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FROM CULTURAL POWER TO ECONOMIC POWER

APAC CREATIVE INVESTMENT STORY | PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Asia Pacific is on fire right now when it comes to creativity. When people talk about the creative economy, they often forget the second word. And it's an economy that governments around the region are increasingly waking up to. Every dollar you put into the creative economy yields many more dollars in other areas, in exports, in jobs, in tourism.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Welcome to From Cultural Power to Economic Power, APAC's creative investment story. I'm Oriel Morrison Higgins, journalist and broadcaster and your host for this podcast.

In October, three pivotal forums took place across the region. Creative Asia at the Busan International Film Festival, the World Bank and IMF Annual Meetings in Bangkok, and the World Conference on Creative Economy in Jakarta. Three different forums, but the same underlying conversation. How creative industries became economic infrastructure, not just cultural expenditure.

So this podcast pulls together what came out of them. To help us do that, I'm going to be joined by Andrew Ure, Vice President of Netflix's global affairs team in Asia Pacific. Later, we'll also be hearing from two expert voices from across the region. Dr. Yonghee Kim from the Department of Business Administration, Sun Moon University. He's advised Korean regulators on media and streaming policy. And his work addresses a practical question. What helps a country's creative industries find a global audience? And what happens after your creative exports go global?

Later, we're going to hear from Dr Nessara Sukpanich, an economist at Thammasat University, who researches Thailand's creative economy and economics of soft power policy. She's going to explore what's driving the country's creative industries and what it takes to sustain it.

Andrew, welcome to the show. It's a pleasure to have you with us.

Andrew Ure

Thank you so much, Oriel. A pleasure to be here.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Now, Andrew, Netflix has had some huge global hits. Interestingly, from this perspective of our conversation today, many of them have actually been made locally, right here in Asia. I guess the question for you is, why is it so important to invest in local stories, which are of course, initially anyway, made for local audiences?

Andrew Ure

Well, I think, Oriel, one lesson we've had very early on, having launched in 190 countries 10 years ago, is that

it's tricky to make something that you expect to travel around the world to every country. What we find is success comes when we make local stories for local. Those are the stories that resonate. They're made authentically. And I think a wonderful side product of that is that they bring a little bit of each country in which they're made to audiences all around the world. So it's no surprise really, that the creative economy as a whole is getting more attention from policymakers right around the region.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Are you seeing any kind of shift right now in how governments actually view the sector?

Andrew Ure

When people talk about the creative economy, they often forget the second word. And it's an economy that governments around the region are increasingly waking up to. This is a huge month, as you referenced at the beginning, across Asia-Pacific for the creative economy and the multiple series of events exploring and diving deeper into what it means to have a strong creative economy, what are the benefits of a strong creative economy, and how do you create the foundations to have a strong creative economy?

So I think we're seeing a real recognition of the economic benefits of the creative economy. And we're seeing a recognition, I think also of the cultural benefits. In this world we're in now, the soft power benefits of being able to project a little bit about your country around the world and help people across the world understand more about your country and the stories of your country. That's a huge benefit to governments from a strategic perspective as well.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

From your perspective, is this changing the way that governments are actually behaving around the creative economy?

Andrew Ure

Yes, we're seeing a lot of interest, I think, in setting up the policy framework to create a healthy creative economy. And that means thinking through what is needed from an IP perspective. It means thinking through what is needed from a skilling and talent perspective. It means thinking through what is needed from creating a conducive investment environment to attract both the local talent and the international capability, technology, and expertise to help those stories travel across Asia Pacific and travel around the world.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

So I do wanna break that down in more detail. But first of all, I wanna get a little bit further focused into the country stories specifically.

So let's start off with Korea, because it's a fantastic example of how a creative industry can become exactly what you've been describing, a major economic force. So cultural exports there, if we have a look at the sum of the numbers, they reached almost $19 billion in 2024, which is up 16%, which is very impressive on the year before.

I did actually catch up with Dr. Yonghee Kim a little bit earlier in Busan. And I started off by asking him what other countries can learn from just how Korea got there.

Dr. Yonghee Kim

In Korea's case, the way people looked at culture changed significantly from the late 1990s onward. Culture and content began to be seen as industries that had to be developed and grown. If Korea had previously been in a defensive position, trying to protect itself, it now became a country that had to function competitively and acquire competitiveness.

So Korea made two choices. One was an arms length strategy. It was not only about investing in content, it was also about the government working with people in the field. The second was accepting competition. At first, Korea had to protect itself. Now there were areas where it had to expand and go outward. Because Korea opened up to competition, there were areas where competitiveness increased.

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Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Dr. Kim, we can't go past this conversation without actually talking about IP protection. So if a country was starting out today, how much weight would you put on IP protection?

Dr. Yonghee Kim

In 1998, when Japanese popular culture began to be opened up in Korea, there was great concern that Korean films and other content would be pushed aside. This was not only about films. There were also worries in television, animation, music, games, and other areas of entertainment.

Later, when Netflix and foreign capital came in, that also accelerated competitiveness. It created a route for Korean content to reach the global market. When production investment went above the previous average level, it also created confidence that Korean content could travel globally. I think that confidence had a major effect on the quality of Korean content.

In Korea, there was not much recognition of IP in the beginning. Copyright had to be protected, but in the early 2000s, awareness was still low. So reforms and systems had to be created.

Another issue was the global streaming business. There were many concerns about how copyright and rights should be shared. When global streaming companies invested heavily, there were concerns that they would take all of the rights. At the same time, investment itself was part of competition, and Korea had to gain experience through it. So IP strategy had to change. There are now many companies that want to share IP, and that can be understood as part of the process of creating market rules.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Dr. Kim, I wanted to ask you about Hallyu, but for those listeners who don't know what that is, can you explain what Hallyu means?

Dr. Yonghee Kim

Hallyu doesn't suddenly appear. Hallyu means the Korean wave. It compares the spread of Korean culture to a wave. Hallyu is not a new idea. From the early 2000s, Korean dramas and songs became very popular in Asia. And during that time, Korea built production experience and international audiences.

Then global streaming companies entered, and Korean content expanded further. That expansion also reached music, beauty, and tourism, and broadened into a wider K lifestyle. These areas had a strong effect. People became more interested in Korean content, and that interest connected to Korean products as well. Not only global streaming companies, but also various platforms expanded, and that had a positive influence.

On the other hand, Hallyu has to continue developing through connections between production companies, platforms, and creators. That is an ongoing challenge. Because familiarity can also create a kind of resistance, a lot of effort is needed to make the content understandable and accessible to audiences.

In my view, the important thing is the communication between overseas demand and platforms such as Netflix. In the past, the way overseas media communicated with Hallyu was limited, often through communities and fans. Now, global platforms play that communication role directly through ordering and production. For example, after the success of Squid Game, Korean works have continued to appear frequently in global top 10 rankings.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

So that was Dr. Yonghee Kim, Andrew. When you take a listen to what he had to say, what really stands out to you?

Andrew Ure

Well, I think what stands out is the deliberate policy approach that Korea has taken to set a foundation for success. The talent across this region is there, the stories are there. What I think countries can learn from Korea is how to create the policy environment that enables that success going forward.

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So when Netflix walked into Korea, we walked into an environment which was set up for success, an environment in which the government had really thought through IP protection, in which the government had really thought through the incentives to attract investment and had really invested in the ecosystem. And so that made it easy to be successful.

And I think around the region, we see countries seeking to emulate that model and to understand what it takes to build a policy environment that allows local talent to flourish, storytelling to be created in a way that is world-class, and then to facilitate how those stories can then travel around the world with global technology and global partners. And we've certainly seen that in Korea, without a doubt.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Andrew, let's touch on Thailand. Very different story, of course, what's happening in Thailand at the moment, because it is essentially a market that's now being built out in real time.

If we look at what Thailand's doing, well, Thailand's Creative Economy Agency and Netflix, of course, together, presented stories that move economies at the World Bank and IMF annual meetings in Bangkok. And we know that Thailand's creative economies are growing as we've just been talking about.

Earlier on, I spoke to assistant professor, Dr Nessara Sukpanich from Thammasat University. She is Associate Dean for Administration at the Faculty of Economics in Thailand. And I asked her where the country's greatest strengths are.

Dr. Nasara Sukpanich

The country's greatest strength is people. Thai people are very creative. They have good skills in terms of creativity.

The other good thing is that right now, we've developed a lot of policy measures to support the industry. For example, music industries, we have a lot of funding to make people or allow people to learn from abroad and also to co-invest together.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

What needs to happen to ensure that the growth that we're seeing in the industry continues, that it is sustained?

Dr. Nasara Sukpanich

I think the Thai government may have to pay more attention to the industries, even though they start to get more support. But I think it still needs more to make a big leap from the current situation.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

And how do you ensure in the Thai industry that this happens, that you do get the support for skills, for the people in the industry?

Dr. Nasara Sukpanich

To do that, I think both the public sector and private sector have to work harder to distribute important information to those people, to the creators.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

If Thailand's creative industry got all of these things right, how fast would it grow?

Dr. Nasara Sukpanich

I think it will grow very fast. It's gonna be like more than 10% for the industry. If we have all that ecosystem and stakeholders working together, Thai creative industries would be the new engine of growth for the country.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Do you think Thailand will become the next Korea?

Dr. Nasara Sukpanich

I think that's what people all talk about. Okay, that works. So we want to follow K-Wave and we have a T-Wave for the whole world. I think we can do that. It requires a little bit of time, but I think, yeah, it is possible.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

So there's quite a lot to think about there, Andrew, when it comes to Thailand. From the Netflix side, though, Netflix has put real money into Thailand's industry. And it's not just the finances themselves, it's training programs, it's local hires. What do those partnerships look like on a day-to-day basis?

Andrew Ure

Sure, well, between 2021 and 2024, we've put $200 million into Thailand. We've created 20 original series and we've worked with 13 and a half thousand cast and crew. So it's a real investment that we're making in Thailand. And I think part of the reason for that is Thailand really is on the cusp of showing huge potential to become the next Korea in Asia Pacific.

I think the way that the government has set up the financial incentives for investment in the industry, the talent that exists in Thailand, both the above the line and the below the line talent to create the stories, film the stories, the post-production, there's a huge talent base in Thailand. And I think the government is setting the right policy environment to enable that success.

So we've seen some really great products come out of Thailand. We've had productions like Evil Lawyer, which is Mad Unicorn. These are really popular around the region. I think they show that Thailand can produce world-class content that people, not just in Thailand, but all around the world want to watch. And we're very excited to be a part of that.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Okay, so I'm gonna throw another country in here, Andrew, Indonesia. It's a much newest chapter again in this particular story. Netflix named it as part of its 2026 regional content slate. Jakarta hosted the World Conference on Creative Economy under the theme Inclusively Creative, Collective Continuity. Is it following a similar or the same playbook that we've seen in Korea and Thailand? Or is it doing something completely different, something original?

Andrew Ure

So I think every country is different and goes about this in their own way. But I think Indonesia also sees the enormous potential of the screen industry and the creative economy from an economic perspective, from a cultural perspective, also from a jobs perspective. And the screen industry in Indonesia employs almost 400,000 people. So it is a huge generator of employment. That's the full flow-on effect through the economy. So it's an enormous generator of jobs as well.

When we go out, we film one location across Asia Pacific. We filmed in over 650 locations. And what it means is we're employing drivers, hotels, accommodation, restaurants. There's a whole ripple effect on the regional economy. And so four out of five jobs created in the sector are typically in small and medium enterprises.

And I think Indonesia is one of those that sees that enormous potential. I know Jakarta, for example, is really focused on building itself out as a screen capital in the region. And we're really excited about the potential of Indonesia.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

If you were a finance minister, so I'm gonna ask you to put your government hat on for a moment, deciding where public money goes, what would you be looking for?

Andrew Ure

From a Netflix perspective, we've done some work on this and we believe that our work has generated $325 billion to the global economy. Every dollar you put into the creative economy yields many more dollars in other areas, in exports, in jobs, in tourism, in many other fields. So it's really a multiplier effect onto the economy as a whole.

So after we filmed When Life Gives You Tangerines, we saw a huge impact actually on visits to the Jeju Hanyeo Museum. They rose 60% after that production. And after K-pop Demon Hunters, the National Museum of Korea saw 7 million visitors, which was double the previous year. When we ask Netflix members about where they'd

like to go, they're twice as likely than non-members to be interested in Korean culture. And 78% say they watch content in Korean in order to improve their language skills.

But I think it's not just finance ministers who should be interested here. I think foreign ministers should be interested in the soft power that they're able to generate through this green industry. I think that leaders of countries should be looking at how they can project cultural diplomacy around the world and showcase their stories around the world by using the creative economy.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Is it fair to say that certainly in the region, but I suppose globally, that countries and governments around the world are becoming more interested in creativity?

Andrew Ure

Asia Pacific is on fire right now when it comes to creativity. If you look at Netflix, titles from Asia Pacific now make up more than half of our weekly global top 10 lists for non-English titles.

If you look at anime, for example, on our service, 50% of Netflix members have watched anime. So it's taking that very intrinsic powerful piece of Japanese culture and spreading it around the world. The same is true of Korean content, where the majority of our members have watched Korean content.

So I think it's a really beautiful way in this time to help stories from around the world flourish and to help countries and people in countries around the world just learn a little bit more about each other.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Absolutely. Andrew, fantastic point to leave that today. Thank you so much for coming and chatting to us. It's been a pleasure to have you with us.

Andrew Ure

Thank you, Ariel. It's been a pleasure.

Oriel Morrison-Higgins

Well, let's take a quick look before we sign off on where that all leads us. So we've got three forums, three audiences, one question, where the creative industries get treated as economic infrastructure rather than cultural expenditure.

Now, the model works, obviously, as we've been talking about, when the policy, the investment, the storytelling, all land in the same place at the same time. Thailand, Indonesia, and others are showing in their own ways that this certainly isn't unique to Korea, which, of course, again, as we discussed, has had a lot of success. The next test is whether more governments will, in fact, back that strategy with the budget that is required.

I wanted to give my thanks again to Andrew Ure from Netflix, to Dr. Yonghee Kim of Sun Moon University, and Dr. Nasara Sukpanich of Tamasat University.

Thank you all so much for listening to From Cultural Power to Economic Power, brought to you by E^2 Studio, the custom content studio of Economist Enterprise. I'm Oriel Morrison Higgins.