



Conflicts over streets: The eviction of Bangkok street vendors



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ABSTRACT

In 2014, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) introduced the 'Reclaiming pavements for pedestrians' plan. This plan, appealing to the Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order, promised to bring 'safety and orderliness' to the city, and its implementation led to the removal of street vendors. This article investigates the goals, practices, and effects of the street clean-up plan in Bangkok's old town and shows the ironic consequences of the plan: the streets became less safe. By analysing the vendors' rights, interests, and strategies for coping with the eviction that affected their livelihood, this article focuses on street vendors' survival strategies and analyses various forms of conflicts over streets: the vendors versus city authorities, among the vendors, and the vendors versus powerful gangsters, and discusses the mediation of these conflicts by a senior Buddhist monk who spoke on behalf of street vendors in negotiations with city authorities.

1. Introduction

Suntraporn,² a 44-year-old street vendor, had a small stall that sold hand-made jewellery on a pavement of Tha Chang, a tourist neighbourhood by the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok's old town. On 30 July 2014, Suntraporn and other vendors in the area were informed by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) of 'Reclaiming pavements for pedestrians', a new plan for spatial reorganisation. In line with the military government's National Council for Peace and Order's (NCPO) campaign to make public spaces safe across the country, this city plan obliged the district office and the City Law Enforcement Department (or *Thetsakit*) to clear vending stalls on the pavements and return the pavements to pedestrians by 31 August 2014 (*Phra Nakhon District, 2014*).

Suntraporn, who had traded in Tha Chang for ten years, was horrified at the authorities' one-month notice. She explained:

'I've been in this business for a decade... I was totally shocked when I heard that I'd have only thirty days to find a new place. What should I do? Tourists know that if they want to get inexpensive, exotic souvenirs, they have to come to Tha Chang. If the vendors move to a marketplace assigned by the Bangkok administration, will tourists follow? No way!'

Somjai, a former government employee in her sixties who sold women's plastic accessories such as bracelets, necklaces, and earrings in Tha Chang, was also affected by the clearance plan. She suspected that the whole idea was just a question of local politics. In her words: 'The

stall clean-up is all about politics. If local politicians don't see vendors as their voters, they may try to remove us from the streets.'

Suntraporn and Somjai were among 300 Tha Chang street vendors affected by the street clean-up plan. Focusing on the effects of Bangkok's recent spatial reorganisation policy, this article asks the following questions: What were the reasons for the 'Reclaiming pavements for pedestrians' plan, and did the authorities consult with the street vendors when making it? How was the plan introduced to street vendors, and what were their reactions to the reorganisation of their vending space? How was the plan implemented, and what were its effects? This study pays particular attention to street vendors' conflicts and their survival strategies.

Unlike several studies on street vendors that group all vendors in one category, and thus assume that they share similar experiences of vulnerability and adopt similar survival strategy, my study reveals that the interests and strategies of the Tha Chang street vendors facing eviction were heterogeneous. Vendors saw the eviction differently, and adopted different strategies to cope with the disastrous effects of spatial reorganisation on their livelihood. In contrast to a recent study on street vendors in Bangkok (*Batréau & Bonnet, 2016*), which emphasised the relationship between street vendors and local authorities, my study discloses a multiplicity of conflicts: between the vendors and city authorities, among the vendors, and between the vendors and powerful gangsters. What makes Tha Chang street vendors an extraordinary case study is that a senior Buddhist monk mediated and negotiated between these interest groups.

In analysing Bangkok, this article responds to a call to study cities

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² The names of street vendors have been changed and the actual vending locations are not mentioned. Other details are accurate.

that are ‘off the map’ (Robinson, 2002) of urban research and contributes to the debates on the characteristic features of the cities in global South - ‘informality’ (Roy, 2005) - by unpacking the complex nature of ‘informality’ and showing the varieties of rights.

The data for this study were collected during nine months of fieldwork in Bangkok, between July 2014 and March 2015. They consist of policy documents; observations; and interviews with street vendors, pedestrians, senior-level officers at the City Law Enforcement Department, and an assistant to the Buddhist monk who acted as a mediator to redress the conflicts.

I begin by providing an overview of street vendors and urban policies on street vending in Bangkok. I then introduce the ‘Reclaiming pavements for pedestrians’ plan. After a brief discussion regarding the debates on informality and rights, I analyse the effects of the spatial reorganisation and the reactions of the Tha Chang street vendors. I conclude by discussing street vendors’ complex interests, strategies, and rights; informality; and the effects of spatial planning on the livelihood of street vendors and on the street safety and orderliness.

2. Street vendors in Bangkok

Street vendors provide ‘goods for sale to the public without having a permanent built-up structure from which to sell’ (Bhowmik, 2005: 2256). The term for street vending in Thai, ‘*hap re phaeng loi*’ (Askew, 2002), literally translates as ‘mobile shoulder pole and floating stall’,³ and reflects the early history of street vending in Thai cities as a mobile activity.

The literature on street vendors in the cities of the developing world (Bhowmik, 2005; Crossa, 2009) acknowledges the role of vendors as self-employed traders in creating employment and selling goods at a reasonable price. Street vendors have contributed significantly to the urban economy; however, town planners tend to see their presence as a sign of ‘disorder’ or ‘underdevelopment’, and street vendors are among the first to be evicted by urban policy that aims for a modern, rational city (Bromley, 2000; Hunt, 2009). Street vendors who ‘illegally’ trade in public spaces frequently face a cat-and-mouse game with city authorities (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). Even if they hold a licence to trade on streets, authorised street vendors may not be able to escape evictions, which are usually legitimised by appealing to historic site preservation programmes, neighbourhood renewal projects, or public events. Nonetheless, evicted vendors often move back to the streets – as illegal street vendors – once monitoring subsides (Bromley, 2000). In some cities, after returning to the streets, the vendors have even formed organisations to help each other keep watch for the police (Crossa, 2009).

In Thailand, policies and programmes on street vending have been ambiguous (Kusakabe, 2006). From time to time, governments have tolerated street vending, and seen it as a significant income generation activity that eradicates poverty, particularly in times of crisis. At other times, authorities have considered street vending a ‘threat’ to the city’s safety and orderliness.

In the early period, vending in Bangkok took place in canals or floating markets (Mateo-Babiano, 2012), but very soon after the construction of streets began under the reign of King Rama IV (1851–1868), which changed Bangkok from the ‘Venice of the East’ to a land-based city, vendors moved into the streets. In the 1950s, street vendors tended to be men who had left their work in agriculture; in the 1980s, food vendors were often female rural migrants; and today, many women and men are involved in the vending business as couples (Nirathron, 2006).

Street vending in Bangkok has long been recognised as an important source of income for the urban poor, the lower educated, and migrants (Maneepong & Walsh, 2013). The 1997 Asian financial crisis brought

about massive lay-offs for employees in the formal sector, leading to a substantial rise in the number of street vendors in the city (Bhowmik, 2005). According to Maneepong and Walsh (2013), a ‘new generation of street vendors’ emerged, characterised by sophisticated business techniques such as branding, international supply chain management, and advanced information technology. They argue that the vendors of this generation had university-level education; some vendors were educated middle-class entrepreneurs. In contrast, the street vendors of the old generation sold low-priced products and services using limited technical skills, and served both local and foreign customers. Further, this new generation of street vendors often trade in private market-places; whereas the old generation usually set up vending pitches along busy public streets, and were vulnerable to policy changes and harassment by authorities or powerful gangsters.

To survive the aftermath of the financial crisis, street vendors, of both the old and new generations, could not avoid competing against each other for space and access to customers. This included direct competition between fixed-stall and mobile vendors (Maneepong & Walsh, 2013). Some vendors moved their stalls near newly built subway or elevated train stations in order to reach new markets (Walsh, 2010). Many old generation vendors changed their products and services to be able to compete (Maneepong & Walsh, 2013).

The total number of street vendors in Bangkok remains unclear, since there are both registered and unregistered vendors. According to the 2014 official statistical data on authorised vending spots (City Law Enforcement, 2016), 665 locations were registered for vending, and registered vendors totalled 20,170.

3. Bangkok's inconsistent policies on street vending

The BMA has changed its policy on street vending several times since its foundation in 1972, the same year that the law to monitor street vending was enacted. After the first Bangkok governor⁴ took office in 1973, the BMA continued to monitor the streets and allowed street vending in some parts of the city, while in others, they forced street vendors to move into regulated marketplaces. In 1978, the BMA established a ‘City Police Unit’ (now, *Thetsakit* or the City Law Enforcement Department) to monitor street vending activities. During the 1979 recession, street vending was encouraged as a solution to unemployment (Yasmeen & Nirathron, 2014).

The early 1990s saw rapid economic growth in Thailand, and the number of street vendors rose to meet the higher demand. Nevertheless, the BMA’s 1992–1996 Development Plan pointed the finger of blame at street vending for making the streets unsanitary, unsafe, and disorganised (BMA, 1992). In response, the Act on Maintaining Public Cleanliness and Public Order B.E. 2535 (1992) came into force, empowering the BMA to decide which public spaces allowed street vending. In the following 1997–2001 development plan (BMA, 1997), the BMA attempted to reduce the growing number of street vendors and prohibit cooking food on the streets. The Act was later used by the BMA to support their division of streets into authorised and unauthorised for vending. Street vendors in authorised areas were asked to register, follow the rules and regulations concerning vending pitch size and hours of trade, and had to be absent from the streets on cleaning days. They were also obliged to pay penalty fines if they violated the law.

In addition to the registration system, in September 2011, the BMA introduced a new regulation on collecting sanitation fees for cleaning authorised vending areas. The fee varies depending on the size of the vending pitch. The *Thetsakit* of the district office collect a monthly cleaning fee (BMA, 2001). It is important to note that the *Thetsakit* do

⁴ The Governor of Bangkok is the head of the ‘Bangkok Metropolitan Administration’, Bangkok’s local government. The governor is elected by direct vote of the residents every four years (BMA, 2016a).

³ Translated by the author.

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