The Permutations of Thailand’s “Floating Markets”

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Abstract: The considerable amount of sociological and anthropological research on tourism in Thailand notwithstanding, its popular “floating markets” have received surprisingly little attention. This paper offers a fourfold sequential typology of the markets, highlighting the permutations which they have undergone in recent decades, as they were transformed from moribund local trading hubs to popular attractions of domestic excursionists and foreign tourists.

Keywords: markets, heterogeneization, excursionists, recreation ring, Thai tourism

Introduction

This is a study of the remarkable process in which the “floating markets” of Thailand, rather than dying out under the impact of the economic development of the country and of the modernization of its transportation system, proliferated as a tourist attraction in recent decades. I conceive of this process as roughly divided into four stages:

1. The historical decline of the “floating markets” in the river basins of Central Thailand, leading to their virtual extinction by the mid-20th Century.
2. The revival of some of these markets under the impact of growing domestic demand, primarily from weekend excursionists from the metropolitan area of Bangkok, starting in the last decades of the 20th Century.
3. The emergence of new, “floating markets,” as modified, neo-traditional replicas of the old ones at the turn of the Century.
4. The creation of new “floating markets” as innovative business enterprises, to serve as attractions for foreign tourists and domestic visitors, in the early decades of the 21st Century.

The study is based on information on all contemporary “floating markets” I am aware of, gleaned from the printed media and the Internet or collected on my visits to 21 such markets between 2008 and 2016.

**Literature Review**

The sociological and anthropological literature on the role of local markets in tourism is remarkably limited. There are several studies of night markets, particularly in Taiwan (e.g. Hsieh and Chang 2006; Tsai 2013), a growing number of studies of “farmers’ markets,” an innovative form of agricultural products marketing in developed Western countries (e.g. Aucoin and Fry 2015; Farmer et al 2011; Hall 2013; Smithers 2013), and some studies of food markets (e.g. Vallbona and Pérez 2015) and the consumption of local foods in rural areas by tourists (e.g. Besiére 1998; Frisvoll, Forbord and Blekesaune 2016), but I have not found any studies of the permutations of local markets under the influence of tourism, even though, according to my own observations, such markets are a magnet for both, domestic and foreign tourists, particularly in the emergent regions of the world.

The considerable body of sociological and anthropological research on tourism in Thailand (e.g. Cohen 1996, 2008; Forsyth 1995; Kontogeorgopoulos 1998, 2004; Mostafanezhad 2014; Pellegi 1996; Walter 2015) has neglected the study of “floating markets” as a tourist attraction. However, these markets have in the last few years attracted the attention of mainly Thai researchers from other fields.

A comprehensive geographical study of waterfront communities in the Chao Phraya river basin by Yodsurang, Hiromi and Yasufumi (2016, p. 64) has analytically distinguished seven “clusters,” or types of communities, among them “waterfront markets,” in which in the past “housing combined a shop house and residential unit, connected to the agricultural landscape and product suppliers in the rear”; but the authors do not discuss the present status of these communities. Silapacharanan (2013) has studied the characteristics of water-based communities along the Mae Klong and Bang Pakong rivers in Central
Thailand, and their transformation into land-based settlements under the influence of infrastructural developments. Though this author did not discuss specifically the “floating markets,” his work provides information on the context of their decline in the early twentieth century. Sriwichien, Kiratiboorana and Soungsaweng (2014) have studied the history of “community bazaars” along the Tha Chin River, which had in the past “functioned as merchandise exchanges for local agricultural products and consumer goods” (ibid., p. 257).

Several studies deal with particular “floating markets”. The most detailed work is Buasorn’s (2010, 2011) study of four of the best known “floating markets” in Thailand Sam Chuk, Amphawa, Taling Chan and Damnoen Saduak, which will also be discussed in this article. Others studied the “floating markets” of Amphawa (Vajirakachorn and Nepal 2014), Bang Noi (Srikos, Phukamchannoad and Yordchim 2014), Nam Phueng and Taling Chan (Suwannasi and Intarat B.E. 2556 [2013]), Tha Kha (Charoensombat 2002) and several markets in Nakhon Pathom province (Wattanacharoensil and Sakdiyakorn 2015). However, most of these studies focused on specific, mostly practical, issues, such as the markets’ role in local community development or visitors’ satisfaction from market excursions, rather than on the trajectories of change of the “floating markets,” as discussed in the present study.

**Purpose and Conceptual Approach**

This is a study of the decline and resurgence of Thailand’s “floating markets,” from a hub of local trade in agricultural produce to a site of consumption and entertainment. My principal interest is to conceptualize this process of transformation in terms of a sequential typology, which will highlight the changing characteristics of those markets as they came to be reoriented from a local to a wider domestic and foreign tourist public; this process resembles the process of commercialization of other cultural practices, such as the production of arts and crafts, in wake of their reorientation from a local, to an outsider tourist public. This study therefore follows in some respects the approach of my earlier work on the commercialization of crafts in Thailand (Cohen 2000), in which I have examined the influence of the change in the public consuming those crafts on the transformation of their production and appearance.
Following the early work of Redfield and Singer (1969) on the cultural role of cities, I have in that study made a distinction between two processes of transformation of folk crafts under conditions of commercialization (Cohen 2000, p. 5-6), namely orthogenetic change (adaptations or elaborations of elements of prevailing local traditions) as against heterogenetic change (adoption of extraneous influences, unrelated to local traditions). The boundary between these two kinds of change is fuzzy; however, in many instances, including the present one, a fairly clear dividing line between the two kinds of change can still be drawn. In my previous work, I have introduced and empirically documented the concept of “heterogeneization” (ibid., p. 185-220), namely the process of transition from an elaboration of local traditions in commercialized crafts to the incorporation of extraneous elements into their production and appearance. I shall adopt a modified version of this approach in the present context, and explore the question, whether the permutations of contemporary “floating markets” involve merely orthogenetic adaptations or modifications of traditions to respond to the needs and preferences of a new clientele, or a more far-reaching process of heterogeneization, leading eventually to their hybridization with other forms of popular entertainment, while preserving the label “floating market” as an attractive brand-name.

The Historical Decline and Rediscovery of “Floating Markets”

Life in lower Central Thailand, the heart of Old Siam, was in the past tied to water, to such an extent that the Thai architect Sumet Jumsai (1998) saw it as a prototype of what he called an “aquatic society,” in which human settlements functioned as “amphibious communities,” their houses often floating on water, or built on stilts, not to be inundated during the rainy season. Their principal products, rice, vegetables and fruits, depended on rain and irrigation from rivers and the ever denser web of canals, whose construction was intensified by the mid-nineteenth century. The canals have distributed water from the main rivers of the Central region, Chao Phraya, Mae Klong, Ta Chin and Bang Pakong, to the rice fields in their basins. The rivers and canals were a main source of food, fish; they were also the principal routes of communication. Boats, kept by households, served as the chief means of travel and trade along these waterways. Thai peasant women plied the waterways selling fresh produce, and stores were put up by Chinese traders on their banks to buy rice and other produce from the local farmers, while supplying them with basic necessities. On the larger rivers and canals those stores nucleated into waterfront market
places (*Talaad Nam*, literally “markets on water”), consisting of land-based Chinese shop-houses and Thai farmers floating on boats. Such markets over time became the core of small towns and nodes of the waterborne traffic.

This waterways-based transportation system had reached the high point of expansion in the early Twentieth century, and remained fairly intact until approximately the mid-century. In 1961, the first National Economic Development Plan (1961-1966) stipulated, as part of an effort to develop the country, the creation of a road system throughout the Central region. With the construction of major highways, and an increasingly ramified system of roads, a transition from water-bound to land-based motorized transportation took place, accompanied by the creation of marketing facilities along its routes; this undermined the old waterborne travel and marketing systems, and led to their deterioration. The trade in the markets along rivers and canals declined and in many cases eventually died down, leaving the riverside towns to wither away, even as the settlements on the new roads thrived (Silapacharananan 2013; Sriwichien, Kiratiboorana and Soungsaweng 2014; Wattanacharoensil and Sakdiyakorn 2015; Yodsuriang, Hiromi and Yasumufi 2016). The rapid economic development penetrating the countryside along the new lines of transportation rendered the stagnating water-bound communities virtually invisible.

It was only towards the end of the last century that a turning point emerged: under the impact of the tensions, frictions, crowding and pollution engendered by a rapidly expanding and modernizing Bangkok metropolis, the new urban Thai middle classes felt a nostalgic longing for a romanticized, quieter and simpler life of Old Siam. The marginalized, stagnating old riverside communities were suddenly rediscovered and rapidly became popular attractions of domestic tourism. With growing automobilization, the volume of week-end excursions into the “recreation belt” (Wu and Cai 2006) around the metropolis, extending into the countryside for several hundred kilometers, increased exponentially. *Talaad Nam*, the “markets on water,” became highly popular attractions of domestic excursionists; rendered in English as “floating markets,” they also attracted foreign tourists.

“Floating markets” can also be found in some other, less developed mainland Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam (CBS.news 2015; Huynh 2011; Nahi 2008) and Cambodia (Cornell University Blog Service 2011), where
they still play an active role in the distribution of agricultural produce, and are visited by some tourists. But they did not attain the touristic significance of the “floating markets” in Thailand, where their number has proliferated in the last two decades, though they had largely lost their local role.

**Contemporary “Floating Markets”: An Overview**

In its narrow, literal, sense, the term “floating markets” refers, as one blogger simply put it, to a “market where goods are sold from boats.” While both sellers and buyers might be waterborne, as they apparently still are in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, in Thailand’s past *talaad nam* referred to both, boats plying rivers and canals selling agricultural produce, and river- or canal-bank markets. The English term “floating markets,” an euphonic, but somewhat inaccurate translation of *talaad nam*, thus similarly refers to both, and covers even water-side markets where no floating boats are found. However, in the contemporary touristic image of the “floating market,” the floating boat is the stressed component, the water-bank market houses the un-stressed one. Its iconic representation is a woman with a Central Thai style hat, paddling a boat laden with fruits and vegetables (Figure 1).

The boundaries of the term “floating markets” are vague; it is not an official designation. Moreover, since it became a catch-word appealing to visitors, some establishments adopted it, even if they have little in common with mainstream “floating markets,” and are included in lists of such markets produced by tourist establishments.

I have identified altogether 62 sites, which are commonly referred to as “floating markets” in the literature, advertisements or the media. Their geographic distribution is presented on Table 1.

Table 1 shows that 53 of the “floating markets” are located in the Central region, the historical habitat of such markets. Of these, ten markets are located in the outskirts of the huge metropolitan city of Bangkok; 21 in the six provinces bordering the metropolis: Samut Prakan, Samut Sakhon, Nakhon Pathom, Chachoengsao, Phatum Thani and Nonthaburi. The metropolis, and the provinces bordering it, thus comprise almost half of the total number of contemporary “floating markets.” This high concentration reflects the main source of their clientele: excursionists from the Bangkok metropolis.
Table 1. The Geographic Distribution of Contemporary “Floating Markets”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Distribution</th>
<th>Floating Market sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provinces bordering Bangkok</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Central region provinces</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other regions of Thailand</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-two markets are located in nine of the other provinces of the Central region, particularly in Ayutthaya, Samut Songkhram, Ratchburi and Suphanburi, and only nine in the rest of the country. Since in the past no “floating markets” were found outside the Central region, none of the nine markets located in the other regions of Thailand are indigenous to them; they have been recently created, primarily in the vicinity of major foreign tourist destinations (see Table 2).

“Floating Markets:” A Sequential Typology

For present purposes it is helpful to order the contemporary “floating markets” into a sequential typology, consisting of four principal types:

1. Continuously active “floating markets.”
2. Revived “floating markets.”
3. New, neo-traditional “floating markets.”
4. New, innovative “floating markets.”

The typology roughly reflects the historical trajectory which “floating markets” underwent; however, the boundaries between the types are fuzzy, while within each there are some internal variations. The distribution of the markets between the types, as assessed by the author, is presented in Table 2.
Table 2. “Floating Markets” by Type and Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Inner</th>
<th>Outer</th>
<th>Rest of Country</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revived</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New, neo-traditional</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New, Innovative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Provinces bordering the metropolitan province of Bangkok  
**Central region provinces not bordering the metropolitan province of Bangkok  
***Four markets could not be classified

Continuously Active “Floating Markets”

Only about seven “floating markets,” in my assessment, have survived the process of transportation transition and remained continuously active up to the present; these markets are mostly located in remote areas, difficult of access, where waterways are still serving as local transportation routes. A good example is the Klong Pho Hak floating market in the maritime Samut Sakhon province, which is approachable only by boat along the Tha Chin river (Thailand Maps, n.d.), and has probably therefore not become a popular excursion destination; another continuous market is the Tha Kha floating market in Samut Songkhram province (Charoensombat 2002). When that market started to decline in the 1990s, the local authorities improved its infrastructure to make it accessible to tourists (Thailand Traveller 1995), thereby preventing its further deterioration. One blogger recently referred to it as “probably the most genuine floating market that you can find in Thailand” (Barrow 2015). It is still a small market: in my visits in 2016 I counted about 16-30 boats selling agricultural produce to a mostly local clientele (Figure 2); but this is still a larger number of floating boats than presently found in some other, larger “floating markets.” There is a small land market perpendicular to the canal, and a restaurant and a few shops along the canal’s shore, all of which seem to be recent accretions.
The rhythm of opening and closing days on these two markets has until recently followed the Thai lunar calendar, based on the waxing and waning periods of the moon (*kham*), rather than the rhythm of the week (Charoensombat 2002), which indicates that it suited the local preferences, rather than those of outsider visitors. Their opening schedules have also reflected the local preferences: they opened up early in the morning and closed around noon. However, Tha Kha market is presently also open on weekends (*Bangkok Tours* n.d.). But, though it is marked by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as a tourist attraction, outsider visitors are few, even during the weekends.

**Revived “Floating Markets”**

Most of the old “floating” markets have either ceased to operate by the mid-20th century, lingered on at a steadily declining rate, or were forced to close by the construction of modern land-based infrastructure in their surroundings. However, even as their disappearance appeared imminent, by the end of the twentieth century many old market places have been “rediscovered” by nostalgic excursionists from the metropolis, or by conservationist groups, seeking to preserve the nation’s architectural heritage, particularly the remains of old houses in water-bank markets. With the growing expansion of weekend excursionists throughout Bangkok’s “recreation ring,” other old “floating markets” in the Central region were revived, mostly on local initiative, raising their number to 23 (Table 2). I shall here present in some detail four of the most popular revived markets.

*Damnoen Saduak:* The revival of old “floating markets” for domestic excursionists has been preceded in the 1980s by the rather unique revival of the Damnoen Saduak Floating Market, targeting foreign tourists. Since this is the internationally best-known “floating market,” and by far the most visited one by foreign tourists, I shall discuss its revival first. It should be stressed, however, that this market does not constitute a prototype for the later revival of the others.

The broad, 35 kilometer long Damnoen Saduak canal, connecting the Mae Klong and Tha Chin rivers, was constructed in 1866-68, during the reign of King Rama IV (Tanabe 1977, p. 62), and remained in use as a transportation artery until the present (Kongsawatkiat 1988). Over time, about 200 small, ancillary irrigation canals were dug by villagers along its course. Many
“floating markets” had spread along the main canal; the principal one was the Lad Plee market (Buasorn 2010, p. 155), adjoining a Buddhist temple. This market remained active until 1967, but declined when new roads replaced water-borne transportation (ibid., p. 156). In 1971 the Tourism Organization of Thailand (TOT, now TAT) turned the market into an attraction for foreign tourists, who were brought in by travel agents from Bangkok. The market featured vendors on boats, and about 60-70 canal-bank based shops, some of them owned by outsiders. However, in 1981, a new road was built to Thon Kem canal, an ancillary of the main Damnoen Saduak canal. Private entrepreneurs, sensing the opportunities land access to the canal will open to the development of tourism, established a new market on the narrow Thon Kem canal and called it the “Damnoen Saduak Floating Market”. The entrepreneurs invited the vendors of the Lad Plee market to move to the new location (Buasorn 2010, p. 158-160). At present, there are just a few food-boats found at the big, abandoned Lad Phlee market site on the main canal.

Big souvenir stores were opened on the new Damnoen Saduak market and hundreds of vendors on boats, wearing the iconic Central Thai style peasant hats, plied the canal, offering food and fruits to visitors (Buasorn 2010, p. 160-162), while motorboats took visitors on canal tours.

Damnoen Saduak Floating Market remains the best known and most visited “floating market” by foreign tourists, but by the early 2010s it seemed to have passed the peak of its popularity (Buasorn 2010, p. 173), owing to high prices, lack of support by the local authorities, noise of motorboats, and pollution. The number of boats floating on the canal was decreasing, as the younger generation preferred opening land-based shops (ibid., p. 176).

The Damnoen Saduak Floating Market has been widely detracted as flawed and unauthentic. The travel writer Andrew Spooner (2013, p. 58) described it as “an exaggerated and very hokey approximation of the real thing,” but conceded that “still, it is one of the most popular day trips from the capital for a reason, namely the clichéed sight of bamboo-hatted elderly ladies paddling along in their long-tails” (ibid., p. 58). Another guide roundly disparages it: “Really it would be hard to justify any trip to the [Damnoen Saduak] Floating Market if it wasn’t for the fact that Bangkok is famous for [it]” (Into Asia, n.d.). But the market regained popularity with the rise of Asian, particularly Chinese, mass tourism to Thailand. Asian tourists, who seem to be generally
little concerned with authenticity (Cohen and Cohen 2015, p. 33), are at present visiting the market in large numbers, while its canal is swarming with vending boats and various kinds of touring craft (Figure 3 and 4).

While Damnoen Saduak attracted mainly foreign tourists, the following three revived markets are among the most popular sightseeing, culinary and entertainment destinations of the domestic weekend excursionists to Bangkok’s “recreation ring.”

Amphawa: Amphawa is a small riparian (water-based) Sino-Thai community in Samut Songkhram province. Located on the mouth of a broad canal of the Mae Klong River, in a countryside criss-crossed by a network of 330 canals (Disatapundhu 2009, p. 115), the town was in the past known as the “Venice of the East.” It was the largest community in the Mea Klong river basin (Buasorn 2010, p. 76-78), and an important regional trading center: “Because water ways were the major means of transportation, the merchants came to the floating market by paddle boats or steamships using Mae Klong River and the connected canals.” However, “[a]bout thirty or forty years ago the Amphawa Floating Market declined due to the developments of roads and in-land markets…During the [next] thirty years, the town had turned into a quiet resident community of senior citizens and children. Most of the adult population worked and lived elsewhere due to lack of local job opportunities or education prospects…by 2003 only a handful of vegetable sellers and one meat stall had remained in the area. The town was dying…” (Vajirakachorn and Nepal 2014, p. 347-348).

However, Amphawa’s rich architectural and cultural heritage (Silapacharanan 2007) has survived its decline; this moved the national authorities to initiate the town’s revitalization (Buasorn 2010, p. 76). A conservation and development project was initiated in 2001, with the collaboration of the local municipal authorities and the involvement of several governmental organizations, the Faculty of Architecture of Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University, and the Chaipattana Foundation; the Danish government provided financial assistance (Buasorn 2010, p. 79; Peerapan 2012, p. 24-25). A section of run-down old wooden row-houses along the Amphawa canal (Rahman 2007) was rehabilitated, and the houses “geared towards activities associated with waterborne tourism” (Peerapaan 2012, p. 25). As Amphawa became increasingly popular with domestic visitors, in 2004 the floating market was
reinstalled (Buasorn 2010, p. 79; Disatapundhu 2009). Being oriented to outside visitors, rather than the local population, the floating market is active only on weekends, from 4.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. A big land-based market on the town’s main street, perpendicular to the Amphawa canal, emerged at weekends. Its vendors came primarily from the surrounding region. Local boat owners offered evening trips along the network of canals, to view the fireflies on the branches of the lamphu trees on their banks (Cohen 2009, p. 104-106). Many houses along the Amphawa canal bank were enlarged and turned into home-stays and guest-houses (Figure 5).

The rehabilitation of Amphawa earned the town international recognition: in 2008 it was awarded an “honorable mention” in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Conservation (UNESCO 2008).

Locals who had moved away for lack of employment, started to return home. Amphawa became a prosperous place. But, its revitalization was accompanied by some unforeseen consequences. Outsiders started to move in, renting canal-side dwellings (Buasorn 2010, p. 117), and turning them into resorts, stores, restaurants and coffee-shops, a trend that has apparently strengthened in the years after Buasorn’s research. Innovative establishments began to emerge along the Amphawa canal’s banks (Figure 6). The growing number of excursionists, who already in 2010 amounted, during the weekends to more than 10,000 a day (ibid., p. 80), provoked increasingly serious environmental stresses, such as overcrowding, transport congestion and excessive fumes from vehicle exhausts (ibid., p. 116). As over the weekends up to 300 firefly-spotting boat-excursions plied the canals (ibid., p. 116-117), the firefly population was threatened, especially when canal-dwellers, irritated by the noise of the motorboats, cut some lamphu trees on which the insects cluster (Cohen 2009, p. 105-106). But a more insidious problem is the progressive change in land use: as home-stays and resorts spread over Amphawa district, land prices rose sharply, causing loss of agricultural land, growing building densities and higher structures. The latter issue was dramatically highlighted by the controversial construction, on the far end of the row of low, mostly one-storey houses along the canal-banks, of a four-storey hotel by an entrepreneur from Bangkok (Cohen 2014, p. 4-5) (Figure 7).

Sam Chuk: In the port of Sam Chuk market, on the bank of the Tha Chin River in Suphanburi province, trade had flourished “in the good old days,
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when boats were the main mode of conveyance”. At that time “Sam Chuk was an important center for the transportation of goods. Merchants from all over the country stopped at the town overnight before heading for Bangkok” (Tangcharoenmankong 2006). The market remained active until 1967; however, when a newly constructed highway made river transport unnecessary (Janssen 2010), there was a drastic fall in the number of customers (Buasorn 2010, p. 29-30). In the late 1990s the old market was on the “verge of collapse” (Glahan 2009). Eventually, only one shop-house remained open to trade (Thip-osod 2014). In 1999, the market’s owner, the Treasury Department, ordered the destruction of its old wooden houses and their substitution by concrete market structures. However, the market community resisted the order and proceeded, with some outside assistance, to revitalize and rehabilitate the market, a process which took about ten years to complete (Buasorn 2010, p. 28). The big, restored “100-year-old” Sam Chuk market, consisting of about 300 old shop houses, became again famous, as a “living museum” (Assavanondha 2007) (Figure 8). In 2009, its successful restoration earned it a UNESCO Award of Merit for Cultural Heritage Conservation (Buasorn 2010, p. 33). However, the award also put the market on the tourist map (Charoenpo 2010). With success came the intrusion of outsider traders from Suphanburi city and Bangkok, who rented old shop houses from the locals and became over time the majority among the shop-keepers in the market. The unregulated growth of the market and increasing over-crowding by weekend visitors are presently seen as a threat to the market’s charm and cultural identity (Charoenpo 2010; Thip-osod 2014).

Taling Chan: The rapid and sweeping urban development of Bangkok led to the gradual closure of almost all the old floating markets on its canals. From the late 1980s onward, however, some of the old markets have been revived, though their appearance was substantially changed, while new ones were created. Taling Chan Floating Market, on Klong [Canal] Chak Phra in Bangkok’s Taling Chan district, on the city’s Thonburi (western) side (Phromkaewtor 2010; Sridhathanaprom 2010), was the first floating market to be revived in the metropolis (Niyabhama 2009). Its revival was initiated by the district’s director in 1987, near the site of an old, defunct floating market, which has been closed in 1971 due to road development (Buasorn 2010, p. 119-120). In the 1980s, Taling Chan was still an area of orchards and vegetable gardens; vendors on the market sold local produce from boats floating on the canal. The market, which was initially based on just four bamboo rafts to
accommodate visitors (Niyamabha 2009), at first flourished, but then declined. It was revitalized, renewed and expanded by the local authorities in 1997, and its management handed over to the vendors’ Market Union (Buasorn 2010, p. 122). A dozen metal rafts replaced the bamboo rafts. These serve as eating premises for food ordered from vendors on boats. There is also a land-based market, perpendicular to the canal. The TAT’s 1998-1999 “Amazing Thailand” promotion campaign promoted the market, but it remained popular mainly with the domestic public, while foreigners constitute only about 10% of the visitors (Buasorn 2010, p. 123); hence it is open only on weekends and holidays, between 8.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

With the growing popularity of the major revived “floating markets,” other old, rundown or abandoned river-bank or canal-bank markets have been more recently revived in the metropolis and throughout the Central region, to benefit from the expanding wave of urban excursionists: for example, the old Ban Mai river-bank market in Chachoengsao province was revived in 2004 (Kranlert 2008), the Bang Luang Floating Market in Nakhon Pathom province in 2008 (Karnjanatawe 2008), the Lad Chado Riverside Market in Ayutthaya province in 2009 (Karnjanatawe 2009; Kranlert 2010), and the Kwan Riam Floating Market in the Minburi district of Bangkok in 2012 (Karnjanatawe 2012).

Most revived “floating markets” consist of large, waterborne, covered rafts and a land-based market. In some, preserved buildings of the old market are in use, as, for example in the Ban Mai riverside market (Figure 9), while in others all structures are new. Though food-boats, surrounding the rafts, are a hallmark of “floating markets”, in the revived markets their role is often overshadowed by the rapidly expanding, land-based market on which restaurants, shops and stalls offer a wide range of foods, fruits, clothing, and souvenirs to the visitors. Since the visitors are primarily urban excursionists, the majority of the revived markets are open only over the weekends.

**New, Neo-traditional “Floating Markets”**

As revived “floating markets” proved highly popular, about 19 new markets, intended to resemble the “floating markets” of the past, were established, mostly in the 2000s. In most cases, the initiative came from community
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leaders or the local authorities. Five were opened in the Bangkok metropolis, e.g. Klong Lat Mayom Floating Market in 2004 (Kranlert 2009), Wat Saphan Floating Market about 2010 (Niyamabha 2009) and Saphan Sung Floating Market in 2015; nine in the inner provinces, e.g. Sai Noi Floating Market in Nonthaburi province in 2002 (Lim 2012), and Lamphaya Floating Market in Nakhon Pathom province in 2003 (Sukphisit 2008), and merely five, such as Anake Farm Floating Market in Ang Thong province (opened in 2011) (Barrow 2011), in the rest of the country. Since the new, neo-traditional “floating markets” are oriented manly to the growing numbers of weekend excursionists, most are open only over the weekends.

Like their predecessors, the new, neo-traditional markets are located on rivers and canals; they resemble the revived markets, discussed above, though all their structures are obviously new. Most consist of two main sections: a row of covered rafts, floating on the water, which serve as restaurants or eating premises for food bought from surrounding food-boats; and a land market at the entrance to the site. But there are variations: the Rangsit Floating Market in Pathum Thani is not really “floating”: though located over a canal, the premises housing the restaurants are fixed. The premises of the Saphan Sung Floating Market in Bangkok are squeezed on a stretch of land between a business complex and the broad Saen Seap canal, but without access to the latter. Neither has food-boats nor a separate land market. Though called “floating markets,” these establishments in fact function as simple restaurants. In contrast, other new markets, such as the Kwan Riam Floating Market in the Minburi area of Bangkok, though their outlay resembles that of other neo-traditional markets, share some traits with the new, innovative markets to be discussed below.

Ingenuous attempts were also made to adopt the traditional “floating market” image for other contexts; these reached the apex in the installation in 2009 of a “floating market” fair in the “Grand Hall” of River City, an upper-end mall close to the bank of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. On the dry floor of the hall several boats, loaded with sweets, were set up, whereas shops in thatched partitions, apparently meant as metonyms of thatched-roofed market stalls, displayed up-market jewelry, textiles and art objects. The fair was advertised by posters featuring a silhouette of the iconic Thai woman on a boat (Figure 10).
Innovative New “Floating Markets”

Except for Damnoen Saduak, relatively few foreign tourists visit the revived or new, neo-traditional “floating markets”. This might be partly due to their remoteness or low accessibility from the hubs and circuits of foreign tourism. Many such markets are located on the fringes of the huge Bangkok metropolis, or in provinces that offer few, if any, other major attractions to foreign tourists. Peripheral locations might make such markets attractive to domestic excursionists, desirous to escape the pressures of modern life by seeking out the reminders of Old Siam; but low accessibility constitutes a disadvantage for foreign tourists on a brief visit to the country.

However, in the course of the 2000s, a new type of “floating markets” emerged: new, innovative establishments, catering to both domestic and foreign tourists, located on main transportation arteries, and thus easily accessible, or in the vicinity of major tourist hubs or attractions. Most of these establishments share some common features, which distinguish them from the revived and the new, neo-traditional floating markets. They are business enterprises, established by private entrepreneurs or companies; most are planned as comprehensive, all-inclusive projects, based on artificially created lakes, surrounded by wooden gangways and arcades on which shops, food stalls, restaurants and various entertainment facilities are located. Some larger restaurants are put up on promontories or islands in the lake. The shops, whose number is planned, are rented to vendors. Outsiders are not free to join the market. Boats, preparing and selling food are predominantly immobile, fastened to the gangways surrounding the lake. Visitors can take short group excursions by boat on the lake, or, in some markets, hire smaller boats, but there are no floating vendors in these markets. Some of these markets are themed, mainly to display metonymically aspects of Old Siam in their architecture or décor; but they also display various features extraneous to Thai traditions.

The principal examples of new, innovative “floating markets” along transportation arteries are the Tung Bua Chom Floating Market in Ayutthaya province opened in 2013 on a lake, adjoining a canal, on the main highway to the Northeastern region of the country, known as Isaan (Barrow 3013), and the Ban Nok Floating Market, opened in 2014 on the road to the remote Pasak river dam in Lopburi province, that serves as an attraction of domestic
tourism (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2014; Life SE Asia Magazine 2015). However, the latter is a “floating market” only by name, since it is located on a hilly site, and does not adjoin a body of water; its only association with water is the artificial lake in a deep valley created by the dam, which, however, is not accessible from the establishment.

The principal new, innovative markets established in the vicinity of major tourist hubs or attractions are the Pattaya Floating Market opened in 2008 in Pattaya, the prime Southeast Asian resort city; the Ayothaya Floating Market, opened in 2010 on the outskirts of Ayutthaya, the old capital of Siam; and the Hua Hin Floating Market, renamed Hua-Hintique Walking Street (so called for a recently added display of antique cars) and Sam Phan Nam Hua Hin Floating Market. Both of the latter were opened in 2011 (Bangkok Post 2011) on artificial lakes on inland locations, off the leading southern resort town, Hua Hin. The “floating markets”, of Ayutthaya and Pattaya, both highly popular among tourists and locals, will here serve as examples of the type.

Ayothaya Floating Market, close to the Ayothaya Elephant Village, is co-owned by the latter’s founder. It is located “on and alongside a giant man made pond on a 30-rai [12 acres] plot of land” (Karnjanatawe 2010, p. 12), with two islands in its middle and a surrounding gallery of wooden booths along a narrow sidewalk. The market is themed by metonyms of the old royal city of Ayutthaya: its distinguishing mark is a replica of a part of the old city wall; lanes in the market were named after the streets in the old city. But the market was also intended to “recreate the charm and ambience of Old Siam” (ibid., p. 12) with other iconic cultural markers, such as arched wooden bridges to the islands on the lake, or the presentation of “classical dances from all four regions” of the country (Saengmanee 2010), performed several times during the day.

At the outset some vendors were “plying their goods on paddle boats” on the lake (Karnjanatawe 2010, p. 12), but most boats on which Thai dishes are prepared and sold are presently fixed along the banks of the lake (Figure 11) and of the narrow canal running through the bigger island, which serves as the principal food center. Covered boats in “traditional” style, taking tourists on brief round-trips, are the only boats that ply the lake.
The market features around 300 shops (Karnjanatawe 2010, p. 12), which have at the outset offered a wide variety of Thai dishes and crafts, as well as “handmade apparel, accessories and home décor items”, produced by local designers (Saengmanee 2010); at present, however, shops offering relatively cheap, mass-produced clothing items predominate in the galleries; while others sell food products or trinkets found in most other tourist-oriented markets.

The Ayothaya Floating Market is the most orthogenetic among the various new, innovative floating markets, with few, if any, elements extraneous to Thai cultural traditions. It is also more oriented to the domestic, rather than foreign tourists, than the other big innovative floating markets.

_Pattaya Floating Market_, in contrast, is significantly more heterogenetic. Established in 2008 about 15 kilometers south of central Pattaya, it was the first among the new, innovative “floating markets;” it is also the largest one, occupying about 27 acres.

Pattaya Floating Market is a planned, privately owned project, the only one of its kind which charges foreigners an entrance fee of 200 baht (about 6.00 USD); this is collected in a roundabout way: the visitors are given a receipt and a 200 baht ticket for a boat ride, but in a slight-of-hand the latter is taken away from them on entering the compound; though obviously a swindle, the procedure seems to be tolerated by the authorities.

The market is located on a huge artificial lake, large parts of which remain undeveloped. The main, older section consists of a series of artificial _klongs_, narrow canals bordered by galleries, styled on traditional Thai wooden dwellings, which serve mainly as shopping premises. Food-boats are fastened along the boardwalks on the banks of the _klongs_; there are no floating vendors. Visitors can tour the _klongs_, by hiring boats steered by women in thatched, colored peasant hats (Figure 12), or take excursions on larger, covered boats, marked “Pattaya Floating Market” in big letters.

The market is divided into four zones, which metonymically stand for the “four regions” (i.e. Central, North, Northeast and South) of Thailand, but the theming is hardly recognizable by visitors walking on the boardwalks along the shopping galleries. The shops are much more varied than those in the
Ayodhaya Floating Market, and carry a variety of modern consumer products, such as cosmetics, not usually associated with “floating markets”. That feature becomes dominant in the more recent extension of the market along a broad canal, running parallel to the lower part of the lake, called the “Top Shop Zone”, in which up-market consumer products of various Thai firms are on offer by rows of shops in new, Thai-style structures.

Several sculptures of mythological beings from Thai cultural traditions decorate the lake (Figure 13); the market features a “traditional Thai show,” and a ring for Thai boxing shows. Some facilities, such as a big Chinese restaurant and an emporium selling mainly Chinese goods, seem to be oriented to the preferences of Chinese tourists, who are presently the principal foreign visitors to the market. The popularity of the market among Chinese tourists is testified by its election as the best tourist attraction in Thailand in a survey by a Chinese website in 2015 (Huasoon 2015).

But the Pattaya Floating Market also displays several distinctive heterogenetic features, such as various branded consumer products, and several attractions not usually associated with “floating markets,” such as a “swinging bridge,” (Figure 14) a “parrot park,” a “hunted house,” and a ‘Love Lock” (Figure 15).

However these heterogenetic features are still relatively minor in comparison to those displayed by some other new, innovative “floating markets.” Thus, the Hua-Hintique Walking Street (previously known as the Hua Hin Floating Market), is a hybrid establishment, combining a display of antique cars (Figure 16) with a floating market around an artificial lake. The recently established Tung Bua Chom Floating Market, mentioned above, is probably the most heterogenetic among the new, innovative markets. It features not only full-sized, variously dressed ceramic figures and a variety of smaller figurines of what in Thailand is considered to be “garden decorations,” but also displays on its premises a Santa Claus with a reindeer-drawn sled, and big sculptures of diverse animals, such as a rhino (Figure 17), and of “robots” (Figure 18), made from junk metal; there is also an old airplane which children can prowl through for a fee, while in 2015 a “water-park” was under construction. This “floating market” points to a trend of change in recently opened new innovative “floating markets”: their gradual transformation into hybridized entertainment centers.
Conclusions
This article dealt with the unforeseen process of transformation of Thailand’s once declining local “floating markets” into flourishing attractions for a growing public of domestic urban excursionists and foreign tourists. I conceptualized this process in terms of a four-fold sequential typology; in this concluding section, some specific trends running through this typology will be explicated, and the principal theoretical issue, raised above, will be discussed: the extent of heterogeneization which the “floating markets” had undergone in that process.

1. Location: The old “floating markets” declined under the impact of development of road transportation. Those that at first attracted the attention of nostalgic excursionists, were located in peripheral or remote areas. The revival of the old, and the creation of new, neo-traditional markets was a response to nostalgic yearnings of Thai urbanites for the disappearing Old Siam. However, as “floating markets” became increasingly popular with the wider domestic public and foreign tourists as culinary and entertainment destinations, new, innovative markets were established in the proximity of major transportation arteries and tourist hubs, thus making them ironically accessible by the very means of transportation, which had caused the decline of their predecessors in an earlier period.

2. Temporal schedules: the change from an internal to an outsider public led to a change in the temporal schedules of the “floating markets”: rather that opening daily, or following the rhythm of the lunar calendar as was the custom in the past, the majority of the revived or new, neo-traditional markets follow an inverted rhythm of the working week, for the convenience of domestic excursionists: they are open over the weekends, and closed on work-days. Opening times were similarly adjusted: instead of opening early in the morning and closing at noon, they open late in the morning and close in the afternoon. The new, innovative markets catering to foreign tourists tend to be open daily; but, seeking to accommodate to the foreign tourists’ diurnal rhythm, some open only in the afternoon hours and close late in the evening.

3. Vendors: The vendors on the old “floating markets” have been mostly locals, and so were, at the outset, the vendors on revived markets and probably also on new, neo-traditional markets. However, with success, those markets experienced an influx of outsiders, not only from the surrounding area but
also from the cities, seeking to exploit the new economic opportunities offered by the growing numbers of visitors (Srikos, Phukamchanoad and Yordchim 2014; Vajirakachorn and Nepal 2014). The outsiders either bought out the local traders, rented local premises, or put up their own ventures. In some instances, the influx of vendors caused a significant expansion of the land-based market, even as the number of vending boats declined. However, such expansion was precluded in the new, innovative markets, because outsider vendors are not allowed to conduct business on their premises.

4. **Organization**: Most “floating markets” are fuzzily bounded aggregates of individual vendors, with a loose organizational structure. In the 2000s, however, a change in the organizational structure has taken place with the establishment of new, innovative “floating markets”: from open trade hubs to planned projects. The establishment of those markets was initiated by private entrepreneurs or companies, which developed comprehensive architectural plans, specifying the number of shops in the project. These were offered for rent to vendors and service providers. Such markets are bounded entities, which do not expand spontaneously, but only by planned accretions.

5. **Services**: “floating markets” have in the past served primarily as places of trade in local agricultural produce; the revived and new, neo-traditional “floating markets” serve primarily as culinary venues and shopping facilities for food, fruits and sweets, as well as a variety of inexpensive goods, such as clothing, crafts, souvenirs and various trinkets. Some of these markets also offer popular entertainments, such as “traditional” Thai singing and dancing performances. On some of the new, innovative “floating markets,” however, up-market products, such as brand-named fashions and cosmetics, and personal services such as Thai massage, or even “fish pedicure” are on offer, while the variety of entertainment opportunities is expanded.

6. **Theming**: The majority of “floating markets” do not have a unifying theme. Theming is found only in new, innovative markets, some of which were themed to represent metonymically various features of Old Siam or to symbolize a leading local attraction; others, while not strictly themed, adopted some specific markers, such as a display of antique cars, or giant robot sculptures, to distinguishing themselves from their competitors.
7. **Hybridization:** Several “floating markets,” particularly some of the new, innovative establishments, have introduced novel recreational facilities on their premises, such as a mini-railway, a water-park, or animal shows, thus in fact becoming hybridized entertainment centers, while retaining the attractive brand-name, “floating market”. Only in one instance was that brand-name given up, in favor of a more distinguishing one: the *Hua Hin Floating Market* was renamed as the *Hua-Hintique Walking Street*.

We now turn to the question posed in the introduction, whether the permutations of the “floating markets” in Thailand involve merely orthogenetic adaptations or modifications of Thai traditions, to respond to the desires and preferences of a new clientele, or a more far-reaching process of heterogeneization.

The findings of this study indicate that most of the changes and innovations in the markets were orthogenetic: the markets mainly incorporated elements of wider Thai traditions, adapting them to a new public of mainly domestic visitors. Significant heterogeneization has taken place only in a few of the more recently established innovative markets, which have introduced extrinsic features in their appearance, thus turning them increasingly into hybrid entertainment centers. It is important to stress, however, that there is no stable division between orthogenetic and innovative, heterogenetic cultural features in Thailand, since initially extraneous features tend to become over time incorporated into Thai culture; “floating markets” might be serving as one avenue of such incorporation.

Moreover, as at least one instance orthogenetic and heterogenetic features are intentionally combined: the entrance of the new Ban Nok Floating Market in Lopburi province is marked by a huge sculpture of a monkey (Figure 19) - an animal with deep roots in classical Thai culture, as well as a symbol of the province of Lopburi in which that market is located; but the monkey wears a pair of modern sports boots, an incongruity producing a remarkable humorous effect.

**Notes**

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References


Figure 1. Image of fruit boat paddled by woman in Central Thai peasant hat, Damnoen Saduak Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 2. Food boats on canal, Tha Kha Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.
Figure 3. Traffic on canal, Damnoen Saduak Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 4. Tourists on excursion boats, Damnoen Saduak Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.
Figure 5. Guest house on canal bank, Amphawa Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 6. Luxurious coffee-shop on canal bank, Amphawa Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.
Figure 7. New hotel on canal bank, Amphawa Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 8. View of Sam Chuk Riverside Market (2009). Source: the author.
Figure 9. View of old Ban Mai Riverside Market (2008).
Source: the author.

Figure 10. Poster of Floating Market in River City mall, Bangkok (2009).
Source: the author.
Figure 11. Food boats on lake bank, Ayothaya Floating Market (2010). Source: the author.

Figure 12. Woman in colored peasant hat paddling touring boat, Pattaya Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.
Figure 13. Image of Phayanak (mythical serpent), Pattaya Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 14. Swinging bridge, Pattaya Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.
Figure 15. Love Lock, Pattaya Floating Market (2016). Source: the author.

Figure 16. Antique cars display, Hua-Hintique Walking Street (previously Hua Hin Floating Market) (2015). Source: the author.
Figure 17. Rhino sculpture, Tung Bua Chom Floating Market (2015). Source: the author.

Figure 18. Robot sculpture, Tung Bua Chom Floating Market (2015). Source: the author.
Figure 19. Giant figure of monkey in sports boots, Ban Nok Floating Market (2015). Source: the author.