

# The Decline of Local Riverside Markets in Suphanburi Province, Thailand

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## Abstract

The objectives of this investigation were to assess the history of riverside markets in Suphanburi Province and to understand why the trade at some of the markets has collapsed. The results show that sixteen markets on the Tha Chin River in Suphanburi prospered while the river was used as the main source of transportation. Both external and internal factors caused the decline of some markets. External reasons included the emergence of road transportation, a new bridge across the river, the increase of local fairs and the construction of supermarkets. The internal factors included disregard and lack of harmony in local communities and traders leaving the area. Some markets remained and prospered. This was due to external help and community participation.

**Keywords:** markets, Tha Chin River, conservation, restoration, community, culture, development

## 1. Introduction

Suphanburi Province is in Central Thailand and is bisected by the Tha Chin River. The local societies along the banks of the Tha Chin River benefitted from greater use of the river for transportation during the early Rattanakosin period. Initially, the people lived a life of subsistence, but with the 1855 signing of the Bowring Treaty, implementation of free trade policies and abolition of slavery, market life grew on the banks of the Tha Chin (Jindamaneerot, 1989). All river trade in Suphanburi originated further upstream in Chainat. Boats passed through Suphanburi en route to Bangkok and for over a century, the riverside markets of Suphanburi flourished. This situation continued until the advent of road transport and the outdating of river trade (Chompunit, 1997). Government policies in the 1960s emphasized road travel and particularly promoted the construction of roads in and around the Suphanburi area, reducing the need for transport on the river. This in turn caused the markets to lose trade and eventually, in most cases, die out (Pipatwong, 2004).

Markets are not only areas to buy and sell products, but are also places to exchange culture and share ideas. Markets are expressions of local identity and are hubs for the surrounding communities, which is evident in the identity of products sold at the stalls. In addition, markets are important centers of community discourse and act as community glue, strengthening relationships and creating a focus for local society (Ditpan, 2009). There are 16 such centers on the 160km stretch of the Tha Chin River through Suphanburi Province. The majority of these markets have closed in the wake of commercial pulling power of new supermarkets, convenience stores and other retail shops. Given the problems faced by local markets in the area and the increasing danger that all 16 of the trade centers may eventually be forced to close, the research team conducted this investigation to assess the history of riverside markets in Suphanburi Province and to understand why the trade at some of the markets has collapsed.

## 2. Research Methodology

This investigation, *the decline of local riverside markets in Suphanburi Province, Thailand*, was carried out using a qualitative method over a 2 year and 10 month period. The study began in 2008 and ended in 2011. The research team examined the state of local Tha Chin River markets and the reasons why some discontinued and some flourished. The researchers needed an appropriate and detailed understanding of Suphanburi history and cultural context in order to implement their hypotheses and analyze field research adequately to determine causes for the development or decline of local markets.

Suphanburi was purposively selected as the research area based on documentary analysis highlighting the specific conditions of Suphanburi. There are 16 markets on the 160km stretch of the Tha Chin River through Suphanburi Province and each is only 10km from the next. Their prevalence and proximity give a clear indication of the former importance of the markets. The population for the research included community members, market traders, shoppers and local government representatives. The research sample was purposively selected and divided into 4 groups. The key informant group was comprised of 16 local community heads, who were chosen by a purposive sampling method. 28 community and market members were chosen to comprise the casual informant group by means of snowball and purposive sampling, which were also the techniques used to identify nine market traders to be general informants. Finally, accidental sampling was the preferred method to highlight customers of existing markets to provide data for the research.

Two modes of data collection were employed: 1) document study; 2) field study. Data was collected by means of survey, questionnaire, observation, photography and audio capture. All information gathered was validated by a triangulation method (Jantawanit, 1999). Data analysis was conducted by arranging the collected data into groups of typologies according to the aims of the research and conducting a typological analysis. Analytic induction was also used as a method of analyzing data, while the findings are presented below method in the form of a descriptive analysis.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 The History of Riverside Markets in Suphanburi Province*

Suphanburi Province is in Central Thailand and is bisected by the Tha Chin River. The local societies along the banks of the Tha Chin River benefitted from greater use of the river for transportation during the early Rattanakosin period. Initially, the people lived a life of subsistence, but with the 1855 signing of the Bowring Treaty, implementation of free trade policies and abolition of slavery, market life grew on the banks of the Tha Chin. All river trade in Suphanburi originated further upstream in Chainat. Boats passed through Suphanburi en route to Bangkok and for over a century, the riverside markets of Suphanburi flourished. This situation continued until the advent of road transport and the outdated of river trade. Government policies in the 1960s emphasized road travel and particularly promoted the construction of roads in and around the Suphanburi area, reducing the need for transport on the river. This in turn caused the markets to lose trade and eventually, in most cases, die out.

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#### *3.2 Causes for the Decline or Development of Tha Chin River Markets*

The development of land transport technology signaled the end for many river markets. Government policies supported the growth of road networks, which connected people to other places and reduced the importance of the river. Indeed, the car made the river seem outdated and slow in comparison, reducing its popularity as a means of transport, dramatically affecting the popularity of the established bazaars. Further government policies supported local fairs, which proved to be in direct competition with river markets. As the frequency of the local fairs increased, so the number of river market customers decreased. Also, the greater importance of the roads led to the foundation of a number of roadside communities. These communities needed somewhere to shop and the river markets soon became obsolete thanks to their distance to the roadside markets. Consequently, a number of convenience stores and supermarkets were established, coming into direct competition with the markets.

Regarding restoration, there is no single direction, with different community factions pulling in different ways. Some groups wish to develop and restore the original markets, while others consider restoration as a backwards step that would cause unnecessary debt and spending. Even if 1 group lacks energy to drive restoration projects, the whole movement will become unfeasible. This means that restoration is not a realistic short term goal and traders have been forced to seek work away from the Tha Chin River markets of Suphanburi.

However, there are 2 riverside markets that have undergone a successful restoration program and are flourishing in their new form. These are PothiPraya and Samchuk. The 2 markets differ. Samchuk sells food, utensils/toys or is a great place for a daytrip. PothiPraya is a fresh market, selling fresh food and ready-made meals. These markets have benefitted from external support by private organizations, including financial support and management. The restoration projects have been innovative and modern, while relying on the traditional identity of the markets to draw its own customers. The external organizations have collaborated with local people, which helps to maintain the local traditions and keep a constant customer base. With the influence of external supporters, tourism has become a significant form of income for the two remaining markets. The success of the markets would be impossible without the leadership and drive of local community heads.

#### 4. Conclusion

The objectives of this investigation were to assess the history of riverside markets in Suphanburi Province and to understand why the trade at some of the markets has collapsed. The results show that sixteen markets on the Tha Chin River in Suphanburi prospered while the river was used as the main source of transportation. Both external and internal factors caused the decline of some markets. External reasons included the emergence of road transportation, a new bridge across the river, the increase of local fairs and the construction of supermarkets. The internal factors included disregard and lack of harmony in local communities and traders leaving the area. Some markets remained and prospered. This was due to external help and community participation.

#### 5. Discussion

Successful adaptation of the markets enabled them to flourish and prosper. This idea is in correspondence with the research of Julian Steward. Steward identified the concept of cultural ecology. He said that a basic cultural foundation was the only way that human society could adapt. In the cases of Samchuk and PothiPraya markets, the core of Steward's theory are represented by the locals participating in market management to retain community identity, traditions and the original consumer base (Steward, 1972). One further requirement of Steward's concept is the incorporation of technological innovations and the appropriate use and management of the surrounding environment.

Recent research into the markets of Turkey has found that their success does not only depend on their management, trade and consumer base. The markets must be part of a larger network between the town and the society. Successful markets act as branches between the two and require efficient and convenient connections. This was visible in the past, when the markets of Suphanburi were connected to one another, the traders and the customers by the popular river transport. For successful restoration programs, road networks must be established to re-link the markets to the people in the wake of the decline of river transport (Biral, 2008). Local communities must administer restoration projects by improving tourist amenities and facilities, teaching one another how to develop a service mind and upgrading the external environment. For communities and their organizations to continue in modern society, there must be dedicated people living in those communities, strong intra-community relationships and establishment of formal bodies to control various tasks (The Catholic Education Council of Thailand, 1990).

It has been discovered that Samchuk Market, to which this investigation alludes, thrives on community participation and efficient tourism management policies. These are also positive factors for the success of KhlongSuan 100-Year Market in SamutPrakarn Province (Saepoo, Assawakowitwong and Jirawattawee, 2007). In accordance with recent Thai government policies, Samchuk has been branded as a 'living museum', which appeals to the new wave of ecotourists visiting Thailand to admire the nature and culture of the country. Samchuk conservation projects have benefitted as a consequence.

PothiPraya and Samchuk Markets have benefitted from external support by private organizations, including financial support and management. The restoration projects have been innovative and modern, while relying on the traditional identity of the markets to draw its own customers. The external organizations have collaborated with local people, which help to maintain the local traditions and keep a constant customer base. With the influence of external supporters, tourism has become a significant form of income for the two remaining markets. The success of the markets would be impossible without the leadership and drive of local community heads.

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