be friction between digital nomads and locals, particularly if there's a lack of understanding or respect for local customs and norms.



### ***Prospection: Recommendations in Facing the Trend***

The rise of digital nomadism can offer significant economic benefits for Southeast Asian countries, but to harness these benefits effectively, local governments need to implement strategic measures. Learning from previous experiences, there are several strategies that can be adopted.

The first is to improve infrastructure. One of the prerequisites for attracting digital nomads is reliable and fast internet connectivity. Local governments should prioritize investments in digital infrastructure, including public Wi-Fi in cities, co-working spaces, and reliable high-speed internet services across the country, including in rural and remote areas.

Introduce digital nomad visas is also worth considering. Countries like Estonia and

Barbados have introduced digital nomad visas that allow foreigners to live and work in the country for a specified period. This gives digital nomads legal clarity and can attract a steady stream of remote workers. The Estonian government has already given prudent consideration to e-citizenship and digital nomad status, which is worthy of reference for Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia that are preparing to introduce digital nomad visas but have not yet perfected them. The opportunities and challenges regarding Estonian e-citizenship have been discussed by Korjus et al (Korjus, del Castillo, & Kotka, 2017).

Encouraging local entrepreneurship is also helpful. Digital nomads often possess valuable skills and knowledge in areas such as IT, marketing, and entrepreneurship. By encouraging interactions between digital nomads and local communities, governments can stimulate knowledge exchange and innovation. This could involve supporting networking events, mentorship programs, or collaboration between co-working spaces and local universities.

Sustainable development is also an important aspect. While digital nomads can stimulate the local economy, there is also a risk of negative impacts such as rising living costs, gentrification, and environmental degradation. Governments should, therefore, strive for sustainable digital nomadism. This could involve regulations on short-term property rentals to prevent housing shortages, initiatives to disperse tourists and digital nomads across different regions to avoid over-tourism and promoting responsible tourism practices. Importantly, governments should ensure that the benefits of digital nomadism, such as increased spending in the local economy, also reach local

communities.



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## Conclusion

This research only provides a perspective of digital nomads in Southeast Asia and does not necessarily apply to all digital nomads around the world, such as in South America. Since digital nomads are a cross-section of multiple groups, this research paper does not provide a complete overview of the digital nomad landscape. The research aims to provide a perspective on digital nomads.

First, from the preceding discussion, this study argues that real-life digital nomads do not really "abandon their homeland and nation" as some concept suggests. Their travels and residences in foreign lands are more like exploring otherwise unexplored perspectives for their minds or seeking a world-wide vision. Such a search does not mean they have to abandon their hometown but see it as their description and a possible future option alongside other destination.

Second, perhaps digital nomadism is profoundly influenced by the culture of global/neo-nomadism, but the term digital nomad encompasses not only a lifestyle, but also the semantics of a work style. With such a difference, digital nomads actually still have utilitarian and practical demands, rather than reversing the order of basic needs and self-fulfillment, as some scholars have argued (D'Andrea, 2006; Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). To understand the cultural phenomenon of nomadism, one should understand with sympathy that human needs exist and are not an epileptic delusion. The pursuit of nomadism is a way for people who work to pursue mental health and



personality integrity. When people can understand the different cultures and possibilities of the world, they are able to reduce the anxiety they feel when they are fixed on a particular path. This becomes more and more important in periods of economic downturn. This demand for anxiety reduction became more urgent during covid-19 as people faced the panic of the government entering a state of emergency.

For local people, the digital nomad industry is very similar to the tourism industry, except that it is dealing with customers who have changed from short-term consumption to long-term consumption. This change can improve the local population's quest for livability, which can bring benefits to the local area.

Southeast Asia can look to the policies of countries that already have more established digital nomad visas to pursue sustainable development, thereby leveraging the popularity of digital nomadism for local prosperity.

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