

# Reconsidering Formality and Informality in Tourism: A Case of Phuket, Thailand

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## Abstract

After the tourism boom in Phuket, Thailand around the 1980s, there was an emergence of massive in-migration of tourism-related labor from different parts of the country. Some found work in different kinds of careers accessible within the system, which would contribute and generate a huge income for labor and the nation. However, this income is characterized by fluctuations and unpredictability — factors that push the government to frequently issue policies to regulate such occupations. This paper aims to discuss the ambivalent practices of government and labor in the tourism sector through focusing on the concepts of *formality* and *informality*. The study further analyses the attributes of the career of a freelancer tour guide; the purpose of the policy regulating the tour guide license; and the tension among the tourism market, the freelancer tour guides, and the government. It tries to propose an alternative approach to discussing informality, which can deepen the understanding of the dynamism of contemporary flexible labor.

## Introduction

The core discussion of this study aims to reveal how the working practices in the career of a tour guide and the policy on tour guides serving liberal-market tourism can further shed light on the concept of informality in a more practical and fluid manner. The researches on the informal economy have initially focused on the countries of Africa and, later on, other industrializing third world economies, where the industrial sector is unable to achieve full-time employment of formal labor (Waldinger and Lapp 1993). Thus, the informal sector was considered a consequence of such unbearable burden on the formal sector and has assisted individuals to practice self-reliance under an uncertain political situation and economic system (Hart 1973, 2006). With global realization of such an unexpected situation, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has also recognized the informal sector as one of the emerging economic categories embracing petty traders, street hawkers, and other unofficial jobs, which still exist in many urbanized settings nowadays. Aside from a mode of labor, the matters of informality in a mode of residency (e.g., the informal settlements and squatter communities) still underlie the fluctuations in the contemporary economy all over the world.

However, many previous studies have assumed the concept of informality as a highly static notion, which is based on the rigid dichotomy between formal and informal. Such conventional approaches to informality lead to obscure paradoxical operations or practices that have emerged in many cities led by free market capitalism. At some point, the free market system is developed from the notion of “flexible accumulation to the benefit of particular fractions of the capitalist class” (Maskovsky and Brash 2014: 260; see also Harvey 1989; Sassen 2001), which allows all capable individuals to be involved in ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ for capitalist development at the macro-economic level. It gives more opportunities to individuals to make a decision as to taking risks of their own in working in a competitive market with an uncertain wave of economic activities.

The tourism industry represents an economic sphere of the free market system, which is characterized by human movement and financial flow, that results in a free-form space conducive to trading business, exchanging resources, and distributing goods and services. Labor that operates in tourism-related services comprises free market driven networks and, thereby, has the chance for broader career paths, connections, and sources of income. In addition, it is interesting to note how free market tourism stimulates the economy, serves as a catalyst creating income opportunities, and shapes the personality of tourism-related labor as they perform their jobs by adopting various strategies. In order to study the dynamism of economic activities in the free market system, what other possible methods can be used to understand the activities, aside from justifying the formality from its static image?

Mcfarlane (2012) points out an interesting way of looking at *informality* and *formality* from his article “Rethinking

Informality: Politics, Crisis, and the City,” where he explains the two concepts in the sense of being “a set of practices” (106) that are carried out to manage, govern, and construct a regime of economic sphere. In this regard, informality is not confined to the static image abovementioned; on the contrary, it involves the practices of stakeholders in the field that, in order to remain in operation, seek for politics to form, circulate, and reproduce certain attributes. In other words, the way to study informality is not limited to posing questions on its nature, characteristics, and existence, but rather, it can be examined to figure out the *politicization of practices* (105), which have been embodied from historical disputes, social structure, cultural background, and variant discourses. In a sense, the authority of government plays a significant role in certifying what can be called “formality” and what, particularly in reference to cases that are not asserted under powers of government, can be labeled as “informality.” Furthermore, informality is not counted as a status, but rather a process of ideological contestation between different groups, especially the state and civil society. Thus, if a policy is a product of the government’s politicization of practices, the precedent ideas, impulse of operation or action, and variegated consequences of such policy should be traced. Roy (2005) states that when developing a policy, planners realize the existence of informal spaces as “unplannable” and that there is a need for “a series of attempts to improve and integrate such spaces” (150). Hence, there is a requirement for different methods, procedures, strategies, and efforts to organize the space of poverty, informal labor, and illegal land holding.

This article is divided into three main parts: 1) the information of context illustrates situation of tour guides in Phuket, informal labor in Thailand, Phuket tourism industry, and freelance tour guides in the tourism industry in Phuket; 2) the experience of tour guides working in the sector encompasses two case studies of legalizing Chinese-Thai tour guides and the van driver akin to tour guides. The cases present two types of in/formal practice conducted by government and tourism-related laborers; 3) the conclusion of this study attempts to reconsider the concept of formality and informality through analyzing the legalization and the roles of tour guide in dynamic tourism context.

### **Situation of Tour Guides in Phuket**

This study focuses on tourism-oriented destinations in Phuket, Thailand, a place, which has long been recognized as a major tourist spot and has been providing various career opportunities for both local residents and migrants. With the aim of understanding the concept of formality and informality in the context of a dynamic tourism-based society, this study is interested in examining the tour guides, who serve as major actors, and their career practices. To work as legal tour guide in Thai tourism, the government authority requires one to undergo the process of registration and licensing mainly because to uphold the tourists’ security. However, some tourism-related laborers perceive that anyone can pursue a tour guide’s job without license unless one can speak a foreign language, has knowledge of local cultures, and can satisfy tourist’s demands.

Tour guide represents a tourism-related career that can be defined in different ways and can play in complex and multifaceted roles (Cohen 1985; Rabotic 2010) in tourism sector, such as, a tourism-related labor service provider and benefits distributor. Many previous studies of tour guide emphasizes on the learning process, training development (Pearce 1984), and the factors influencing on the progress of learning and training (Salazar 2005; 2006). However, there have been few researches conducted in analyzing the career of a tour guide in the context of labor study, specifically in the situation of market-based tourism. It can be noted that unlike contracted laborers in tourism sector (e.g., staffs of hotel, restaurants and souvenir shops), most licensed tour guides work flexibly as a freelancer with multiple tour operators. Heintz and Pollin (2003) explain that the rise of competition among firms results in a transformative form of contract to flexible employment. In this regard, many firms prefer the informal production process, which is done by hiring part-time or seasonal laborers in order to minimize the burden of excessive amounts of labor and to reduce the responsible cost of social welfare.

Tour guides can be considered formal in the realm of governmentality when they undergo the process of authorization, allowing them further to work in the field of tourism. Nevertheless, their working situation becomes ‘unpredictable’ and ‘unplannable’ after receiving license. Some of them decide to work full-time to earn a monthly salary and to have a working security with a tour company, while the majority are freelancers who are employed by more than two tour operators. Moreover, some possess tour-guide license and are never employed by any tour companies; yet, these tour guides illegally work independently whenever they find tourists on the streets or tourist sites.

Moreover, in terms of tour guide’s overall population, since the trend of tourism is swiftly changed, it is difficult for the government to estimate the actual numbers of tour guides that should be supplied in the tourism sector. For instance, there are many tour companies that are always demanding for a larger number of licensed tour guides, which leads to tour guide scarcity who should be working for the Phuket tourism sector. To solve such irregularities, the Thai government resorts to allowing tour guide institutions to train and open more courses, in order to produce more licensed tour guides. This, however, ultimately results to production of massive and unqualified tour guides who work for mass tourism.

Two research questions are raised in this study in order to understand the dynamism of in/formality in Phuket tourism industry:

- 1) what are the strategies that tourism-related labors use to maintain their position as a tour guide in Phuket tourism sector?;
- 2) what is the government policy that intensify the numbers of tour guide and the consequences that affect to the tourism sector in Phuket?

This study was conducted for four months; specifically from April to July 2016 in Phuket, Thailand, and employed multiple methods of data collection; specifically, observation, semi-structured interview, and casual conversation. In order to gain in-depth information on labor, and better understand the overall situation of the Phuket tourism setting, this study was conducted with the researcher immersing herself in the training course for tour guides as one of the trainees. Particularly, the 15-day training course for pink-badge<sup>1</sup> operated by a university, which is not based in Phuket but rather in the northern part of Thailand, was attended. In order to complete the course, trainees have to attend at least 80% of the total time required, experience tours conducted in tourist sites, take the written and oral examinations, and finally receive their tour guide licenses. After completing the training and being authorized to work in the sector, the researcher experienced conducting tours with both new and professional tour guides who were using various languages while conducting the tour. For a broader context, contact was made with tour operators in tour companies, tour sellers, freelance van drivers, and souvenir salespersons. In the section detailing relevant narratives, the real names of the informants have been changed to protect their identities.

### **The Ambiguous Meaning of Informal Labor in Thailand**

The concept of “informal economy” has been discussed among many scholars in order to understand the economic activities that are not within the attention of the state financial system and fail to fit the regulatory framework. However, the notion of “informal sector” was first introduced in Thailand in 1987 (Wannarat 2014) and the initial seminar concerning the promotion of informal work in the urban setting, held by the committee of National Economic and Social Development Office, raised the serious phenomena of informal labor and home labor in February 1988. However, the specific term “informal sector” has not been found employed in any previous study; instead, other related terms, namely self-employment, freelancer<sup>2</sup>, and shadow labor, have been used to explain similar characteristics of groups comprising informal labor. To be more specific, it refers to a labor group that has difficulty in pursuing work in the formal sector, and who finally end up with jobs that lack proper attention from the government. However, the study trend of gathering labor demography in the informal sector in the 1980s was inclined to change. After 1997, many Thai scholars began attempting to work more on finding ways to support social welfare and ensure work security of informal labor among the diverse types of related occupation such as the street vendor, street goods seller, driving service provider, repair service giver, craft and weave worker, and household agricultural farmer. As a consequence of the previous studies, the Foundation for Labor and Employment Promotion (2003) defined informal labor as:

“... labor who is employed without any formal contract, has no employer following the laws of labor, does not work at a regular working place, receives no definite amount of salary, or is a freelancer or temporary labor. Consequently, informal labor is not included under the protection of Labor Law and Welfare Law, resulting in a lack of work security in terms of their job stability, reasonable wage payment, health concerns, and the stability of life after retirement.”

The given definition may entail two significant realities. Firstly, the Foundation expects to categorize the characteristics of informal labor in a more general way in order to include various kinds of related jobs. Secondly, it counts all workers who do not register for social insurance operated by the Social Security Office as informal labor. For example, if a freelance artist registers to request for social insurance, he/she will be considered as formal labor under the protection of Labor Law and Welfare. However, Wannarat (2014) points out that the broad definition tends to be problematic in defining who can be considered as informal labor since the definition also includes some types of occupation that are freelancers with the possibility of generating high income, such as stock traders, artists, architects, and event organizers. Thus, the study of informal labor under notions of poverty, low-productivity, and exclusion from social protection would seem unable to explain the fluidity and the variants of informal jobs in a modern economy.

### **Context and Overview of the Phuket Tourism Industry**

Since the 1980s, the tourism industry has mitigated contingencies faced by the Thai economy due to many economic crises and the side effects of becoming a newly industrialized country. In fact, several signs of service-oriented products have emerged

scattered mostly in the military bases area or industrial peripheries, in order to serve the temporarily residing international migrant workers, especially from the first world countries. With the advent of the possible growth of tourism, the Tourism Authority Thailand (TAT), under the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, finally stepped forward with its tourism promotion by proclaiming the primary campaign of *Visit Thailand Year 1980-1987*, which attracted over two million tourists who traveled to Thailand. The consequent tourist growth and the attendant generation of a large amount of revenue has led the government to create more promotional events, including the most recent theme *Discover Thainess* which started in 2015.

Aside from its duty of promoting tourism, the government has had to extend the significance of regional tourism by stimulating regional tourist sites, coupled with infrastructure development for the tourism sector by way of improving accessibility, providing transportation, and supplying communication channels. The island of Phuket, located in southern Thailand, has been one of the target destinations for tourism, which the government has been attempting to promote as a regional tourist site with the aim of transforming its environmental resources into an exotic place of leisure for foreign visitors. Due to its enchanting beaches, multicultural communities, and geographical advantages, Phuket has been considerably attractive to tourists, thereby opening up opportunities for domestic and international investors to establish tourism-related businesses all over the island.

The local residents are from multiple ethnicities under the same Thai identity. However, to be more specific, the vast majority comprises Hokkien-Chinese descendants, whose ancestors were the main migrant population in Phuket who worked in the tin-mining industry beginning the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Nusution 2009), and who thereafter inherited major land possessions and became significant capitalists holding most of the top-tier businesses in Phuket. Meanwhile, other ethnic and religious groups can also be found such as the Buddhist-Thai, Muslim-Thai, Indian descendant, and Sea Gypsy. However, it should be stressed that despite the multicultural ethnicity, the residents in Phuket are considered as homogeneous, rather than living ethnically isolated. The residents have instituted a sense of Phuket localness due to their possession of a common Southern Phuket dialect and local cultures. In fact, Phuket has continually encountered inflows of migration due to its realm of economic opportunity owing to the tourism industry since the 1980s.

The tourism industry in Phuket, and its commercial sector, is driven by different groups of residents. Firstly, due to the endlessly increasing land value, Phuket locals who own land are deemed to be affluent and financially capable of launching businesses. Some groups, especially landowners of locations near beaches and tourist destinations and who also operate large-scale enterprises of hotel, real estate, and shopping centers, even have influence on tourism planning and development. They take part in local government and participate in tourism-related organizations, namely, the Phuket Tourist Association and Phuket Chamber of Commerce. The other group of landowners is composed mainly of medium-sized business owners (such as restaurants, car rental shops, souvenir shops, and the like), and the rest are employees in the tourism sector.

Behind the economic growth of tourism in Phuket lies a huge population of labor that play the significant role of benefit production. Tourism-related labor include both the employed and self-employed, composed largely of hotel and restaurant staff, souvenir salespersons, package tour sellers, taxi drivers, and so on. Due to a free market, the profit-making opportunity is also available for migrants who are able to make a living out of various forms of economic activities from business investments, full-time employment, to self-employment. Some tourism-related careers tend to be less attractive to the Phuket locals; hence, the recruitment for such careers have become more associated with migrants.

The tour guide is considered a freelancer, and is interestingly regarded as one of the service providers that should reflect the characteristics of a knowledgeable local expert. Remarkably, the career tends to be associated with the migrant group. According to an interview with Kan, a 50-year-old woman who has spent 30 years working as an English-speaking tour guide, the “tour guide is not the job for (Phuket) local people. My colleagues back then were from *Isan* (the northeastern part of Thailand). The locals perceive my job as cheap and for the lowly maybe because the way I worked did not go well with what Phuket tradition has framed. Every time I speak English to my customers or wear a swimsuit to accompany my customers to the sea, it has an effect with my parents because our relatives always talk negatively about my job.” Another view was given by a former Japanese-speaking tour guide, named Tao, who worked in the sector from 1997 to 2007. He is also a Phuket local who failed to receive a college education; therefore, he decided to work as a first generation tour guide for a Japanese tour company. Tao states that “during my time, being a tour guide was not a popular career, but it was really profitable. I was the only Phuket-born tour guide in the company. The first batch was recruited from among university graduates who predominantly were *Isan* people.”

In the absence of supporting quantitative data showing that the majority who pursued a tour guide career are not locals, it can be deduced from these narratives that the first-generation tour guide in Phuket were mainly from northeastern Thailand. Careers in service provision, like the tour guides, seem not to fit the conservative ways of Phuket locals, namely being extrovert in communicating with foreigners, and having free lifestyle in wearing clothes. Although work as a freelance tour guide can be profitable, for the sake of work security, most of Phuket locals would rather be employed full time in tourism sector, or even become business owner due to the merchandise-oriented society. Therefore, the trend of migrant labor working as local tour guides

in Phuket has, to this day, continuously existed. Later, a discussion will be made on how such trend can make a vast contribution to the Phuket tourism economy, while creating a policy in response to informality in order to serve the demand of the liberal market system.

### **The Significance of Freelance Tour Guides in the Tourism Industry in Phuket**

Freelance Tour guides are distinctively one of the types of labor in the service sector that can generate great profits for the benefit of other types of labor within the system, such as promoting optional tour packages or local products to tourists. It should be noted that the work of a tour guide is one of the reserved occupations for Thai citizens<sup>3</sup>, and a tour guide has become a key actor and driving force in the service sector. Legally, work as a tour guide is considered a career authorized, after professional training and licensing, by the Department of Tourism. Moreover, the operations of tour guides are shaped by norms in accordance with The Tourism and Guide Registration Act of 2008, which focuses on proper attire, professional ethics, work etiquette, and good physical condition. This law also includes, in Section 60, prohibitions against specific activities, practices, and actions that seek to extract benefits from tourists illegally. For example, the tour guide cannot legally allow any person who has not been licensed as a tour guide to participate on a tour job.

Apart from the main task of providing facilities and services to tourists, in the government's eyes, tour guides represent Thai nationals as a whole. The Committee Regulation of Tourist Business and Tour Guide of 2013<sup>4</sup> prescribes the working standard and duty of tour guides with an emphasis on giving correct and appropriate information about Thai cultures. Further, their primary function is to be able to distinguish and explain about sensitive topics, which are neither allowed to be mentioned nor criticized, especially with regard to issues affecting the nation, religion, and the royal institution. The regulation also requires, among tour guides, a deep awareness of morality, Thai customs, and different rules of every tourist site — factors that are deemed significant to the burgeoning tourism industry in Thailand.

Before becoming a licensed tour guide, applicants must pass the licensing process, which is administered by two different sectors. First, the applicant for a license has to undergo training with an institution that has designed a curriculum and course syllabus duly approved by the Department of Tourism. Apparently, there are four institutions operating specialized tour-guide training courses for two to four times a year. Second, after completing the training course, the applicant has to go through the process of registration with the Office of Registration of Tourist Business and Tour Guide, with offices located in most provinces with a tourism-based industry, like Phuket. The licensing process takes approximately one and a half months, or can take longer depending on the time it takes to verify documents sent directly by the school or university attesting to the applicant's educational degree. Once the entire procedure is completed, the applicants receive their tour guide license and they can begin to officially work in the sector.

Basically, tour guides can be classified into two main types (Suwanpimol 2013) as described below.

1) General Tour Guides can operate tours all over Thailand under either a silver-badge license (Thai language) or golden-badge license (foreign language). They are required to be Thai citizens above 18 years of age. Furthermore, they should possess a Bachelor's Degree or hold a Diploma in Tour Guide or Tourism (with a module on "Tour Guide" in the curriculum). In the alternative, they can be certified under a tour guide training course, where applicants are normally required to have a Bachelor's Degree in any field to be able to attend a 4-month course for approximately \$1,200 as tuition fee.

2) Specialized Tour Guides can operate tours under a specific context or in a particular terrain, under any of the eight sub-types of the specialized license for art and culture tour guide. The criteria for receiving this type of license is less stringent than the general one, as the applicant is only required to be a graduate from 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, attend a 15-day course, and pay around \$300 tuition fee to the training institution.

Interestingly, tour guides operating in Phuket can be mostly found under three categories<sup>5</sup>; namely, general tour guides (foreign language type), and two specialized tour guide for specific area (including Phuket, Phanga, and Krabi) and coastal areas (covering all islands in Thailand).

It should be noted that the general tour guide license was the first type authorized since the 1980s, with the first batch trained by Phuket Community College in 1983. As for the specialized tour guide license, it was established in 1992 for an avowed purpose. In an interview with Guide Noi, the president of Phuket Professional Guide Association, he states that "the initial aim of authorizing the license of specialized tour guides was to promote job opportunities and generate income to locals, especially to the Sea Gypsy living nearby coastal areas. It also would prevent outsiders; for example, Bangkok people, from taking away jobs from



the locals who have the right to earn their living from tours conducted in their own communities.” Such statement explains the significance of permitting licensing of specialized tour guides so as to augment income opportunities for the locals.

Nevertheless, in the contemporary situation, the purpose for specialized tour guide licenses has, instead, shifted to creating a large number of tour guides in order to serve the demand of mass tourism. Based on the field survey, it can be noted that since 2010, the two main institutions for tour-guide training (Phuket Community College and Pisanulok University) are allowed to open a course for specialized tour guide on a maximum of 4 rounds per year. This has resulted in the production of more than 3,000 tour guides in the past 7 years. Since the license is aimed at reducing the barriers posed by the required training period and high educational attainment, it has consequently facilitated the massive introduction of labor into the sector. In this way, the government has tended to make use of this license type, which was previously reserved for locals, in the “unplannable” situation of massive tourism resulting in both positive and negative outcomes in the experience of tour guides.

## The Experience of Tour Guides Working in the Sector

This section presents two cases of informality. The first case deals with the ambiguous character of the government policy, which intends to formalize the tour guide practices, but somehow resulted in an unexpected outcome. The second case focuses on the informality created by the demands of tourists for being guides. It aims to investigate in what aspect both cases, showing different forms of informality, are interconnected in actual operation. Through the examination of this section, an alternative view on the economic sphere, which is infiltrated both by formal and informal labor practices will be clarified.

### *Case 1: Legalizing Chinese-Thai Tour Guides*

In 2010, the demand for Chinese-speaking tour guides increased with the influx of Chinese tourists in Phuket. Within the past 5 years, Chinese tourists had the highest numbers among visitors on sightseeing in Thailand (Department of Tourism 2016). Phuket is one of the two destinations in Thailand that have chartered flights coming in directly from the major cities of China (Thansettakej 2016); and the Chinese tourists are served by more than 50 tour companies mainly conducting business for them. This circumstance has created job opportunities to the so-called “illegal Chinese tour guides” because most of the Chinese tourists believe in and are more comfortable with a fellow Chinese as their tour guide. Therefore, the government took the plight of illegal tour guides into consideration and urged institutions to open a more specialized tour guide course for producing more tour guides for the sector.

In this regard, the aim of issuing licenses for specialized tour guides has shifted from giving jobs and income opportunity to locals to allowing anyone who is a language expert to receive the same opportunity. One of the procedures that prove this change in the beneficiary of the licensing policy is the requirement of the “certification of localness.” Before receiving the tour guide license, a migrant has to find a Phuket local, who has a household registration in Phuket, willing to certify his status of being a local. In the context of Phuket tourism, when the increasing demand for Chinese-speaking tour guides became a precursor for the opening of specialized tour guide training in Phuket, a great opportunity presented itself to the second-generation migrant labor from the Chinese-Yunnanese community, located in northern Thailand. Nonetheless, the attributes of this group are different from the first-generation migrants from *Isan*. They are basically Thai nationals who are descendants of the Chinese-Yunnanese dialect group, living in the mountainous areas of northern Thailand<sup>6</sup>. While being bilingual Thai-Chinese — a match for the requirements of the tour guide career in Phuket hoping to fill the demand for Chinese-speaking tour guides — they are, however, not considered locals and most of them have lower educational attainment.

According to the researcher’s observations during the training for tour guides in April 2016, majority of the trainees were Thai Chinese from northern Thailand. Da, one of the trainees, is a Thai Chinese woman who originated from a mountainous district, called Arunotai village, located in Chiang Mai province. She was born in 1978 and raised in the Yunnan community; thereby the language spoken among her family, friends, and neighbors is Yunnan Chinese. Further, she received instructions on using Mandarin Chinese from people in her community, which is common among children of her ethnicity. The only way for her to be exposed to the Thai language was to communicate with people outside her community. Da started primary school in 2001 (when she was already 30 years old) through non-formal education. It was an intensive form of education, which took her 4 years, studying with other adult schoolmates, to complete up to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>7</sup>. In September 2015, she decided to follow her siblings, who have worked as tour guides for 4 years, to Phuket and started as an assistant to her sibling, done parallel to attending the training course for future tour guides. When asked about her motivation for working as a tour guide in Phuket, she states:

“I came to Phuket 6 months ago. I was helping my sister on a tour and learned how to take care of the customers. The reason I work here is because back in my village, many people from my hometown come back from Phuket with a lot of money. Some can even afford to build a big house, buy a car, and buy so many things for their lives, and, like my relative, settle down and have a better life in Phuket. It is a trend to come to Phuket and be a Chinese-speaking tour guide, so I just want to follow them, follow their success.”

During the training, Guide Da and other Thai Chinese trainees, who completed only 9<sup>th</sup> grade in school, had difficulty in Thai literacy, evident from their slow-paced word spelling, reading skill, and essay writing. Her spoken Thai language is accented, influenced by her mother tongue, but she is best in her speaking skills, compared to the rest. As regards the subjects taught in the training program, the lessons on history, geography, cultures, and tourist sites, and local products of Phuket were difficult for her. She offered an opinion when asked about the significance of the lessons learned as a tour guide for Chinese tourists, when, in reality, such local information might not be much needed to communicate with the tourists.

“Chinese tourists love shopping and entertainment. What I have to learn, actually, is not about information on tourist sites in Phuket, but rather I need to know the shopping places for the Chinese people, the strategies of promoting products and services, and of course learn what the Chinese tourists like. These things are not taught in school, in where we are learning right now. But you know, I worked with my sister before, where I gained a lot more than class. But why do I come to class? Because I need the license. That’s all.”

This conversation with Da presented a host of interesting topics about the legalization of Chinese-Thai tour guides. Da represents the Yunnanese descendants who have moved from their hometown to find a better job in Phuket, following the path of people from their village with the hope of better opportunities like all the successful stories of her friends and relatives. Moreover, for the tourism sector, the 15-day training course is inadequate to completely study and understand the whole content regarding Phuket. Thus, Da realizes that once she becomes a legally specialized tour guide, she will need more skills in communication to be able to sell products and will require more knowledge of products that suit the tastes of Chinese tourists.

The case of Da is a consequence of the ambiguous character of government policy. It changed the initial purpose of issuing licenses of specialized tour guide for Phuket locals to authorizing the licenses for any language-in-demand experts, specifically Chinese speakers, to serve the increasing numbers of Chinese tourist. Thus, this causes the mass production of local tour guides migrated from the north, not the local-born tour guides. Moreover, the government policy also allows the institution of tour-guide training to open more courses and to produce excessive amounts of tour guide without investigating the appropriate proportion of tour guides needed in the sector. Many officials, scholars, and professional tour guides have attempted to raise the issue of mass production and to initiate improvements in the quality of tour guides through media and training classrooms. However, in the following case, it can be said that the concepts of knowledgeability and localness of tour guides would gradually shift to put more emphasis on commercial tour guides, in order to serve the market demand of Chinese tourists. The politicization of practice in changing the policy towards market-driven tourism brings about the present controversy of tour guides’ quality among the tourist-related actors and increases the financial benefits to tourism-related government and institutions of tour-guide training.

### ***Case 2: The Van Driver akin to Tour Guide***

Chai is a 31-year-old freelance van driver, who migrated from southern Thailand. He has lived in Phuket since studying Information Technology (IT) and worked as a permanent IT staff in the same university for more than 10 years. His mundane job is to set up computers and install hardware and software. Everyday, after getting off work at around 4:30 P.M., Chai would shift from being an IT staff to becoming a freelance van driver. At first, he owned a van with employed-type license and attempted to become a member of an existing group of freelance van drivers, called *team ngan rod tu*, which he really fits in. Each *team ngan rod tu* would strengthen its working connections by making multiple personal contacts with tour companies and hotels in order to obtain driving job orders. Therefore, aside from working as a driver, each member also works as a dealer, sharing his driving jobs to other members in the group in case he is busy, in exchange for some amount from the agreed driving wage.

A year later, his income from his van-driving job increased; thus, he decided to buy a second van and hire another driver. Their routine job is to provide transfer services for tourists from the airport to the hotel, and vice versa, following the job order of tour companies. However, he is turned into a tour guide when the tour companies assign him a job to drive for a one-day city tour without a licensed tour guide accompanying him. While providing driving services, Chai has been asked by many customers (both Thai and foreign tourists) for his phone number, so that in their next visit to Phuket, they could skip the tour company but instead

directly hire Chai to drive for their independent trip. This gives him an opportunity to reach more than 50 customers on his own without dealing with the tour company. He further said that sometimes he works as a local tour guide for his personal customers as well. He explains his perception on being a tour guide as follows:

“Being a tour guide is not difficult. I can speak English and give good service to my customers. I usually take them on tour in the city, to temples, viewpoints, and beaches. Conducting a tour means that I just explain all information inside the van and when we reach the destination, the customers just walk around the sites by themselves and I wait inside the van.”

The informant recognizes the fact that ‘communication’ and ‘service’ have become shared attributes in a tour guide’s job. When a van driver is on duty, normally, he communicates with the tourists and sometimes provides basic information about famous sites during the journey. However, he is aware that giving information about the tourist sites may be construed as a tour guide job, which clearly violates section 49 of the Tourist Business and Tour Guide Act of 2008, stating that any subject that intend to work as a tour guide has to undergo the process of registration and licensing at The Registration of Tourist Business and Tour Guide Office. Thus, this act of conducting the tour inside the van is a defiance to avoid dealing with the government officials in tourist sites. Aside from the common attributes of being a tour guide, Chai further explains what make customers choose to hire him as their tour guide:

“It is the customers’ vacation and I just have to fill that service. My strategy is firstly to evaluate the customers’ demand. I once got a group: a family composed of a father, mother, and son. Within 2 hours, I offered different activities that entertained each family member differently. Firstly, the father requested to drive the go-kart. So, I took him there and began to think of what other activities I can offer or shops we can go to that would interest the mother and son while waiting for the father. Then, I came up with the Tiger Show nearby for the son and the jewelry shop for the mother. Not only did the services satisfy all family members, but I could also receive good commission from the activities, the show, and the shop within a limited time. Everyone is happy — the customers and I are happy — after all.”

Each tourism-related actor has particular strategies of giving service to the tourists. At some point, Chai tends to have successes in his tour management. Moreover, his practices have found the right balance for customer satisfaction: when the customers are not being forced to buy products or services by the guide in exchange for more commissions. It is noted that if a tour guide can make the customers happy while he/she receives good remuneration and positive feedback from the customers, that trip would have been accomplished successfully. To further understand Chai’s perception and awareness of being an illegal tour guide, he states:

“I don’t find it wrong to be a tour guide. I treat my customer as an old friend who used my service, satisfied with what I have given to them, and contact me directly every time they want to visit Phuket. What is the matter with the law regulating tour guides? If such tour guide follows the ordinary tour program and has no idea how to complete the customer’s requirement. I have a van that can take them anywhere they want and it is even fine if the plan changes. In fact, tour guides can be a job for anyone who wants to tour their customers or friends, and they are just given rewards in return.”

At this point, working as a tour guide cannot only be considered as a remunerative-based occupation, but an intimate-oriented relationship, as the tour guide is a person who prioritizes the customer’s request and services. Beyond the tourism-related law, he believes that having the character of an intimate tour guide and the trust of customers give him the right to be a tour guide in the sector. Thus, the informality in this case is created by the demands of tourists for being guides. The study of Chai’s case may not represent the reasons behind the work informality of tour guides as a whole; however, it can reflect one of the successful cases of small-scale tours because of the giving of interpersonal service and the continuity of providing such service. To some extent, the significant question of whether or not such informal practice, bordering on illegality for conducting a tour without a license, should be reconsidered for its positive effect to the tourism economy.

### **Informality and the Politicization of Practices of Actors**

In many market-oriented settings, tensions between actors or stakeholders have been created under the principal ideas of raising economic development, advances, and expansion, with the aim of the market contributing to massive purposes and requirements (Seligmann 2014). A micro-prospective view of experiences of tour guides gives multifaceted points for discussion on the concept of informality in the context of a liberal-market tourism industry. Informality can be determined by a “politicization



of practice". *Politicization* is a term that explains the situation when governments use political power to certify what is right or wrong among the practices of people. Thus, the right practices are widely accepted by citizens due to the authorization of the government, especially in the form of laws and regulations. Yet, scholars have found that the government, many times over, have changed their laws pertaining to the change of global economics and politics. For example, as earlier expounded on, the government provided benefits to the ones who can contribute income to the government rather than supporting the locals. This refers to Case 1 that the government changes policy to increase the number of Chinese-speaking tour guides through reducing barriers of legalizing the Chinese-Thai tour guides from the north of Thailand. Thus, politicization of practices, in this context, means any action or practice that operates for the purpose of the interests of government rather than the matter of principle (i.e., supporting the locals). In this regard, when studying the history of development of a certain law during the past years, it can be understood that any laws have gone through a dynamic process, under which the status of people can be frequently shifted between informality and formality.

In addition, such politicization cannot be simply generalized; but rather it is a process that has to be clarified from a particular case because of the details and complexity of its background. According to the abovementioned case of the van driver akin to a tour guide, Chai can be defined as 'informal' because the government does not certify his practice as a tour guide, and in fact, asserts that a tour guide is a kind of job that cannot be simply defined like other wage jobs. From Chai's perspective, a tour guide does not necessarily have to be trained. "Everyone can be a tour guide" and "being trained" is just a process that the government takes to make it formal. However, in detail, if a person has no idea how to provide good service to a customer, he cannot be a genuine tour guide. In this regard, such case should not simply be justified by locating whether it is illegal or legal; yet his way of being a tour guide is an example of why the government should examine further the tour guide career. The tour guide has an intimacy-based career that has more details than government has seen, such as, the relationship between tour guides and customers. In order to understand informal practice, as perceived by government vis-à-vis by Chai, the latter's perception on the matter of being a licensed or unlicensed tour guide becomes significant. Overall, Chai views himself as one of the active and potential labor that can bring positive economic effects for the tourism industry, gauging from his customers' feedback and their return trips to Phuket. This is the reality, regarding the concepts of formality and informality, portrayed from the field of free-market tourism.

## Conclusion

The paper has argued that the concept of informality can be redefined as a dynamic process of politicization wherein the power-relations between the government and labor are always negotiated contrary to the government's bounded and conventional definition especially in identifying a certain group's conditions or status. The current tourism situation functioning under the influence of liberal market system is also highlighted in this paper. In this kind of system, urban entrepreneurialism can be created and flexible economic activities can be developed as productivity by any actors in the field. In this setting, a tourist plays a vital role of being a representative of the core market who determines and, more often than not, dominates the directions of tourism-related activities. Evidences of such domination are portrayed from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives: First, the government manipulates the rules of economic system by changing the policy from alleviating the locals from poverty to supporting the migrant workers who have the potential to serve the mass market and to produce most benefits to the nation. Second, despite the risks at hand — e.g. the lack of protection from job security under the laws of labors that may eventually lead to having no chance of becoming permanent workers, and the possibility of getting fringe benefits ---tourist-related laborers opt to accept job opportunities as freelancers and devise their strategy independently despite the apparent risks and unpredictability these jobs entail.

Seemingly, both perspectives concentrate on the same goal of aiming to capitalize on the available markets in context of tourism, yet, the operations in the field lies the big difference. Apart from examining the various practices of government and labor, a thorough investigation on the details of such practices (e.g. motivations involving actors and their characters, and outcomes) is required to understand the interplay of actions that shape the thoughts, social norms, and rules of human and institution in society. However, to carry out significant discussions on informality in the context of liberal market, it should be taken as a dynamic process rather than a static concept. This study focuses on the concept of informality from the micro-perspective view of experiences of tour guides. It presented the complexities and ambiguities of the practices based on politics by various actors who manipulate, govern, and maintain the liberal economic system in the tourism industry of developing societies. Thus, informality is considered as a process of politicization of practices utilized by any actors or institutions striving for valid certification.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This license allows operating tours for foreign tourists in mainland Phuket and its neighboring province, but prohibits any island tour.
- <sup>2</sup> Freelancer is defined as 'contingent worker' (Belous 1989: 7) or independent contractor who works in 'temporary, part-time, seasonal, and other non-standard workers, depending on the contractual arrangement between freelancer and the firm' (Chauradia and Galande 2015: 85).
- <sup>3</sup> According to The Foreign Workers Act of 2008, the tourist guide is one of 43 occupations that have been prescribed as prohibited for foreign workers. The reason for reserving the occupation for Thai citizens is that, as stated in Section 7, it is concerned with issues of national security. Yet, should there be increased demand for any prohibited occupation to be opened up to foreign workers, the government would be capable of crafting proper regulations in order to conform with national development. More details about prohibited occupation of foreigner can be retrieved from the link of Ministry of Labor (in English version) <http://www.mol.go.th/en/content/page/6347>
- <sup>4</sup> This is in addition to the requirements in the Tourism Business and Tour Guides Act of 2008 from the link of Department of Tourism (in Thai version) <http://newdot2.samartmultimedia.com/home/details/11/569/309>
- <sup>5</sup> According to The Registration of Tourist Business and Tour Guide Office Zone 2 (Phuket and Phanga province), the statistical report on tour guide licenses, updated in September 2014, shows that among the three major types of tour guides authorized to work in the sector, 2,653 are general tour guides for foreign tourists; 2,051 are specialized tour guides in specific areas for foreign tourists; and 1,573 are specialized tour guides in coastal areas.
- <sup>6</sup> Historically, their ancestors migrated from Yunnan, in southwestern China, since the Kuomintang Military Diaspora in 1952. At the end of the war, some groups moved to Taiwan, but some continued their residence in the Chinese Yunnan Village along the mountainous borderline of Thailand, Myanmar, China, and Laos. (Prapatong 2014)
- <sup>7</sup> Students who complete the 9th grade are considered as having received basic Thai education.

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