



South-East Asian cities are waging war on street food

Big mistake

The taxi-driver parks in the way a drunkard falls asleep: suddenly, with little regard for his surroundings, he leaps from his cab, eyes alight with anticipation, striding toward Jae Deh. She shouts at him, pointing at the bucket of bones at her feet: “You’re late! All finished!” The cabbie, who has the gelled hair, tinted aviator glasses and raspy voice of a low-level mafioso from New Jersey, staggers backwards as though he’s been shot: “I’ve been coming here for ten years! You didn’t save any for me?” Ms Jae Deh’s mock-stern look collapses into merriment. She points him towards the nearest table, handing him a plate of rice and a bowl of braised pork. He helps himself to a couple of chilies and a coriander frond, keeping up a steady patter with Ms Jae Deh and her husband, Su Kit.



Street food in Bangkok - Picture not present in the original text © YouTube

The couple has been selling *khao kha moo* (rice with stewed pork shanks) on Soi Thong Lo, a side street off one of Bangkok’s main roads, since 1987, when they were just 16. Now their adult daughter works alongside them. The family is not rich, but Mr Su Kit says that on a good day they clear around 4,000 baht (\$113). Like many of Bangkok’s street-food vendors, they came to the city from Isaan – Thailand’s poor and dusty north-east – in search of a better life. And they have built one, shank by shank.

So have millions of families like theirs across South-East Asia. As the young and ambitious have moved from fields to factories, making the region among the world’s fastest-growing and fastest-urbanising, others have moved to feed them. In cities, time is scarce and dwellings are small: people need something cheap, filling and convenient. Ricketty plastic tables spread across pavements all over South-East Asia, offering a quick meal of *pho* (noodle soup) in Saigon, *khao kha moo* in Bangkok, *mie bakso* (meatball and noodles) in Jakarta and *mohinga* (fish soup) in Yangon. Office workers in pressed shirts and builders in orange jumpsuits sit cheek by jowl. According to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2.5bn people eat street food daily. The most recent study available, from 2007, found that Bangkok’s 20,000 vendors provided residents with 40% of their food; two-thirds of households ate at least one meal a day on the street.

Providing those meals is not an easy life. Jane, a no-nonsense woman who does a brisk late-night business in papaya salad and hotpots, begins setting up around 3pm; her tables are still packed at midnight. Luung Pan, who sells pork-noodle soup and dumplings with his son just up the street from Ms Jae Deh, starts cooking at 4am and rarely makes it home before 9.30pm. But he takes tremendous satisfaction in having fed the same people for a decade. He prides himself on how few of his customers feel the need to season their meal with the condiments he sets out on each table: "I know my soup is number one." Says Mr Su Kit: "We are happy. We can work as a family and we have our own place."

But trouble looms. Unless there is a sudden and unlikely reprieve, vendors will no longer be able to sell food on Soi Thong Lo's pavements after April 17th. Local officials have decided to bar them from the footpath, on the grounds that they impede pedestrians, make a mess and attract vermin. The displaced vendors can at least find company in their misery: over the past two years Bangkok's municipal government has evicted almost 15,000 hawkers from the city's pavements. Previous governments threatened to crack down; this one, obsessed as it is with public order, is actually doing it. Other vendors have lost their space to landlords cashing in on Bangkok's booming property market, particularly in the area around Thong Lo.

Bangkok's government is not the only one seeking to "tidy up" its streets. Authorities in Ho Chi Minh City are moving vendors away from congested areas, and "advising them on more stable ways to make a living". A similar drive is under way in Jakarta.

Soi Thong Lo's hawkers are scrambling to secure their livelihoods. Mr Su Kit points to his hair, which is shorn on the sides but sprouts, turnip-like, into a topknot on his crown: "Thinking about what to do has turned my hair white." He found a shop one street away, but that would cost him 30,000 baht a month to rent – compared with his current 1,000-baht fee to the district – as well as a 100,000-baht deposit. Mr Luung Pan wonders whether a nearby bank might rent him part of its outside space. Jane says she may just go back home to Chiang Mai, a northern city.

For the most part, Bangkok's hawkers have proved to be adept improvisers. Thrown off the streets, they have recongregated in basements and courtyards. As long as a demand exists for cheap, quick food, supply will follow.

Singapore faced this problem years ago, and moved its hawkers off the streets into dedicated, convenient "hawker centres", with running water and regular hygiene inspections. That may be feasible for a small rich country, but not for big poor ones such as Indonesia or Myanmar. Even if it were feasible, it would not be desirable. Street stalls may cause a bit of congestion and disorder, but they also make urban life more vibrant.

Hawkish on hawkers

Banyan hopes that Bangkok's government – and the authorities in the region's other megacities – look beyond the superficial inconveniences caused by street-food vendors, and think harder about their role in the city's fabric. There is a reason food trucks have begun to populate the streets of American and European cities: not everyone wants the formality of a restaurant, much less the anomie of a sandwich at a desk.

Asia's hawkers do not just provide cheap, delicious food for the masses. They also embody the beating heart of a national cuisine. Perhaps most important, they create a community: the chance for citizens of all classes to rub shoulders over a bowl of noodles swimming in fish broth. Move the vendors along, and people will still find places to fill their bellies. But they will have a harder time finding each other.