

Partner South East Asia

Thailand: Arts for Change

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- **This briefing provided an overview of the arts, culture and creative economy sector in Thailand by looking at current cultural and creative economy policies.**
- **It also explored the role of creative cities and creative districts in building social impact.**
- **The panel discussion spoke about how artists connect their work to the public and communities to become more inclusive and effect change for the society.**
- **The Ministry of Culture of Thailand acts as a custodian, developer and promoter of Thai culture. It also creates commercial value for Thailand's cultural products.**
- **The Creative Economy Agency (CEA) develops and promotes creative people, creative districts and creative businesses using innovation and creativity to improve Thai creative economy in general.**
- **Grassroot initiatives create social impact in cities because they have local knowledge, networks, and are more in tune with the creative gaps in the community, so they can relate better to the local people.**
- **Centralised governance is a challenge for local organisations to get funding or free control of their collaborations.**
- **Art is a medium that can bring awareness to national and global issues, and empower marginalised communities to sustain their culture while earning income from it.**

Overview

The theme 'Arts for Change' reflect the trend of young Thai artists and creative professionals, as well as networks, pushing the boundaries of their work to instigate social change.

The briefing covered three topics:

- The government's policies and strategic direction on arts.
- The role creative and cultural districts play in bringing sustainable and positive change to cities, districts and local creative economies.
- Arts as an agent for social change.

Thailand's cultural policies

Prasop Riangngoen, Deputy Permanent Secretary for Culture, Ministry of Culture of Thailand, introduced the ministry role in cultural management. It covers four aspects:

- **Preservation** or protection of cultural capital.
- **Development** of cultural capital.
- **Creation** of economic value for a product or a service to generate income.
- **Management** of ownership by people or groups.

The Minister shared a case study of *Nora* (a dance drama from southern Thailand) to show how the Ministry manages cultural capital. *Nora* was successfully preserved and turned into a cultural product of Thailand (CPOT) with commercial benefits that helped ensure sustainability of the art.

The Ministry also focuses on creating landscapes or ecosystems that are conducive for the cultural economy, for example the film industry, which generates income for the industry and the country's culture.

Thailand's creative economy policies

In this session, **Pichit Virankabutra**, Deputy Director of the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), spoke about its role in driving Thailand's creative economy. CEA was developed from the [Thailand Creative and Design Center \(TCDC\)](#).

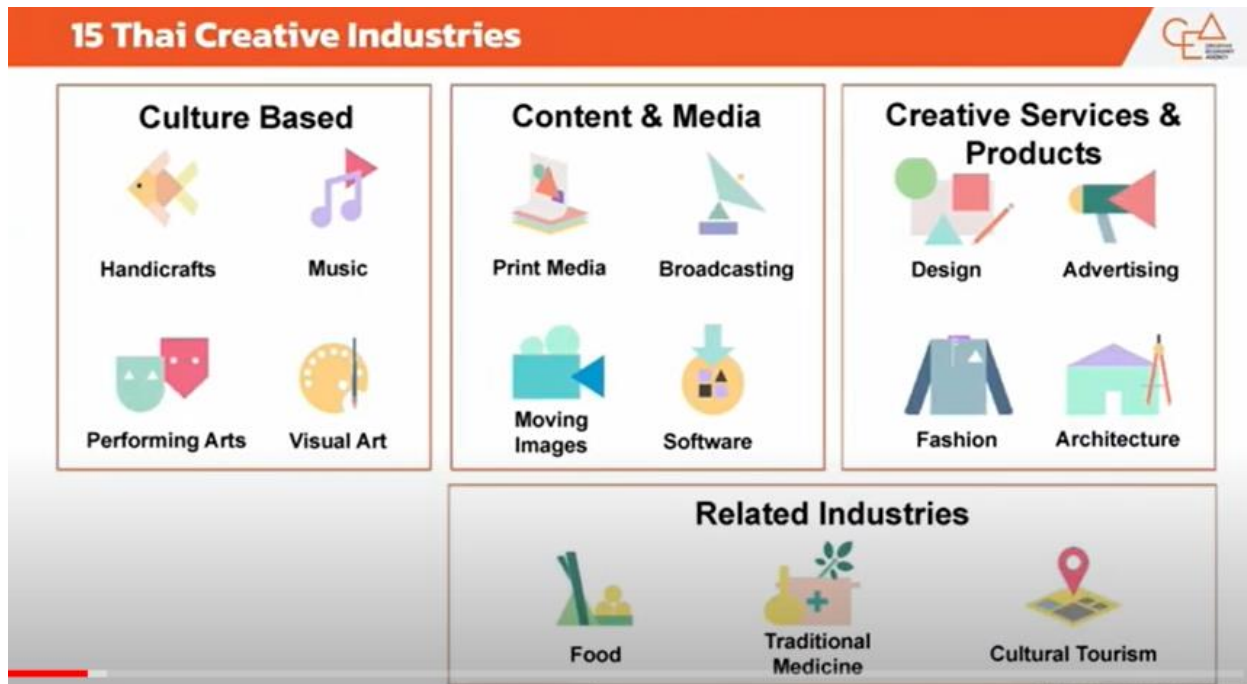


Image taken from Pichit Virankabutra's presentation showing the 15 creative industries in Thailand.

CEA supports creative industries by introducing regulations that expand the sector and remove limitations that hinder its growth. It also develops the creative ecosystem, which consists of:

- **Creative people**
CEA works through TCDC in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen and Songkhla to empower creators with creative resources, exhibitions and education.
- **Creative place/district**
CEA developed the [Thailand Creative District Network](#) that now covers 30 provinces. It looks for ways for creative industries and workers to expand in their provinces and nurture their districts. One example is the [Bangkok Design Week](#), which will be used as a prototype for smaller creative festivals.

- **Creative information and industry data**

CEA engages with the 15 creative industries, organisations and the [Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council](#) to solve legislation and registration issues.

It also aims for creative industries to be the engine of Thailand's 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan. Part of CEA's mission is to push the digital economy like blockchain and NFT.

A discussion between Prasop and Pichit about the direction of Thailand's creative economy and cultural policies followed the two presentations. Patcharawee Tunprawat, Head of Arts and Creative Industries, British Council, led the session.



Clockwise: Patcharawee Tunprawat, Pichit Virankabutra, Prasop Riangngoen

The Ministry of Culture is documenting Thailand's cultural capital of tangible and intangible heritage, as well as media content for a cultural capital database. This database will be used to promote learning, tourism and produce CPOT for sale.

In the coming years, CEA will be expanding the foundation of creative people, businesses and districts to create a creative ecosystem. It engages stakeholders to gather data and find out

their needs, problems and limitations. CEA also work with other government agencies to update regulations related to the creative industries.

CEA is expanding the Creative Information Center to track data for indexes such as the creative city index and creative competitiveness index. It's working on a stakeholder map to help it identify the enabling factors of the creative economy.

Panel: Creative cities & creative districts

In this discussion, three creative hub leads shared their work in creating impact for their cities. **Jaray Suwannachart** is Co-Founder of Songkhla Heritage Trust. **Martin Venzky-Stalling** is Senior Advisor, [Chiang Mai University Science and Technology Park](#) (CMU STeP), Creative Chiang Mai Secretariat. **Nathanich Chaidee** is Co-founder of AriAround, Bangkok.

Professor Joyce Yee, Professor of Design and Social Innovation, Northumbria University, UK, moderated the session. She has worked with the British Council on a research project on Thailand's creative and cultural districts.



Clockwise: Professor Joyce Yee, Jaray Suwannachart, Nathanich Chaidee, Martin Venzky-Stalling.

[Songkhla Heritage Trust](#) is an NGO in southern Thailand that works with local government stakeholders like the Songkhla Municipality. Its projects focus on architecture, urban heritage and conservation and city revitalisation. It works on a number of creative and education programmes promoting the preservation of heritage and heritage values as well as public participation.

[Creative Chiang Mai](#) was set up 12 years ago to bring stakeholders together and promote connections within and outside the local ecosystem and networks. The organisation aims to create visibility of the separate groups working across the city's various hubs and units as there may be different parties working on similar topics.

It also wants more visibility for Chiang Mai outside Thailand as many groups in South East Asia's creative network that want to work with the city do not know who to turn to. The organisation creates visibility reports, databases and events to help outsiders make local connections.

[AriAround](#) was formed by residents of Bangkok's Ari neighbourhood and launched at the Bangkok Design Week in July 2021. 'Ari' means 'kindness' in Thai and AriAround is a platform and mobile app that connects the community through activities. A token system using [AriCoins](#) facilitates the exchange of kindness and encourages sustainable behaviours like recycling.

AriAround wants to further develop their model to include more features and expand the pilot project to other parts of Thailand and abroad.

Central governance versus bottom-up initiatives

One of the topics discussed by the panel was the central government's role in supporting initiatives and helping organisations to deliver impact.

Martin revealed that as Thailand is a centralised country, most of the government's budget and administrative support goes to central Thailand. Organisations like CEA and TCDC which have opened offices in other places like Chiang Mai is a positive development in decentralising support.

However, local organisations working with central agencies don't have a free hand in their work as central agencies want co-ownership and have preconceptions of how things should run.

Chiang Mai's art galleries are mostly privately funded. While it's easier to get funding for traditional cultural events, Martin questioned if these events benefit tourists more than locals and their living culture.

The Songkhla Heritage Trust is supported by locals. For example, its office is housed in a century-old red building that was formerly a rice mill. The building owner pays for the space and utility bills.

Relying on central support is difficult as it would have to go through the provincial level first. Jaray would like Thailand to have a group like Malaysia's [Think City](#)¹ to drive creative work with support from the central government. CEA could be the answer for Songkhla.



The iconic building of the Songkhla Heritage Trust is a city landmark.

Image credit: Jaray Suwannachart

¹ Think City is an impact organisation that delivers urban policy advisory, urban projects and venture building.

AriAround said that full funding from CEA would ensure its sustainability. It is open to collaborating with stakeholders at the national level, like the National Innovation Agency. AriAround currently relies on private funding from neighbourhood businesses and works with local volunteers.

Regional and international connections

Creative Chiang Mai has active networks and projects with other cities in South East Asia and the UK, including a British Council project on creative hubs and city connections. Martin said that keeping this international outlook is important as there's much to learn from other hubs and cities, including secondary cities hubs like Cebu and Bandung.

Songkhla Heritage Trust hopes to work with another city of the same size for research between universities.

AriAround wants to learn from case studies from UK and around the world and adapt lessons to its community projects.

Panel: Arts as agents of change

This session on Thailand's arts scene and the role of creative culture as an agent of change was moderated by **Adulaya Hoontrakul**, Art Curator and Historian with a focus on socially engaged arts. She was joined by **Kawita Vatanajyangkur**, **Sirasar Boonma** and **Wayla Amatathammachad**.



Clockwise: Adulaya Hoontrakul, Sirasar Boonma, Wayla Amatathammachad, Kawita Vatanajyangkur

A voice for abused workers

[Kawita](#) is a Video and Performance Artist. Her work focuses on labour and exploitation behind fast consumption industries.

[Knit](#) spotlights labourers who are dehumanised into tools and machines, working repetitively and non-stop. In this hour-long live performance, Kawita turned her body into a human knitting machine spinning a red spiderweb to symbolise abused labour. Through her work, Kawita hopes to bring change to the treatment of workers and their low wages.



Image: Kawita Vatanajyangkur's live performance of Knit

Kawita presents her work on various platforms. For art to be a force for social change, it should be taken out of the art world to places that are more accessible and relatable to the audience.

Besides exhibitions and museums, her work can be seen in public spaces like billboards and screens. Instead of seeing an ad for a clothing brand, for example, the audience sees a statement on fast fashion and materialism. The world's changing attitude towards sustainability, ethical clothing, ethical labour and supply chain transparency is happening in part because of the voices in art.

Empowering marginalised communities through music

Sirasar is CEO and Co-founder of [Hear & Found](#), a social enterprise that aims to stop discrimination against indigenous people of Thailand. It's dedicated to presenting indigenous voices worldwide through their music and preserving indigenous cultural treasures.

Over the last three years, it has worked with 30 Indigenous musicians to build their music and story archive and connect them to more than 100,000 audiences worldwide.

To help Indigenous people overcome poverty and sustain their culture, Hear & Sound creates revenue for Indigenous musicians by sharing their music with the world. When Covid-19 hit, the organisation built digital connections with media creators worldwide through its online local stock music. As copyright owners, the musicians earned income from music licensing.

Bringing contemporary art to the grassroots

Wayla is Director, [Prayoon for Art](#), a group created four years ago to expand the art ecosystem from the white box and museums to other areas in Thailand. This is to give the wider community access to contemporary art.

Its latest project is the [Loei Art Fes](#) that brought the art festival scene to the north-eastern part of Thailand. People upcountry don't really relate to the concept of creative economy as they associate 'creative' with 'hipster' activities like dressing stylishly and going to fancy cafés.

Prayoon for Art tries to create a new understanding that creative work can be down to earth and relate to daily life. It forms relationships and trust with the community first and lets people experience art for themselves as an activity that's not about making money but opening minds and creating happiness.

Listen to the video recording [here](#).