

The Evolution of Wet Markets in a Thai-Lao Border Town¹

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Abstract

Previous studies of wet markets have focused largely on hygiene and on the diversification of services in response to the needs of customers. This article examines the evolution of wet markets in a Thai-Lao border town within the broader social, political, and economic dynamics of the country. It is based on an empirical research study that used qualitative methods to obtain the required data. Three wet markets in Nakhon Phanom, a town on the Thai-Lao border and the Mekong river, were purposively selected. They are Thesaban, Chock Amnuay and Ban Pung sub-district wet markets. Relevant local authorities, the chair of the provincial chamber of commerce, business owners, market operators, and vendors in the wet markets were identified and interviewed, using in-depth interview guides. The research found that the origin and evolution of wet markets are related to the growth of the local economy. The growth of Nakhon Phanom markets was associated with the presence of an American military base and a Vietnam War refugee camp in the locality. While state policy regarding the construction of the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and establishing the Special Economic Zone may have boosted the growth of the local economy, it did not

necessarily promote the growth of wet markets. Moreover, many Lao people who used to shop at wet markets are now buying goods from modern superstores, while walking street markets, which were established to promote tourism, have attracted another segment of buyers. These factors challenge both wet market vendors and policy makers in their attempt to balance the country's and local economic growth.

Keywords: wet markets, border trade, Vietnam War, local economy

Introduction

Throughout the developing world, the exchange of goods between people of different places existed long before the advent of capitalism and the modern nation state. Trading between people on the two sides of the Mekong river was common. However, the establishment of nation states redefined the Mekong as the border separating the Thai and Lao nations. During the reign of King Rama V, the threat from western colonial powers, especially the United Kingdom and France, was the paramount concern of the Thai state. Several policies were implemented to prevent annexation by foreign powers. For example, the state took a number of actions to demarcate the border, including a survey of border lands using modern maps. The *Monthon Tesapiban* system was introduced as a part of administrative reform to replace the traditional *chao mueang* or city lord system. Officials from Bangkok were dispatched to govern the cities along the borders in order to integrate them into the central state administration. The presence of colonial powers, reforms, and the emergence of modern nation state borders brought about a number of changes that have profoundly affected people living in border areas (Promphakping, Thongyou, and Chamruspanth, 2014; Phongsiri, Thongyou and Apichatvullop, 2014; Winichakul, 2013).

Recently, the debate on borders has drawn the attention of several groups of sociologists. One group sees the border as a place weakly administered by the central state, thus, widening the gap for influential groups, usually outlaws, to play a vital role and take control over the area. Another group views border areas as being strictly

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controlled by the state power. Illegal acts along borders usually occur with the complicity of officials or indirect support from the state. Despite different points of view, both groups agree on one point, that is, movements across borders of both goods and people have been major drivers of neoliberalism, and such movements contribute to the extension of capital accumulation (Walker, 1999). From this point, it can be seen that petty commodity producers, such as vendors in local markets, might be both constrained and facilitated by such movements.

Nakhon Phanom has been an important border town between Thailand and Laos and was previously ruled by the same *chao mueang* as Khammouane province of Laos. People on the two sides of the Mekong were kinfolk who visited each other and exchanged goods with each other. However, after the French claimed the left bank of the Mekong river, including small islands in accordance with the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1893 (Theerasasawat, 2009), the Thai state (then known as Siam) was concerned about being annexed and losing sovereignty. As a result, Siam integrated the outposts into the central government administration. Affiliations with foreigners were prohibited or strictly controlled. Moreover, a new tax policy was imposed to replace the traditional labor conscription system. The state at that time placed a top priority on security. The integration of the local economy into the national and global markets was still low, primarily due to lack of transportation infrastructure. Local people continued to engage in sufficient production so that exchange of goods was minimal. However, the advent of the modern development era together with the Vietnam War spurred the growth of the local economy. The wet market of Nakhon Phanom province was a strong presence beginning around the 1950s, and since then the pulse of wet markets has been directly related to the rise and fall of the national and regional economies (Promphakping, et al., 2018b).

“Wet markets” is a term that is often used to refer to traditional markets. For anthropologists, the focus of market studies is often on the trade and entrepreneurial skills acquired the pre-capitalist economies (Geertz, 1973). Wet markets continue to play a number of roles. They are a source of earning a living for small peddlers as well

as a source of food for urban dwellers of the market area. The wet markets in central locations also provide supplies of goods, especially foods, to wet markets of the satellite markets outside of cities (Promphakping, et al., 2018a). German sociologist Max Weber (1947), proposed the idea of the division of labor, that is, that people were bounded to specific kinds of production (works), and this gave rise to the need to exchange. With the current growing urbanization, wet markets can be even more important.

Studies of wet markets in Thailand have not received much attention. Previous research used only two approaches. The first was the study of market hygiene, for example, improvements in a market’s structure or service system, and improvement in food safety in order to become a noteworthy wet market (Sornkasettrin, Sumpavamana, Chaitong, Eakrat and Chumee, 2014; Martnakoon, 2018). The second approach highlighted improvements in a market’s function, especially the transformation of a market into a tourist attraction (Suphachaturas and Panin, 2014; Thammaneeewong, et al., 2006). Neither approach has paid sufficient attention to the evolving roles of wet markets in relation to local socio-economic conditions. This article is concerned the rise and fall of wet markets as a result of the country’s socio-economic dynamics. The growth or subsidence of wet markets can affect the local economy and as well as the wellbeing of local people.

This study adopted a qualitative approach in which empirical data were collected from observation and in-depth interviews with purposively identified interviewees. A total of 30 interviewees were classified into the following four groups: 1) a group of eight who oversee the governance of market operation and policies, including the city mayor, the deputy city mayor, the chairman of the chamber of commerce and officials of the public health and the finance divisions of Nakhon Phanom municipality, and the wet market manager; 2) a group of 12 vendors in the market; 3) a group of 7 buyers; and 4) business owners. The data obtained were analyzed using content analysis techniques (Phothisita, 2007). The scope of this study was limited to the following three wet markets in Nakhon Phanom: Thesaban, Chock Amnuay, and Ban Phueng sub-district wet market.

Market in the History of Nakhon Phanom Province

The history of Nakhon Phanom province dates back to over several hundred years before that of Sukhothai, which is generally considered the first Thai kingdom. The province is thought to be the location and the center of the kingdom of Si Khotrabun, which flourished during the 12th - 16th centuries. The capital of the kingdom was originally located on the eastern bank of the Mekong river. After Wat Phra That Phanom was built, the capital was relocated to the western side of the Mekong, north of the temple. Its prime location enabled Si Khotrabun to be the center. Nakhon Phanom province, the modern name of Si Khotrabun, is home to diverse ethnic groups. As people on both sides of the river were part of the same kingdom and shared a similar ethnicity and culture, they travelled and traded across the Mekong River (Natsupha, 2017).

The pre-capitalist economy of Si Khotrabun varied by geography; those living on the plains would engage in rice farming, while people living in mountainous areas would engage in upland farming. The main types of products included cows, buffaloes, chickens, ducks, geese and pigs. Ancient works of literature recorded the taming of elephants for military purposes as well as various crafts, such as metal and silverwork, sculpture, casting, and the weaving of silk and cotton textiles. Pottery, such as bowls, pots, and jars, as well as basketry and carving were also commonly found in the community. These factors clearly demonstrate a kingdom with a certain division of labor and a level of household surplus, demonstrating the existence of trading since the time of the kingdom (Theerasasawat, 2008a). In addition, evidence found in a Lao history book published by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism of Laos (MICT) indicates that a market existed that time. Ban Talad was an old market located 80 kilometers away from the north of the Vientiane Wall (Natsupha, 2017).

Nakhon Phanom, in the records of Etienne Aymonier, a French explorer who arrived in Nakhon Phanom on January 19, 1882 (during the reign of King Rama V), was portrayed as follows:

In Nakhon Phanom, there are around 300 cottages scattered along the right side of the Mekong River. As the people live on plain areas, it is difficult to do rice farming when the tide is high. Rice paddies are located at the back of the village. There are five temples. Each has 10-20 monks. Besides rice farming, Lao people grow cotton and tobacco. They also fish in the river, trade acacia bark bought from Nong Khai, and sell cloth from Korat (Theerasasawat, 2008b: 75).

Clearly, the record not only reflects the physical circumstances and way of life of people in Nakhon Phanom who had a deep bond with the Mekong River, it also points out that trade had been carried out for a very long time. Aymonier's record indicates that cotton was for sale as it was included in the product lists of Chiang Khan, Nong Khai, That Phanom, and Nakhon Phanom. Tobacco was a cash crop grown in the provinces along the Mekong River where the villagers had only a limited area to grow rice. They fished and grew tobacco in order to have products to exchange with villagers who were able to grow rice, such as those from Mukdahan. They loaded tobacco and acacia bark from Nong Khai on their carts and traveled as far as Champasak province in Laos by crossing the border in Ubon Ratchathani. There, a market was formed along the border for people from both sides of the river to sell their products, such as pigs, ducks, chickens, fish, and a variety of vegetables. They also imported products, such as small metal chests, copper flagons, wool hats, blankets, and cotton. Thus, the record reveals that people from both sides of the river began their trade long ago and its atmosphere was bustling (Aymonier, 1895).

The market area of Nakhon Phanom, as the center of trade in the region, also served the communities located along the Songkhram River. Trade using the Mekong as a route of transportation was limited because the river's high tides and small rock islands were obstacles. The Songkhram river is a branch of the Mekong, 420 kilometers in length and with a gentler slope. The river meanders past the large Sakon Nakhon basin, which together with *pabung patham* (wetland forests)

makes the area rich in natural resources, such as fish, shrimp, clams, and wild products like herbs, logs and others. Furthermore, there was a village that had long been producing a substantial amount of salt to sell other villages in the Songkhram basin as it was the essential ingredient in fish products, such as fresh fish, sour fish, sun-dried fish, fermented fish, etc. The fish products became the communities' famous products even until today (Phetkham, 1997; Promphakping, et al., 2019). The richness of these resources made the communities in the Songkhram basin important sources of food supplied to the Nakhon Phanom market. However, trading in Nakhon Phanom was seldom regulated and controlled by the state.

Chinese and Vietnamese Traders and the Emergence of Nakhon Phanom Wet Market

Chinese traders played a vital role in driving the local economy in the northeast because they had expertise in trade. The Chinese first immigrated to Nakhon Phanom around 1917-1927. The majority of the immigrants were from Guangdong province, who initially came to Bangkok and then dispersed to various provinces in every region. Around 1917, the rice trade in the central plain of Thailand was expanded. The entourages of the nobility and the king played a leading role in rice growing investments in northern Bangkok outpost areas (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2018). Nakhon Phanom, as mentioned earlier, existed long before the establishment of the nation state. After the administrative changes in the reign of King Rama V, the city became a provincial center of state control and administration near the border area, in an attempt to integrate political power with the central state. Therefore, the city became a place for state administrative workers or officials that represented the central power. Because of the presence of both the state and Chinese traders, Nakhon Phanom evolved into a city of two functions, a local center for state control and a center of trade. The Chinese opened shops on primarily on Sunthonwijit road along the Mekong river. The road was well known as a part of the Chinese trade

community. They would act as middlemen to find products such as rice and wild goods from local communities and sell them in Bangkok, and then take products from Bangkok and other provinces back to sell to the local people. Because the Chinese community offered a large variety of modern products, their neighborhood became a prominent shopping area for people in Nakhon Phanom. The first Chinese language school, Tong Kia, was founded in 1947 for children of Chinese immigrants to study their ancestors' language in addition to the Thai curriculum in regular school. Later, the school became popular among Vietnamese and Thai people as well because they preferred to have their children educated there.

The Chinese traders who settled in Nakhon Phanom were the key economic drivers of the city (Chuaninee, 2014). In 1946, they officially established an association called Hua Khiew, which changed its name to the Chinese Traders Association in 1983. This association contributed to the economic role of the Chinese especially for large enterprises. The Vietnamese who came later preferred to marry Chinese rather than local people because they shared a similar culture and economic stability.

While the Chinese moved into Nakhon Phanom for economic reasons, the Vietnamese came primarily because of wars. The presence of the French and their colonization of Indo-China generated strong resistance by local city lords and their supporters. Resistance in central and northern Vietnam before World War II was strong, resulting in bloodshed that caused hundreds of Vietnamese to flee to Thailand. During the French colonization period prior to World War II, Vietnamese laborers were sent to work in French businesses and mines in southern Laos. The short Japanese occupation period during World War II allowed the rise of Vietnamese resistance movements, the dismantling of colonial administrative structures, and the seizure of businesses under the control of independence movements. However, the collapse of the Japanese-led 'New order in East Asia and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' led to the return of Indo-China to France, and the region entered into a new era of even more bloodshed.

One incident that sparked another influx of Vietnamese into Nakhon Phanom was the storming of Thakhek, the capital of Khammouane province, by the French in 1946. The incident was referred to as the day “Thakhek lay completely in ruins,” when around 3,000 Lao and Vietnamese were killed. About 40,000-50,000 Vietnamese refugees fled to Nakhon Phanom (Sripana, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, Thai state control of the first group of immigrants was relaxed, but after World War II, controls were tightened. Vietnamese refugees arriving in Nakhon Phanom initially lived along the Mekong river near Wat Okat and they later dispersed to different places. The Thai state, fearful of communism, developed alliances with Western powers, especially the United States. Consequently, remittances by Vietnamese immigrants to fund independence movements in their homeland came under scrutiny and were eventually prohibited. The state issued a policy to restrict the mobility of Vietnamese by determining specific places in which they could live. Those living outside the designated areas were ordered to relocate (Thongkaew, Srisontisuk and Chamruspanth, 2014). Meanwhile, the Thai state heightened fears about the Vietnamese spreading communism, which encouraged propagation of the “Tii Kaew” movement². During 1962-1965, such movements took place across the northeastern region, including Renu Nakhon district. The Tii Kaew movements caused the Vietnamese living near the district office to move out to other places, such as That Phanom, Ban Klang market, and Nakhon Phanom city. However, some villagers helped the Vietnamese find places to hide. As a result, some Vietnamese gradually became fully assimilated into the local population.

In immigrating to Thailand with limited capital, the Vietnamese out of necessity became hard-working and productive. They opened small businesses in urban and suburban areas. Their industriousness contributed significantly to the growth of the wet market Nakhon

Phanom. At an earlier market located around Wat Okat, most of the vendors were Vietnamese immigrants living in Nong Saeng, a community of Vietnamese Christians, and some lived in Ban Na Chok. The policy issued by the Thai government to restrict jobs for the Vietnamese forced them to earn their income mainly by growing vegetables, fishing, baking, and cooking Vietnamese food to sell at the market. Later, when the wet market was relocated to its place on Apiban Bancha road, the majority of vendors continued to be Vietnamese. Vietnamese vendors influenced the wet market administration and many of them were able to accumulate enough capital to expand their businesses outside the wet market (Sukaree, 2015; Suwanwong, 2016).

A Vietnamese woman who runs a restaurant recounted the hardships in her life when she moved to Nakhon Phanom as a child. Her parents had nine children and she and siblings, who were very close in age, never experienced teenage life. She said:

We didn't go to school because we were the children of Vietnamese. We started selling things when we were 10 years old. My mother was a fish seller in the wet market, buying fish from traders in Si Songkram district. We were responsible for carrying buckets of fish from the bus terminal to the market to be cut up for customers' orders. It was hard work, but we earned money. Once we saved enough money, we began selling fish, like Chinese flatfish. Fish selling has made me a restaurant owner today (Wanmai [Pseudonym], 2017).

These recollections not only reflect the diligence and patience of the Vietnamese, but also indicate their ability to elevate their status from market vendor to business owner. The arrival of the Chinese and Vietnamese contributed to a new form of city that serves as a place to exchange goods or a “market.” The settlement by the Chinese has been a crucial factor in the market’s existence because they came to trade, and not to produce anything. Similarly, the Vietnamese who came before World War II earned money by selling things. Thus, wet markets

² The term literally means “beating the Vietnamese,” a movement which was formed by a group of local villagers for the purpose of threatening and expelling the Vietnamese. *Kaew* is a derogatory northeastern word used to refer to the Vietnamese.

were places to provide food for the Chinese and traders in the city. The Nakhon Phanom wet market started to exist following the reforms in which the urban center both functioned as a center of trade and also integrated the outpost areas. Vietnamese immigrants, despite being under restrictions and control, provided an important impetus for wet markets to grow.

The US Military Base, the Refugee Camp, and a Bus Terminal

The Nakhon Phanom wet market came into existence in 1947 and continued to grow. The market furthered expanded with the arrival of American military bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War (1963-1975). The US government asked permission to build 12 bases in Thailand for air force operations, five of which were located in the northeastern region in the following provinces: Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, and Nakhon Phanom. The 56th Special Operations Wing of the US Air Force used Nakhon Phanom as their operating base during the years 1967-1975 with over 8,000 troops reportedly based there (Promphakping, 2018b). According to Kamwang (2015), the base enabled the local economy to soar. Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai traders from other regions as well a group of Sikh traders came to expand their trade in the northeastern region, especially the provinces with military bases. The Sikh traders, because of their ability to communicate in English, were successful in trading with the bases. Trading flourished around the bases because of the strength of the US dollar compared with the Thai baht. As a result, over 300 shops and entertainment spot sprang up to serve military personnel (Kamwang, 2015).

The US military base contributed significantly to the development of transportation. At the same time, the city's wet market expanded as the number of consumers grew. In the early 1970s, a Vietnamese businessman named Ko Min³ donated a piece of land to

the municipality to build a new wet market to replace the old one near the Mekong river, which was overcrowded and could no longer serve the needs of vendors. Part of the land he donated, which was already used as a parking area for minibuses from different districts, was reserved for building a bus terminal. After the relocation of the wet market, the land belonging to businesses adjacent to the new wet market was developed (Wanmai [Pseudonym], 2017). Buildings constructed there were used for commercial purposes, especially businesses connected to the wet market. This development transformed the market area into a new central trade center of the city. The convergence of a bus terminal and a wet market was common in many cities in Thailand. It can be concluded that the Nakhon Phanom wet market together with the bus terminal defined the central place in town. However, when the bus terminal was relocated to a new place in 1983, some businessmen attempted to develop a new wet market and businesses around the new bus terminal, but were not successful. Properties and two markets nearby were abandoned for a number of reasons, including changes in the mode of transportation and a decrease in the number of public bus users. The quality of public transportation had improved only minimally and consequently, most people came to rely on personal vehicles (Promphakping, 2018b).

The wet markets had expanded because of the US military base and they served the consumption needs of American soldiers. A large number of local people moved to work in the province, especially in entertainment and hospitality businesses such as hotels, restaurants, pubs, nightclubs, and lounges. These businesses existed to serve American soldiers, but the service providers, as local people, needed supplies from wet markets. One vendor in the market said that it was the most profitable time for her. Many people were able to establish themselves because whatever they sold, their products always sold out completely. The local economy of Nakhon Phanom at that time grew rapidly due to the soaring of purchasing power, both from US military personnel and those who provided services to them (Promphakping, 2018b).

³ Ko Min, a Vietnamese millionaire, used to own a gold mine in Vietnam. His family played several roles in Nakhon Phanom's economy, for example, as owner of Tangtrongchit Commercial College and several plots of land in the city.

The Vietnam War moved progressed in parallel with the Lao leftist movement, Khabuan Kan Pathet Lao, both guided by the Indo-China communist organization, Viet Min. Consequently, a large number of Laotians fled to Thailand to seek refuge. The Office of the National Security Council and the United Nations set up temporary camps for refugees along the borders. There were two refugee camps for Laotians in Nakhon Phanom: Ban Napoh and Ban Nong Saeng in the city. Both camps required food, consumer goods, and services, which contributed to the growth of wet markets, especially the one outside the city near Ban Napoh refugee camp. A small market rose to sell goods to the Laotians. The market was previously located near fences adjacent to the camp. After the camp closed, the area was developed into Ban Phueng wet market, where fresh food from the city and products from local farmers were sold. According to an interview with one of its vendors, there were no Vietnamese vendors there, probably because the Vietnamese were forced to live in a designated area when the market evolved, and most were concentrated around the Nakhon Phanom wet market.

The existence of Ban Phueng market, unlike that of Thesaban wet market, was driven by different groups of people. Its origin was not driven by inhabitants of Ban Phueng village but by the creation of the refugee camp that was set up there. Lao refugees shared a similar cultural background and similar consumption values with the people living in Ban Phueng, despite the fact that some of the Laotians came from ethnic minority groups or were highland people. Therefore, local products, such as vegetables, natural foods, including insects, wild animals, frogs, bamboo shoots and herbs; and surplus household products, could be sold at the camp. The regulation of the camp was flexible enough for the refugees to come out and buy food or household products at Ban Phueng market. The socio-economic development after the camp closed propelled the urbanization of the Ban Phueng area, especially because the consumption patterns and cultural values of local people became more urbanized. The wet market continued its services and expanded after the refugee camp's closure because of the growing

demand among local people. The rise of Ban Phueng wet market is similar to that of other markets across the country because of the spread of urbanization outside the conventional municipal boundary that had previously served as the center of trade (Promphakping, Inmuang and Phongsiri, 2019).

For the Vietnamese, the wet market was a vehicle by which they could accumulate wealth, which contributed significantly to the recent vigorous growth of Nakhon Phanom's local economy. A Vietnamese vendor living in Nakhon Phanom told the research team that under the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, integration and naturalization policies or the "New Thai" policy which allowed the Vietnamese to have Thai citizenship resulted in the Vietnamese investing in numerous businesses and services. One of the Vietnamese business owners estimated that over 70 percent of businesses in Nakhon Phanom were owned by Vietnamese. However, their influence on the business community remained second to the that of the Sino-Thai, who have a strong link with national and local politicians (Thaimai [Pseudonym], 2017).

It should be noted here that the presence of the US military in Thailand during the Vietnam War was part of the Thai government's policy of suppressing the communist party. The confrontation between communist insurgents and the government was mounted following a fight between villagers and officials in Ban Nabua, Renu Nakhon district, in 1965, an incident that the Communist Party of Thailand later referred to as the "First Gunfire Day" (Promphakping, Thongyou and Chamruspanth, 2017). The communist suppression policy was implemented in two ways. First, a law was imposed to keep people under control and to ban them from taking part in or supporting communist movements. People were not allowed to sell products, medical supplies, or food to those involved in communist movements. However, the communists arranged to have a group of supporters buy necessary products (especially rice) from a market in the sub-district or the city. Second, the government accelerated the construction of infrastructure, especially feeding roads and rural development.

Expenditures by American troops and infrastructure development of the state contributed to the fast-growing economy of Nakhon Phanom. In this respect, it is fair to say that the wars provided an impetus for the wet market of Nakhon Phanom to grow.

Cross-border Wet Markets

Because the Nakhon Phanom wet market was situated near the border, cross-border trade had a significant effect on both the growth and recession of the market. The well-known policy of turning Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace, the construction of the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, and the creation of the Special Economic Development Zone, all of which affected the wet market, will be discussed below.

In 1989, the government of General Chatichai Choonhavan initiated the policy of turning battlefields into marketplaces. The Ministry of Interior made an announcement on January 23, 1989 to reopen the Nakhon Phanom border crossing after it had been closed for almost 10 years. The change allowed traders and others from Khammouane province in Lao PDR to cross the border to buy products in Nakhon Phanom as they had done in the past. As a result, the border trade came alive again (Nakhon Phanom Immigration, 2012). There are six temporary border entry points: 1) Ban Paeng, 2) Tha Uthen district, 3) Nakhon Phanom city, and 4) That Phanom district. The other two are permanent border crossings: 1) Nakhon Phanom ferry terminal and 2) the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. A vendor in Nakhon Phanom wet market said that after the reopening of the border, her goods sold quickly and in great numbers because Lao traders came to buy a large stock of goods to sell in Lao PDR. Wet market customers from Laos bought not only food, but also clothes, home utensils, and miscellaneous items. Customers from Laos further fueled the Nakhon Phanom wet market after the end of the Vietnam War and the closing of the US military base, resulting in the shrinking of the economy and the wet market.

However, in the last ten years, Lao people's habits have changed and they prefer modern shopping at malls, such as Tesco Lotus and Makro, because they are more convenient and have lower prices on some items. The rise of modern trade has put the wet market in a state of uncertainty.

The construction of the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge connecting Nakhon Phanom province with Thakhek province in Laos was completed in 2011. The Thai government decided to invest in the project (Nakhon Phanom - Khammouane)⁴ as a means to boost cross-border trade. The bridge is 1,423.1 meters long and the road crossing it leads to Nanning, the capital city of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China (Jumlongnark and Tangpathomwong, 2013). This road extends the potential of economic prosperity through cross-border trade, considering the size of the economy and demands of southwest China. In 2011, a large amount of products were transported via the bridge, with a product value up to 7,032 million baht, which rose to 11,500 million baht in 2012. In 2013, export volumes across this bridge were estimated to double to 50,000 million baht and in 2014, reached 80,000 million baht. As of 2018, the sales value was expected to soar to over 100,000 million baht (Nakhon Phanom Customs House, 2018).

In addition to the presence of modern trade and the completion of the Friendship Bridge, Nakhon Phanom was recently declared one of the Special Economic Development Zones (SEZ phase 2) in accordance with the announcement of the Policy Committee of Special Economic Development Zones No. 2/2015. The SEZ of Nakhon Phanom includes a total of 13 sub-districts. Ten are in Mueang Nakhon Phanom district: Guruku, Tha Koh, Tha Sai, NaratKwai, Nai Mueang, Ban Phueng, Poh Tak, Nong Yat, Nong Saeng, and Atsamat. The rest are in Tha Uthen district and include Non Tan, Woen Phrabat, and Ramarat. The special economic zone covers approximately 800 square

⁴ One of the shipping roads that connects Thailand with Laos and China. There are five roads, as follows: R3A and R3B run from Chiang Rai, R8 runs from Bueng Kan, R9 runs from Mukdahan, and R12 runs from Nakhon Phanom.

kilometers or 500,000 acres of the total area of the province, which is 55,127 square kilometers or 3,445,414.32 acres. In the past few years, large logistic businesses have been increasingly interested in investing in special economic zones because of tax privileges (Office of the Nakhon Phanom Special Economic Development Zone, 2015).

In an interview with vendors in Nakhon Phanom Thesaban wet market, all agreed that during the period of the implementation of the policy of “turning a battlefield into a marketplace” and the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, the wet market was growing vigorously and bustling. Sales of fresh food, household products, and clothes were extremely good. The businesses around the wet market which sold a variety of general goods (ranging from clothes and shoes to household items and electric appliances) were doing extremely well, as these goods were not yet available in Laos. In Ban Phueng market, which is located further from the city, however, there was not much economic expansion overall. Moreover, the opening of the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and establishment of the special economic zone barely improved the growth of wet markets. A representative of the provincial chamber of commerce pointed out that economic growth of such projects did not do much for the local economy. For example, there were around 70 companies involved in exportation, but 50 percent of them were owned by foreigners and only 20 percent were owned by Thais. Local people were not involved in either production or consumption of goods transported through the bridge. The withering of demand particularly affected conventional stores surrounding wet markets, as these stores were relying on traditional types of logistics and supplies. Furthermore, the expansion of logistic systems via the third Friendship Bridge has clearly affected the economy of Mukdahan province. This can be seen in the plummeting in the value of exports through the second Friendship Bridge in Mukdahan linking Sawanakhet of Laos which previously stood above 60,000 million baht annually. After the operation of the third Friendship Bridge of Nakhon Phanom, the value dropped to just 8,000 million baht (Tansuwan, 2017).

Modern Retailing and Urbanization

In 1997, Lotus supermarket opened a new branch in Sakon Nakhon, a neighboring province west of Nakhon Phanom. Because Lao traders preferred modern things, they began to buy products there. The vendors in Nakhon Phanom Thesaban market started to see some negative effects but these were not major until Lotus opened a branch in Nakhon Phanom. After the third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened, transportation became more convenient for Lao and Vietnamese people who own vehicles. Big-C and Makro supermarkets responded by opening up branches in Nakhon Phanom, which had a major negative impact on shops surrounding the wet markets, as well as stalls inside the markets. The effects varied, depending on the type of merchandise. Some merchants had to give up their businesses, while fresh food stalls managed to survive while suffering a decline in sales clearly related to the opening of the supermarkets (Promphakping, 2018b).

In 2011, Nakhon Phanom municipality introduced a walking street held every Friday and Saturday on Sunthonwichit road. The walking street covered the area of the city’s landmark clock tower which once was a business center of the Chinese and Vietnamese. The primary aim of the walking street is to promote tourism and to revitalize the old city center. The main features of walking street are stalls selling foods and different kinds of products, which potentially can mean both a rival to and an extension of wet markets. That is, modern values of consumption may favor walking streets rather than wet markets, and therefore a reduction in the number of wet market customers. For the second reason, walking street food sellers mostly rely on raw material from wet markets, thus the boom in walking streets could potentially enhance wet market consumption (Office of the Nakhon Phanom Special Economic Development Zone, 2015).

As described earlier, the Thesaban wet market of Nakhon Phanom is located in a central place, the most highly urbanized area of the province. In the past few decades urban areas expanded, and the number of urban dwellers increased. According to the National Statistical Office (2012), during the 8-year period of 2004-2011, there

was a rapid growth in products and services in Nakhon Phanom city. While there were 13 wholesale shops and 588 retailers in 2004, the number increased dramatically to 238 wholesale shops and 5,983 retailers by 2011. Currently, there are 102 hotels in the province and the number is expected to rise in order to serve tourists during holiday times. The number of rental rooms, commercial buildings, and houses constructed rose by an average of 300 percent. Investment groups from the central region, such as C.P. Land Public Co, Ltd., took over two hotels – the Fortune Riverview and the View Khong. Accommodations expanded to around 1,500 rooms in areas outside the city, such as That Phanom, Renunakhon, Ban Paeng, and Nagae (Prachachat, 2018).

An increase in population or an expansion of services and tourist industries contributes to an increasing demand for food. However, the wet market's role of providing food for urban people has faded despite the fact that people still need fresh food. Retail food businesses have recently replaced the original kind of trade and have gained in popularity. Changes in the lifestyle and tastes of people are also important factors. Those wet markets clustered around the bus terminal need to make adjustments as the means of transportation has changed as well. Conventional shops selling commodities like clothes, shoes, agricultural products, and tools that were previously clustered around the wet market for economic reasons of sharing space also need to make immediate adjustments because people have become interested in the walking street or prefer shopping online. Most importantly, there has been a significant change in the food preferences of urban people. Whether wet markets survive or not mainly depends on how well their vendors adapt and respond to new challenges (Promphakping, et al., 2018a; 2018b).

Conclusion

The Nakhon Phanom wet market expanded because of the growth of the local economy, especially from the settlements of the Chinese and their trade and the Vietnamese who fled wars. Thus the wet market was connected with the local economy, in other words, food products

such as fresh vegetables, fish protein, meat, and others were produced locally and sold in the Nakhon Phanom wet market, which served as a source of food supplies for urban consumers. This conclusion indicates that wet markets are a crucial part of the local economy, while the rise and recession of wet markets are inherently tied to wider socio-economic development. This study has pointed out that the growth of modern food retail businesses that come with department stores and convenience stores has negatively affected the wet markets. This phenomenon, the “supermarket revolution” (Reaedon and Gulati, 2008) is occurring widely in developing countries.

The present study proposes that research and policies should increasingly focus on the importance of local food systems. The term “local food system” does not refer to local food, but to a food system that has a short supply chain. To allow modern retail businesses to be the main food providers could potentially lead to the destruction of those elements of food production that are not part of the supply chain of large businesses that monopolize the entire market. This situation could cause local people to rely heavily on food produced further away or in other countries. Wet markets are the heart of local food systems whose supply chain involves local producers.

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