

Revisiting Flexible Labor: A Case of Freelance Tour Guides under Economic Uncertainty during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Phuket

การทบทวนแนวคิดแรงงานแบบยืดหยุ่น: กรณีศึกษามัคคุเทศก์อิสระกับความไม่แน่นอนทางเศรษฐกิจในช่วงการระบาดของโควิด-19 ในภูเก็ต

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the precarious forms of freelance tour guides experiencing economic breakdown, to reconsidering a case of flexible labor, during the COVID-19 outbreak in Phuket. As the major Phuket residents depend their livelihood on and everyday means of support from the travel industry, the emergent measure terminated the dispensable mobility, which brought into a sudden economic downfall to each of individuals. Freelance tour guides are laborers who have generated benefits to other tourism-related businesses and local economy. However, they presently become one of the vulnerable laborers in the collapse of neoliberal tourism system affected by the outbreak. They encountered unemployment instantly after the cease of flight operation and land travel ban. The study is qualitative research and mainly uses ethnographic method by gathering data from interviewing three informants and observing their conversations online during the COVID-19 in March 2020. The results portray the micro perspectives of flexible laborer in the tourism sector, reflecting through the narratives of freelance tour guides experiencing the economic breakdown and blockage of cash flow. They further arise in various informal strategies to deal with the difficult situations and assure the life security, for example, finding alternative sources of income from online sales and family business, relocation for an affordable living, and seeking for network embeddedness. The epidemic does not only infect health conditions, but also perturbs the well-being and transforms the practices of human in economic-driven society.

Keywords: Flexible Labor, Tourism, Freelance Tour Guide, Phuket, COVID-19

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความรูปแบบความไม่มั่นคงของภาคธุรกิจอิสระที่ประสบปัญหาทางเศรษฐกิจเพื่อทบทวนแนวคิดแรงงานแบบยืดหยุ่นในช่วงการระบาดของ COVID-19 ในจังหวัดภูเก็ต เนื่องจากภูเก็ตส่วนใหญ่ต้องพึ่งพาการดำรงชีวิตและความช่วยเหลือในชีวิตประจำวันจากอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยว มาตรการสั่งห้ามการเคลื่อนย้ายระหว่างและภายในประเทศ ส่งผลให้เศรษฐกิจตกต่ำอย่างกะทันหัน โดยมีภาคธุรกิจเป็นกลุ่มแรงงานอิสระที่สร้างผลประโยชน์ให้กับธุรกิจอื่น ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการท่องเที่ยวและเศรษฐกิจในท้องถิ่น อย่างไรก็ตาม ปัจจุบันพวกเขากลายเป็นหนึ่งในแรงงานอิสระที่ได้รับผลกระทบมากที่สุด จากการล่มสลายของระบบการท่องเที่ยวเสรีนิยมใหม่ที่มีผลมาจากการระบาดของไวรัสโควิด-19 พวกเขาประสบปัญหาการว่างงานทันทีหลังจากการหยุดทำการของสายการบินและการห้ามเดินทางทางบก การศึกษานี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและใช้วิธีทางชาติพันธุ์เป็นหลักโดยรวบรวมข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์ผู้ให้ข้อมูลสามคน และสังเกตบทสนทนาออนไลน์ในช่วงโควิด-19 ในเดือนมีนาคม 2020 ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นถึงมุมมองปัจเจกของแรงงานที่มีความยืดหยุ่นในภาคการท่องเที่ยว ผ่านเรื่องเล่าของภาคธุรกิจอิสระที่ประสบปัญหาเศรษฐกิจตกต่ำ และการชะงักงันของกระแสเงินสด จากการศึกษา พบว่าพวกเขายกย่องความคิดว่ากลยุทธ์ที่ไม่เป็นทางการต่าง ๆ เพื่อจัดการกับสถานการณ์ที่ยากลำบากและสร้างความมั่นคงในชีวิต เช่น การหาแหล่งรายได้ทางเลือกจากการขายออนไลน์และธุรกิจครอบครัว การย้ายถิ่นเพื่อดำรงตนด้วยค่าครองชีพในราคาประหยัด และการสร้างเครือข่ายทางอาชีพ เป็นต้น โรคระบาดนี้จึงไม่เพียงแต่กระทบสุขภาพร่างกาย แต่ยังส่งผลถึงความเป็นอยู่ที่ดีและเปลี่ยนแปลงแนวทางปฏิบัติของมนุษย์ในสังคมที่ขับเคลื่อนด้วยเศรษฐกิจในวงกว้าง

คำสำคัญ: แรงงานที่ยืดหยุ่น การท่องเที่ยว ภาคธุรกิจอิสระ ภูเก็ต โควิด -19

Introduction

Thailand was the first nation in the world that encountered the transnational spread of coronavirus since the beginning of January 2020 due to the arrival of an inbound Chinese tourist group from Wuhan. Since then, International Airport Quarantine under the Department of Disease Control began to monitor closely on tourists from the disease spreading areas. On January 31, 2020, the first case of Thai infected patient found from a taxi driver who picked up a group of Chinese passengers from the airport (More 5 Coronavirus, 2020). This incident raised the Ministry of Public Health to announce the level-2 warning of preparedness and responsive plan, issuing preventive measures of local transmissions to maintain health security of citizens. Although Thailand was anticipated to be the low-risk area of the epidemic in the first period of outbreak, the flexible tourism policy allowing the incessant traveling of international tourists tended to engender the silent danger of novel coronavirus spreading in many touristic cities.

Phuket is one of the world-renowned cities for tourists, located in southern Thailand. It is the

province that serves approximately 10.6 million visitors and generates more than 419 billion baht in 2019 to the national economy (Phuket and Its, 2020). The main source of income is from the two major tourist nationals- Chinese and Russian, and the new tourist target that emerged in 2019 is Indians. The high demand of tourism can be observed from the operation of 20 direct flights from various cities of Mainland China and 47 direct flights from Russia, South Korea, Australia, etc. Phuket is one of the globalizing cities where traveling is a product of mobility, which led to movement-based industry called 'tourism' (Urry, 2007; Urry, & Larsen, 2011).

Working as a tour guide in Thailand is required a certified license from the Department of Tourism, and such occupation is reserved for Thai nationals merely. Their roles are not only to facilitate international and domestic tourists during travels but are also expected to present positive images of Thailand and cultures. Therefore, the Department of Tourism issued the Tourism Business and Guide Act B.E. 2551 (2008) to protect the rights of tour guide career while working in the sector. To some extent, all tour guides are

freelancers who can generate incomes from tourist clients to other tourist-related actors and businesses through recommending and promoting products and services with commissions in return. They become essential economic generators in the tourism field of Phuket. However, working as a freelance tour guide financially vulnerable. They are considered as self-employed and informal labor in the economic system (Tovankasame, 2018b). Although the freelance tour guides are given chances to accumulating benefits available in the neoliberal-driven city, the exceeding dependency on tourism economy can cause great collapse when a sudden crisis occurs.

The COVID-19 caused the national measures to terminate Phuket tourism and exacerbated the economic precariousness of major laborers who depend highly on tourism economy. It places consequent on the suspension of employment and subsequently loss of income (International Labor Organization, 2020). Approximately three thousand Chinese-speaking tour guides are not called for employed due to the cease of China's flight operation (Suffering from the Loss, 2020), then freelance tour guides from other specializing languages also fall into the same vulnerable path. The outbreak has triggered tremendous suffering to human of neoliberal policy and mindset.

To reveal the socio-cultural context of freelance tour guides in Phuket tourism during COVID-19, this study uses the framework of labor studies, based on the field of urban anthropology, to analyze the social conditions of flexible labor experiencing the crisis. The research is conducted by gathering data from interviewing three informants and observing their conversations online during the COVID-19 in March 2020. In the global context where flexible labor, represented in this study as freelancers, has become numerously increased and has still faced with the economic and social insecurity due to the subsequence of COVID-19. The main research question poses on how they utilize their capitals and resources to maintain life and devise strategies to overcome the unpredictable adversity.

Research Objectives

To examine the precarious forms of freelance tour guides resulting in job security, social protection, life stability, and coping strategies in tourism sector during the spread of pandemic coronavirus from 2019 to 2020.

Literature Review

Precarity of Flexible Labors

The concept of flexible labor has become the main framework of this study. By focusing on the epitome of freelance tour guides, their basis of living aligned with the neoliberal economy has manifested as unpredictable, insecure, and precarious conditions. The labor studies after Marxism emphasized on immaterial laborers who works for cognitive or emotional type of job in the economic system (Lazzarato, 1996). Tourism industry is considered laborers as commodities in the production. Therefore, services created by labors who have value meanings and appears as new forms of product which are not materially measurable (Dowling, 2007). Other significant products of immaterial labor from other fields, namely, information, (symbolic) communication, knowledge, and cultural artefacts (Kitirianglarp, 2014). Tourism has been a significant production imparting the consumption growth to neoliberal economy (Gómez-Encinas, 2019). Freelancer is a laboring production of neoliberal policy. Standing (2016b) explains that flexible laborers are addressed as precariat in the neoliberal scenario where survival of the fittest is a proper elucidation. The laborers are precariatized in security and protection in terms of health conditions, employment, job, work, skill production, income, and collective representation. Therefore, the precariatization deserts them to identify as a class-for-itself and undermines social backup for sustaining their quality of working and living. Another sense of flexible labor in the digital platform can be classified as commodified labor (Wood et al., 2019) as their status of employment depends on the demand of employers. It means that they are commodities

in a labor market where employers can purchase with the agreeable price. The hiring logic considers the labor's payment on piece-rate, assigned job, or hourly basis (Kassi, & Lehdonvirta, 2018) with no other additions of security-related cost. Freelancers, therefore, are not the burdens for a long-term contract and unexpected risk. Most employers do not include individual investment in the hiring cost, namely, self-training and development (Corrado, & Hilten, 2015). In this respect, Standing (2016a) explains that commodification of labor still considered 'unpaid work-for-labor' signifying the 'all-in-one' time of employment. During the situation of disaster, different governments encompass multifarious approaches of recovery scheme to tackle with economic crisis. Broinowski (2017) states the case of nuclear disaster in Fukushima and the Japanese government's priority in assisting private corporations. It shows that most neoliberal-driven nations transpire a certain model that lacks attention on the labors in the production process.

Research Methodology

This is a follow-up study of the researcher's doctoral dissertation from 2014 to 2018 on the social status, working mechanism, everyday practices, and organizational structure of freelance tour guides in the context of Phuket tourism (Tovankasame, 2018a). As stated, the working status of freelance tour guides are endangered to employment unpredictability and financial instability, thus this study further focuses on their socio-economic impacts when encountering with the aftermath of coronavirus spread. The study is qualitative research and mainly uses ethnographic method by gathering data from interviewing informants online, starting from the end of March 2019. Since the researcher is acquainted with the informants and know each of the individuals' background, it is effortless to observe their updates on the social networking sites and have personal conversations. However, to complete this study, the researcher

conducted interviews with them to gain narratives of exposure to living/working instability during the outbreak and coping mechanism from three informants that found purposefully relevant to the objective of the study. Concerning the confidential matter, all informants are named under pseudonym with the description of biography. Analytic induction was applied to infer meanings from the data collected by looking for emerging patterns of freelance tour guides experiencing economic aftermath from COVID-19 crisis.

Findings and Discussion

Phuket Tourism: The Field for Treasures Collection

"How is your job at present?", I carefully initiated a talk with Mr. Makro, a 10-year taxi driver in Patong beach, as we have lost connections for almost two years.

"You are being ironic to me! If we have not long been acquainted, I am sure we would have a fight. You knew everything is hard these days. I can't do anything."

Mr. Makro is a local-born Phuket freelancer who mainly works as a taxi driver and has a tour-guide license for legal tour operation. According to the statement, Mr. Makro responded back with the tones of discontent and harshness since his social identity is a person who is capable to earn large amount from tourism industry. His straightforward way of expression implies the anxiety of unexpected future of jobs and earnings. Even a basic greeting about the state of living can affects his feelings and interpret it intimidating. It is not easy for the freelancers in the sectors to admit the truth of tourism failure during the crisis as his statement conveys the mental distress and pressure. Many local-born Phuket freelancers are used to receive high incomes and profits from tourists. There is even a saying among laborers in the tourism sector that,

"Phuket is like a big pond. If you are hard-working and persevering enough, you can easily find

fishes. Jobs in the (tourism) sector are everywhere. One day we are taxi drivers, then next day we sell tour program, on the other day we give them a tour."

Another case of local-born tourist guide who is facing with the unemployment. Ms. Janet, a 24-year-old tour guide who has worked as a freelance tour guide for 4 years right after graduation. She was born and raised in Phuket. In her working experience, she is an English-speaking tour guide who is amenable to adjust herself to the fast-changing trend of national visitors by learning Chinese language while working as an assistance of Chinese-speaking tour guides. It took her 5 months to be confident in guiding the Chinese tourist without accompanying. As her efforts paid off, she becomes a flexible and competent laborer in the tourism sectors who accumulate wide-ranging connections to pursue incessant employment in the past couple years. Similar to what happened with every other tour guide, when the outbreak emerged, she began to gradually lose her tour-guide jobs. Thus, to sustain her life during the financial difficulty, she returned to depend on the family business of selling local seafood in a market. A casual interview was conducted while she was delivering the seafood to my house. As soon as we met at the meeting point, she smiled and expressed her feeling regarding the miserable and hopeless conditions.

"I am totally unemployed. I lost my job and all the connections. But good thing I was having a group of westerners while they [the Thai government] banned the arrival Chinese tourists. At least I could earn something little before everything [tourism-related activities] is totally stopped." Then I asked if she had plan to do something else. She further explained, "not really. Now I am busy with helping my family to sell seafood online. We have a permanent seafood stall located in Boat Plaza market. I haven't thought of doing other things, just waiting for the tourism recovery."

Among the plight of outbreak and economic instability, domestic consumption of local food become

an essential source of livelihood sustainably. The job as a freelance tour guide tends to prove her self-reliant ability in the young age and the opportunity of wealth accumulation during the tourism growth. However, her family business of food selling gave subsistence to her and other family members' backup, as well as necessitate the supplies for Phuket community as a whole. Moreover, many tour guides have been acquainted with working through social networking services as they are the tools of pursuing more connections for employment. When the pandemic situation impacts city, its economic activities in physical forms follow after the online platforms. This phenomenon reflects the self-training and development of flexible labor discussed by Corrado, & Hilten (2015).

Another perspective from the field site, the economic growth of tourism in Phuket has attracted people from different parts of Thailand to in-migrate and be temporarily settled for working. Freelance tour guide is also one of the tourism-related jobs that brought people from different parts of Thailand, depending on the market demands in periods. It can be seen from an increasing numbers of licensed tour guides from Northeastern and Central Thailand in 1990s when Japanese tourists became the main visitors with high consumption. Back then, the employment of tour-guide job was quite stable and secure with contract and guarantee of monthly stipend by tour agency. Also, their additional earning from commissions and tips revealed as one of the dream careers of tourism sector for many communicators since the sources of income are varied.

When the market changed drastically, from 2010 to the present, Chinese tourists have dominated the tourism sphere in Phuket and Thailand as a whole. Thus, many Chinese-speaking tour guides from all over the country are sought-after to serve a massive flux of Chinese tourists. Such market shift does not only coincide with Chinese-language graduates, but also match with the group of Thai-Chinese Yunnan migrated from the northern part of Thailand. They

are an ethnic group that inhabits as a close-knit community. Although they are Thai citizens who consider Chinese language as their mother tongue speaking in family and community domain, they can also communicate in Thai with strong accent and the majority receive secondary to higher level from non-formal education certified by Ministry of Education of Thailand. Many of them found opportunity of working as a Chinese-speaking tour guide due to the high demand of Chinese market and the ease of licensing by the Department of Tourism. The group of Thai-Chinese Yunnan usually applies for tour-guide license in specific type, which allows them to operate the tour within a specific area.

Thence, the majority of the freelance tour guides in Phuket are migrant workers flexibly employed by tour agencies in the sector. Taking the Thai-Chinese Yunnan migrants as a case, it is not significance whether the “local people” are the tour guide, but it is rather essential to be accommodated by the tour guides who have the common ethnicity. A skill needed to respond the market-based tourism are communication for persuasion as shopping become a must-do activity during the travel. In another word, the licensed tour guides would receive benefits if they were able to convince their clients to buy products or services from businesses in network. Phuket has long represented as a pleasant island attracted the movement of human to have a leisure visit. In the perspective of industrial and social production, it has become a space of opportunities for all walks of life.

The Safety Net of Flexible Labors during the Outbreak

One of the huge challenges to government after the pandemic situation in Phuket is the mechanism of aiding private sectors in subsidization and financing all citizens to sustain their daily lives. Phuket is urbanized and progressively growth due to the incessant circulation of tourism economy. Hence, when all tourist-related businesses were urged

to close down, it resulted in the financial loss and the deficit of payment balance. Many hotels, tour agencies, restaurants, and souvenir shops decided to lay off employees and requested supports from the government. In this regard, on 24 March 2020 the Ministry of Finances announced the first phrase of remedial measures from the impact of outbreak, to assist tourist-related businesses as follows:

1) Financial measure is a speedy track to aid the businesses directly. The vulnerable businesses will be provided soft loan with 2% interests for two years from the Government Savings Bank to recovering the business. However, the eligible businesses are those who are registered with the Social Security as employers. The businesses are required to prove that they can use the loan for hiring employees more than 80% out of the total numbers of employments for three years. It shows that the financial measure attempted to strategize for lifting the financial problems of the businesses and assuring of the employees’ job guarantee. Moreover, any businesses or individuals, who are in debt with the financial institution of state enterprises, will be able to suspend principles, to reduce interest, or extend the repayment period.

2) Revenue measure is one of the significant assistances for saving individual finances and stimulating the flow of national economy. The government would decrease the rate of withholding tax from 3% to 1.5% from earning, to encourage citizens to find more jobs, keep working, and be financially productive during the outbreak.

3) Contribution cutback measure aims to reduce the financial burden of employers in paying contribution to the Social Security fund. The employers are required to contribute only 0.1% from the allowance of employee to the fund for three months.

Many freelance tour guides began to concern on a sudden decrease of international tourists since January 2020. The Chinese-speaking tour guides were the first vulnerable tour guides from such the decline,

followed by other tour guides in discontinuing to work due to the suspension of flight operation. As a result, more than seven thousand freelance tour guides in Phuket suddenly encountered income shortage from being unemployed and become vulnerable to the economic failure. Mr. Somsak, 41-year-old, works as a Chinese-speaking tour guide in Phuket for 15 years. As a freelancer susceptible to the tourism failing, he explains how he coped with the personal finances during the unemployment.

"I noticed a signal of downturn since last year when the virus happened in China. We were the first (tour guide) group who got affected by the China flight cancellation. I thought the virus will not end any sooner or later, so I need to do something. Good thing that I have a month to prepare the incoming risk and search for other sources of income. I decided to return home in a village in Chiang Rai because the cost of living is cheap here. It was a tough decision because our life has settled in Phuket. My two kids went to a school in Phuket town and my wife has a job in a tour agency. Once, the situation happened, we need to make a decision. If we still live in Phuket, we need to have a lot of money for food, electricity bill, and water bill. So, my family agreed on the temporary transfer to save our budget. I still must pay off my monthly dues for car and house. But at least I do not need to burden much on food expenses. We can share ingredients among families or find them in the forest."

Regarding the narrative, it is not easy for the freelance tour guides to experience changes all the time. Many of them still have financial burden of long-term debt from money loan or mortgage. The transferring to a more affordable place is a solution to evade the unexpected deficits may cause. The relocation to hometown can also be considered as social backup from families/relative to support their quality of living (Standing, 2016b). Although the settlement of the migrant worker, Mr. Somsak, seems

to entail his status of a Phuket local, still the economic orientation has become a factor of detaching him from the sense of belonging to Phuket. Moreover, his financial responsibility signifies the major concern of living in a capitalist-driven city where everything has prices to pay.

As anticipated, the coronavirus infection can be remained and devastates populace in various aspects for at least half a year. As the pandemic exacerbates the long-term scarcity of people from all walks of life, the Ministry of Finances issued the second phrase of remedial measure for freelance tour guides on 24 March 2020, to boosting up national economy and elevating individual livings. The measure is to provide 5,000 baht monthly for vulnerable laborers for three months starting from April 2020 to June 2020. The eligible laborers are "temporary employees, short-term laborers, and freelancers with no social security registration, and got affected from employers who ceased business operation due to the coronavirus infection." (Criteria to register, 2020). Such amount of provision aims to at least help alleviating the laborers with less of safety net in the economic system. The provision is known as the cash transfer program for economic stimulation in a short-term since the outbreak causes the reduction of many households' expenses (Department of International Development, 2011). To some extent, the provided money may also encourage each of them to seek for other solutions to reskilling their abilities and sustain oneself in a long-term.

Strong Connection between Freelancers and Private Sectors

Phuket is a capitalist-driven province that contains a stronghold of close-knit sociality. As the plague began to be critical, it triggered various groups and individuals of tourism-related business to congregate for making contributions to the community in terms of economic recovery. As the numbers of infection

in Phuket ranked the 2nd in Thailand and there were increasing cases emerged, the president of Phuket Tourist Association Thailand took an initiative to collaborate with the provincial government in making tremendous donation for the first field hospital for COVID-19 patients. The inception of field hospital was an active endeavor to reduce the numbers of infections in Phuket. It is not established for severe cases of COVID-19, but rather temporary founded to quarantine trivia cases under professional treatment. Thus, the field hospital was an imagined community that demonstrates the private-public partnership.

When the field hospital first opening, many medical supplies, especially, masks and PPE suits, are donated by various groups of Phuket residents. Three-meal food for medical staff, the patients, and volunteers are also provided everyday by different donors. In this respect, the field hospital is well-equipped for supporting approximately 150 cases with a preparation of full treatment. The main volunteers working cooperatively with the medical staff are the freelance tour guides from the Association of Andaman Tour Guide (hereafter AATG). They played a vital role of organizing many donated supplies from various sources of donation. Some of them become the third-language interpreters facilitating the communicative services with foreigner cases. However, when the numbers of infection in the field hospital lessened, their focus on voluntary works shifts to other vulnerable groups, namely, residents of abandoned communities and unemployed tour guides.

Since many people in communities nearby the field hospital are victimized by the closure of district and unemployment during the plague, the team of AATG worked collaboratively with the medical staff to share out donated food supplies (namely, rice, egg, seasonings, instant noodle, and can food) to the vulnerable community members. Every day, the team attempted to partake the role of mediator between the givers and takers by sorting out different in-need

groups of population and figuring out necessary items for particular groups. For example, providing milk for small children and sanitary napkin for women in deprived communities. Many freelance tour guides, to some extent, have also struggled with the food scarcity in their daily life. Therefore, the team did not just provide food supplies, but also set up a feeding program for freelance tour guides by cooking ready-to-eat food every Tuesday and Thursday. The sources of feeding program are from fundraising among the AATG members and other tourism-related businesses, as well as the donation of ingredients from restaurant and food business owners. Although freelance tour guides are known as one of the well-earned careers in tourism sector, the economic slowdown has brought a significant loss to them. A food receiver from the program narrates his situation after collecting two packs of fish curry and another side dish that,

"I am a freelance tour guide for English- and Spanish-speaking tourists. I am from another province but couldn't go back home during the COVID-19 because of the lockdown measure [the closure of province]. I came here to pick up 'kap khao' [side dishes] to eat with my rice at home. These free 'kap khao' help me a lot with reducing the food cost and live on for a day. In my opinion, this program is very good because the local government already gave us the food supplies, like rice. And this [program] aids us with all ready-to-eat food. It's very convenient for the person who live alone and cannot cook like me. I don't end up with just eating instant noodles or can food every day." (An interview in Ajanjo, 2020)

Although the narrative from an informant cannot represent the existing conditions of all unemployed tour guides, his perspective on food scarcity may imply one of the strategies of self-management on day-to-day subsistence. Receiving notes from cash transfer program is substantial, but ready-made food can be more meaningful for his solitary life who has no cooking skills. Since the feeding program in Phuket is held in many areas by different voluntary groups,

food becomes trouble-free for the unemployed people as they can find the similar program almost everywhere. It connotes that the foodstuffs in Phuket during the disaster has never been undersupplied. Moreover, the expansion in assisting vulnerable people of the AATG has shown a strong commitment on the voluntary works amid the disaster. The powerful connection between freelance members is evident an impact on the remarkable resilience. Private sector emerges to play an important role of managing crisis and facilitating supplements for people in need.

Conclusions

The flexible laborers accept such unstable conditions at the beginning due to the autonomous working manner, allowing them to operate their own plan to accumulate wealth and ensure the future of well-being. The emergence of coronavirus brought in a “shocking incident” for all flexible laborers to remain their upkeep harder than the earlier situation. The study found significant economic hardship, as well as their coping strategies practiced by each of individuals. The study discusses reconsidering flexible labor in another aspect from the insightful narratives, as that;

1) The flexible laborers have coping strategies to deal with unpredictability not only for economic crisis, but also for other catastrophe namely, health security and environmental disaster. Unpredictability is a normal life condition of flexible laborers as they have been trained to live with high-competitive employment due to the oversupply of freelance tour guides in the system. Also, they have always confronted with the swiftly changes of global-tourist trend. Therefore, the approaching of coronavirus is just another factor resulted in an unpredictability to which they have been accustomed.

2) The assurance of life security is not limited to the singular form of money, but it includes technological knowledge in online platform, natural resources and local products, and family backup.

Based on their experiencing with uncertainty, many freelance tour guides are aware that the more money are accumulated, the more expenses ensue.

3) The importance of working as a freelance tour guide is not just the requirement of local knowledge and professionalism, but it is also the matter of social capital. To be employed by the agency, it needs the network embeddedness by accumulating personal connections with people in the sector (Granovetter, 1985). Therefore, trust among the sector is a key component of establishing and sustaining the social relations of flexible laborers in tourism industry.

4) To some extent, the flexible laborers can transform their “network mode” to maintain their sources of finance. It can be stated that economic stabilization of the laborers does not longer depend on the market consistency yet counts on the fact if an individual is capable to extend his/her networks incessantly.

5) The strong ties of flexible laborers’ network during the crisis signify the coping strategy. The actions taken by AATG is one of many small-scale charities organized all over Phuket, which help strengthening the civil society through the medium of social solidarity and augment the role of governmental sector in compromising on the day-to-day security of freelancers.

Recommendations

1. The narrative experiences of tour guide freelancer under the economic uncertainty reflects another form of life precariousness. The further study should play attention on the appropriate models of social security or welfare models provided to the flexible labor in order for them to sustain their living in an oscillation of neoliberal economy.

2. Since this study focuses on a particular occupation of freelancers, further research is recommended to examine other tourism-related careers or other types of flexible labor that prone to be affected by the economic fluctuation and multiplicity of global disasters.

3. It should be noted that studying the impacts of freelance tour guide from the COVID-19 from different context of tourism setting can give wider perspectives and various consequences to pursue.

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