

Evolution of Riverside Commercial Districts in the Central Region of Thailand

วิวัฒนาการของย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำในพื้นที่ภาคกลางของประเทศไทย

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คำสำคัญ: พื้นที่ริมน้ำ, ย่านการค้าริมน้ำ, การพัฒนาพื้นที่ริมน้ำ, พื้นที่ภาคกลาง, ตลาดเก่า, ย่านการค้า

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Several riverside commercial districts in Thailand were once prosperous and the centers of development in those areas. Now, they are quiet, in a state of urban shrinkage, and seeing shops close. Most of the people in these areas are elderly due to the emergence of new commercial districts along the roads. This article aims to study the evolution of riverside commercial districts in the central region of Thailand to identify the factors that cause changes in the districts.

Methods: The researcher studied and analyzed the physical aspects of the towns, the use of rivers, the forms, and the commercial roles of the districts.

Results: The evolution of the riverside commercial districts in the central region can be divided into five periods: 1) the early period from the Dvaravati to Sukhothai, 2) the traditional or feudal period from the Ayutthaya to the early Rattanakosin, 3) the prosperous or free trade period, the raft-boat trading quarters and the riverside commercial districts from the reign of King Rama IV until 1957, 4) the decline or industrial period after the Chao Phraya Dam was in operation, and 5) the revival period or the riverside commercial districts under the concept of the creative economy. The factors affecting the change in the role of the riverside commercial districts in the central region district are politics, transportation, environment, natural disasters, the economy, and society.

Application of this study: This article is useful for those interested in cultural capital, local history and wisdom, architecture, urban planning, and creative design. It can be used to further develop creative work, tourism activities, cultural communication, and the creative economy, for example, applying the information to writing novels and designing scenes for films and animations.

Conclusions: The influx of outsiders and the evolving needs of local residents have driven the transformation of the riverside commercial districts. If a district lacked effective planning, management, and governance to solve environmental, natural disasters, economic pressures, and societal problems, its residents may begin to seek opportunities from new commercial locations, possibly leading to the deterioration of the old districts, leaving them shrunken or abandoned. These phenomena have always occurred through history, but nowadays, new commercial areas are usually not located along the rivers.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: ย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำหลายแห่งในประเทศไทยเคยมีความรุ่งเรืองและเป็นศูนย์กลางความเจริญของพื้นที่ แต่ปัจจุบันกลับอยู่ในสภาวะเมืองหด มีสภาพเรียบเหงา ร้านค้าปิดตัว คนในพื้นที่ส่วนใหญ่เป็นผู้สูงอายุ เนื่องจากเกิดย่านใหม่ตามแนวถนน บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาวิวัฒนาการของย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำ ในพื้นที่ภาคกลางของประเทศไทย เพื่อค้นหาปัจจัยที่ทำให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงในย่าน

วิธีการศึกษา: ผู้วิจัยศึกษาและวิเคราะห์ประเด็นด้านกายภาพของเมือง การใช้ประโยชน์จากแม่น้ำลำคลอง รูปแบบและบทบาททางการค้าของย่านเหล่านั้น

ผลการศึกษา: วิวัฒนาการของย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำในพื้นที่ภาคกลาง สามารถแบ่งออกได้ 5 ยุค ประกอบไปด้วย 1) ยุคเริ่มต้น ชุมชนโบราณสมัยทวารวดี ถึง สุโขทัย 2) ยุคดั้งเดิม หรือ ยุคศักดินา ย่านการค้าเรือแพ สมัยอยุธยา ถึง ต้นรัตนโกสินทร์ 3) ยุครุ่งเรือง หรือ ยุคเสรีการค้า ย่านการค้าเรือแพและย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำ รัชกาลที่ 4 จนถึงก่อน พ.ศ. 2500 4) ยุคเสื่อมถอย หรือ ยุคอุตสาหกรรม ย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำ หลังจากเขื่อนเจ้าพระยาเปิดใช้งาน และ 5) ยุคฟื้นฟู ย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำภายใต้แนวคิดเศรษฐกิจสร้างสรรค์ ปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงบทบาทของย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำในพื้นที่ภาคกลาง ได้แก่ ด้านการเมือง ด้านการคมนาคม ด้านสภาพแวดล้อม ด้านภัยธรรมชาติ ด้านเศรษฐกิจ และด้านสังคม

การประยุกต์ใช้: บทความนี้มีประโยชน์สำหรับผู้สนใจงานด้านทุนทางวัฒนธรรม ประวัติศาสตร์และภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น สถาปัตยกรรม การออกแบบผังเมือง และงานออกแบบสร้างสรรค์ สามารถใช้ต่อยอดในงานสร้างสรรค์ กิจกรรมการท่องเที่ยว การสื่อสารทางวัฒนธรรม และเศรษฐกิจสร้างสรรค์ เช่น การนำข้อมูลมาใช้ในการเขียนนิยาย และออกแบบฉากในภาพยนตร์และแอนิเมชัน

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บทสรุป: การเข้ามาของคนนอกพื้นที่ และความต้องการของคนในพื้นที่ เป็นสิ่งกระตุ้นให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงของย่านการค้าริมแม่น้ำ หากย่านใดขาดการวางแผน การจัดการ และการเมืองที่ดี ในการแก้ไขปัญหาสภาพแวดล้อม ภัยธรรมชาติ เศรษฐกิจ และ สังคม จะส่งผลกระทบต่อกลุ่มคนเหล่านั้นออกไปแสวงหาโอกาสจากพื้นที่การค้าใหม่ อาจนำไปสู่การเสื่อมสภาพของย่านการค้าเดิม ให้อยู่ในสภาพเมืองหด หรือ ย่านร้าง ซึ่งปรากฏการณ์เหล่านี้เกิดเสมอตั้งแต่อดีตเพียงแต่ปัจจุบันย่านการค้าที่เกิดขึ้นใหม่ มักไม่ได้ยอมรับแม่น้ำ

Introduction

The central region of Thailand according to the National Geographic Board 1977 which divided the area of Thailand according to geographical characteristics. (See Figure 1) has traces of prehistoric human habitation from small groups living in caves and rock shelters scattered throughout the forests sand along the coast. There is evidence of cave paintings, such as Khao-Pla-Ra in Uthai-Thani and Khao-Hua-Mak in Nakhon-Nayok. Later, groups of people from outside the area travelled to settle. The first group migrated from southern China, through Vietnam, to the northeast and Chao Phraya River basin to settle in the mountains and then trade forest goods and minerals with the local people. The second group was ancient Indians who travelled to trade and exchange products with people on the mainland, in the Tha-Chin and Mae-Klong river basins. Those people learned, adapted and exchanged knowledge and cultures between races through marriage (Vallipodom, 2011 : 11, 12, 16, 19, 20, 63). They moved to settle in the lowlands along the river (Nartsupha, 2020 : 1, 2), a delta, a fertile area formed by sediment accumulation at the river mouth before flowing into the sea. (Songsiri, 2021 : 63) People in this period used rivers and canals as water sources for consumption, transportation, housing and agriculture (Vallipodom, 2021 : 150), including trading and exchanging goods between communities. Some communities had an increased population and developed into important political towns and economic ports. As a result, there were trading areas along the river or riverside commercial districts.

The riverside commercial districts consist of the following elements: 1) There are stories, tales, or legends about the river. 2) There are ways of life, practice, occupations and activities related to rivers or canals for trade, travel, catching aquatic animals, etc. 3) There are objects, equipment, items, goods, and products related to the river, such as nets, boats, rafts, logs, and river fish. 4) Architecture or places were built to support river trade, such as shophouses, riverside houses, piers, riverside shrines, riverside temples, etc. If any district lost any element, that area would be considered an old district or an old market.



Figure 1 The Central Provinces of Thailand
(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025a)

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The evolution of riverside commercial districts is often divided according to the kingdom's era. The content is often about the old towns of the lower central region, such as the studies of Kanchanakpan (1968) and Jiwakul et al. (1982). There are few studies about the content of commercial districts in the upper central region. Meanwhile, Wrenn (1983) described the development of cities and waterfronts in coastal areas in North America, starting from small villages before developing into riverside industrial areas in large cities. Pekin (2013) developed Wrenn's concept by dividing the process of change of riverfront areas into four periods: emergence, growth, deterioration, and rediscovery.

Ancient Trading Center from the Dvaravati Period and Sukhothai Kingdom

1. The physical aspects of the towns and how the towns use the river

Ancient towns in the Dvaravati period in the central region, such as U-Thong in Suphan-Buri, Sap-Champa in Lopburi, U-Tapao in Chainat, Kok-Mai-Den in Nakhon-Sawan, and Si-Thep in Phetchabun, generally have moats or ridges in the shape of circles, ovals, and almost rectangles. People in this period did not live only within the town walls as ancient sites or small brick buildings were found inside and outside (The Fine Arts Department, n.d.). Meanwhile, ancient towns in the Sukhothai kingdom often had geometric rectangle moats, such as Tri-Trung in Kamphaeng-Phet, Phra-Bang in Nakhon-Sawan, and Si-Satchanalai in Sukhothai. Most ancient towns in both periods had moats near rivers for public utilities and transportation (See Figure 2). However, in some towns located far from rivers, such as Sukhothai and Chan-Sen in Nakhon-Sawan, irrigation systems were built to divert water from rivers, mountains, or lakes to be used in the town (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, n.d.).



Figure 2 Ancient Towns in the Dvaravati and Sukhothai Period

(Source: Google Maps, 2025)

2. The characteristics and the commercial roles of riverside districts

Archaeological evidence was found on the coast and in ancient town areas of Dvaravati, such as glass beads, coins, pottery, and shipwrecks. This indicates that those towns had trading activities with the ancient Indians, Chinese from the Tang Dynasty, and people from the Middle East or Persians from the Abbasid Dynasty. (Khunsong, 2015 : 2527), including the Srivijaya Kingdom in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula (Khunsong, 2014 : 9). The Dvaravati people traded with outsiders by sailing through the mangrove forests and sandbars in the Dvaravati Bay, Bang-Khun-Thian in Bangkok, and Phra-Pradaeng in Samut-Prakan, and the floodplain in Ayutthaya, Samut-Prakan, Samut-Sakhon (Hutangkura, 2014 : 28-31). Local products in the Dvaravati period were assumed to be agricultural products, forest products, pottery,

and metal products (Khunsong, 2014 : 17), whose raw materials imported from the Tenasserim range in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi (Rattananungsikul, 2012 : 108).

Sukhothai had a market called Talad-Pasan (ตลาดปสาน) or a shophouse market (Fine Arts Department, 1934 : 14) for selling dry goods. It was a community market with regular trading (Kanchanakpan, 1968 : 27), but Thaiarry (2005 : 77) suggested that it was likely a caravan-like trading community. In addition, there were forests or areas of goods, such as coconut forests, charcoal forests, and flea markets scattered throughout the town, and outside of it (Jiwakul et al., 1982 : 3), where people could trade cows, horses, elephants, as well as silver and gold (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2012a). The area around the moat in Sukhothai town was used for agriculture, growing crops such as rice, areca nuts, betel nuts, mangoes, tamarinds, coconuts and jackfruit (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2012b).

Markets from Dvaravati to Sukhothai kingdom were mostly ground markets with open spaces and trading houses or shophouses for storing goods (Suphachaturas & Panin, 2014 : 1599). As for the areas along the riverbanks near the town's moats or canals, it assumed that there were buildings used to store forest products, pottery, and Sangkhalok ceramics (Suphachaturas & Panin, 2014 : 1599) before they were exported to sell by sea. These buildings were likely temporary stilt houses along the riverbanks that would be in shallow water or floodwater according to the season.

In this era, most trading activities were near the forests, in open areas, and away from the rivers. However, people still used the river to transport goods and travel.

Floating Markets in the Ayutthaya and Early Rattanakosin Periods

1. The physical aspects of towns and how the towns use the rivers

Some towns from the Ayutthaya to early Rattanakosin periods were in moats or fortresses, such as Phitsanulok, Nakhon-Thai, Phichai, Phichit, and Lop-buri. Some towns moved away from the moats and settled on high ground, such as Nakhon-Sawan. Some towns moved out of the old locations and settled in new moats or fortresses, such as Kamphaeng-Phet. Some were new towns without moats or fortresses, such as Uthai-Thani and Nonarom. All four types of old towns were near rivers (See Figure 3). Rivers, canals, or moats surround the capitals of the kingdoms of Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin to protect against enemies and for transportation. In addition, canals were dug within the cities to transport goods and connect to the outer towns and coastal areas to trade with people outside the kingdoms. In the areas around the capitals, canals were dug that branched off the rivers for gardening and rice farming. (Vallipodom, 2021 : 144).

Since the Ayutthaya period, people in the central region have often lived scattered along rivers. Most of their residences are made of hardwood and bamboo with woven and bonded techniques. They are single-storey houses raised on stilts and extending into the river to allow the current to wash away dirt (Vallipodom, 2021 : 143) and to protect against flooding and wild animals (See Figure 4). Stilt houses on higher ground had space underneath for various activities (200th Anniversary Celebration Organizing Committee, 1982b : 78). The areas along the riverbanks were for orchards, farms, and livestock, as well as temples, which were the centres of the community (Vallipodom, 2021 : 143). People lived along rivers and riverbanks partly because a feudal system governs the country. All citizens were Prai and had no land ownership because the king owned all property (Nartsupha, 2020 : 8, 9).

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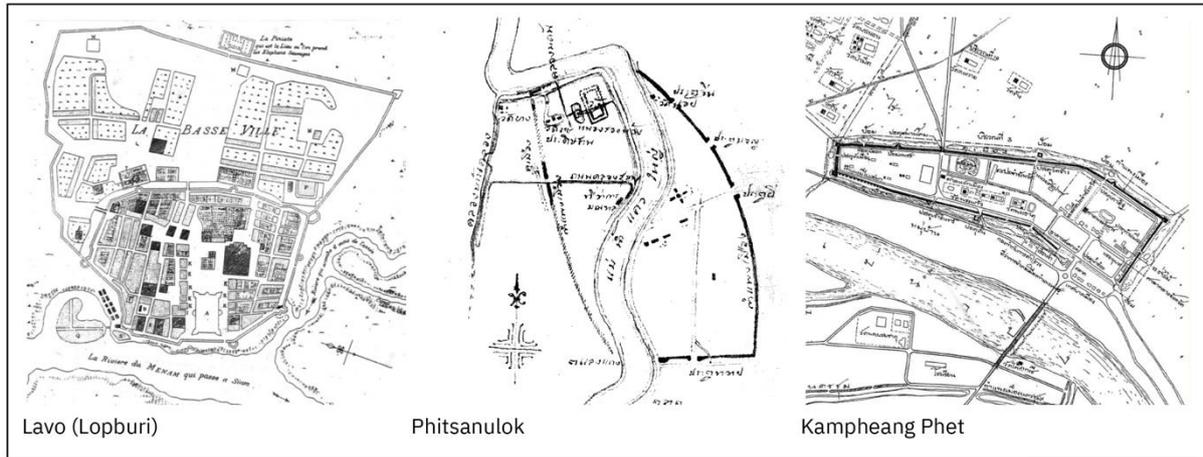


Figure 3 Major Cities in Ayutthaya Kingdom (Left to Right)

(Source: Public Relations Group Office of Fine arts Department, n.d.; Vajirayana, n.d.; Finearts Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park, n.d.)



Figure 4 A Siamese House

(Source: La Loubère, 1693)

2. The characteristics and the commercial roles of riverside districts

Ayutthaya has many floating markets and production areas spread throughout residential communities, mostly along the riverbanks. The floating markets were where merchant ships and rafts gathered. Some were the anchorages for junks and ships that came to trade. These ships and rafts were places of trade and residence (Suphachaturas & Panin, 2014 : 1599-1600). As for the Chinese shops, they were often built as large stores and warehouses along the riverbanks (Jiwakul et al., 1982 : 3). In addition, there were ground markets and Talad-Pasal (ตลาดพาสาล), which appeared in the law of 1899. Kanchanakpan (1968 : 66, 115) Talad-Pasan (ตลาดปสาน) in the Sukhothai period later distorted into Talad-Yisan (ตลาดยี่สาน) which The Royal Institute Dictionary defines it as a market selling dry goods like clothes.

In the Thonburi and Rattanakosin period, most people lived on the Thonburi side of the river. They worked as farmers and transported their goods to sell at floating markets, which were like street vendors on land but used boats and rafts to transport various products to sell, taking advantage of the ebb and flow of the tides to travel along water sources. Some vendors would bring products from the floating markets, such as dried goods and groceries, to sell in the land markets, which were temporary sheds on land rented from royalty, nobles, or temples (See Figure 5). Floating markets

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in other towns were located at canal mouths or junctions between rivers and canals. These were community areas where people could travel conveniently by boat and raft. In addition, there were markets selling products from other towns, which were local production and foreign districts such as Ban-Bat, Ban-Mo, Ban-Pun, Khlong-Ong-Ang, etc. (Jiwakul et al., 1982 : 6-11)

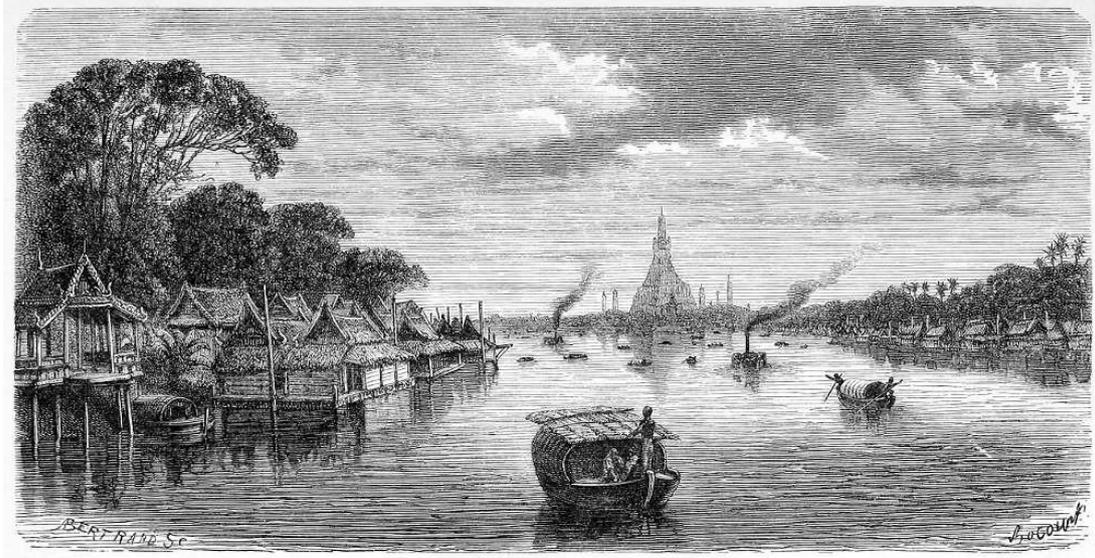


Figure 5 General View of Bangkok

(Source: Mouhot, 1864)

Trade during the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods flourished in city. The royal warehouse was responsible for overseeing trade and controlling the purchase and sale of specific products, preventing the people from selling directly to foreign merchants. In addition, there was income from various forms of tax collection, such as port fees for ships entering the tax collection checkpoints (Kaosol, 2019 : 86). As for the transportation of goods between the capital and the central provinces, it was usually carried out as an order from the capital to tributary cities. For instance, during the reign of King Rama III, Nakhon Sawan was required to deliver goods such as teak, bamboo, heartwood, and rubberwood to Bangkok (Khuttranon, 1985) and during the reign of King Rama IV, Nan and Phitsanulok sent cutting teak tied into rafts to Bangkok (Pallagoix, 2009 : 80).

During this period, local people were satisfied with their agricultural life (Kanokphongchai, 2007 : 167) and did subsistence farming. They did trade as a secondary job. The merchants would row boats to buy and sell goods in nearby areas. Trading with other towns, such as Suphan-Buri to Nakhon-Sawan and Nakhon-Pathom, took several nights to travel (Nartsupha, 2020 : 55, 56, 61). It is consistent with Pallagoix (2009 : 80), who stated that during the reign of King Rama IV, travelling from Nakhon-Sawan to Phitsanulok took up to five days, but only three villages were found along the way. It shows that there were not many villages in the upper central region. Additionally, there were often problems with the robbery of goods along the way. (Mektrirat, 1985 : 439).

In this era, most people settled along the riverbanks, resulting in floating markets spreading throughout the communities. However, due to centralization, trade and exchange of goods flourished in the capital and major cities in the lower central region.

Water Trading After the Bowring Treaty in 1855

1. The physical aspects of towns and how the towns use the river

Many old towns have moved their city halls and mayor's residences out of the old town areas, except for Ayutthaya, Phitsanulok, Phichai and Suphan-Buri. Some towns were newly established, such as Uttaradit, Khanuworalak and Banphot-Phisai (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1972 : 41-42). Many towns had problems with shallow rivers during the hot season, making them unnavigable. They had to move their towns to new locations, such as Ang-Thong, Sing-Buri and especially Phichit, where almost all government officials and people lived on rafts because the new location was in a lowland area that flooded frequently (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1972 : 37).

After the Bowring Treaty of 1855, Siam opened free trade with foreign countries. Consulates were established in the capital. Oversea people began to settle, do business and build modern houses and shops. Residences and shops in this period began to develop into wooden and two-storey shophouses (200th Anniversary Celebration Organizing Committee, 1982a : 57, 554). In line with Pallagoix (2009 : 65), houses in Bangkok were divided into brick-and-mortar houses, wooden houses, and bamboo houses, which often caught fire. In this period, foreigners began to build sled mills and rice mills to accommodate teak logs and rice paddy brought down from the North (Khun Wichitmatra, 1966 : 63). The central region was promoted as a source of rice and agricultural products. To export to the world market, in 1905–1906, rice production in the central region was up to 98 per cent of the country's total exports (Nartsupha, 2020 : 79-80).

2. The characteristics and the commercial roles of riverside districts

The urbanization of Bangkok expanded to the Phra-Nakhon side. New roads were built, resulting in the emergence of ground markets and many street shopping areas, especially along Charoen-Krung Road (200th Anniversary Celebration Organizing Committee, 1982a : 59, 62). Fresh markets were developed to be modern and sanitary. Industrial areas, rice mills, warehouses, and factories were still located along the canal near the river for the convenience of transporting goods (Jiwakul et al., 1982 : 15, 17, 18). On the Thonburi side, raft houses and houses along the banks of rivers and canals gradually moved up to be built on the banks and riverbanks because western steamboats came to sail in the rivers and canals, causing waves to hit and damage the residences (Vallipodom, 2021 : 145).

In the upper central region, water transportation and trade by steamboats between Bangkok and the northern regions of Thailand grew considerably. Many towns and villages in upper Ayutthaya were used as stopping points for passenger boats during the journey, such as Pak-Bang in Sing-Buri (Angkurawatcharaphan, et al., 2016 : 51) and Phayuha-Khiri in Nakhon-Sawan (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1972 : 45). Many towns became large rice trading ports with rafts and boats moored along both sides of the river, such as Ban Sakae-Krang in Uthai-Thani and Ban Paknam-Pho in Nakhon-Sawan (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1972 : 46). In particular, Ban Pak-Nam-Pho was a gathering place for traders who floated logs from the north (See Figures 6 and 7). Timber trading companies, such as the Pamai-Tanya-Phon-Lamsam (ป่าไม้รัตนัญญะผลล้าชา), the Borneo Company, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, and the East Asiatic Company, were established along the riverbanks. (Chemsripong, 1985 : 217)

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Figure 6 Architecture in Riverside Commercial Districts (Left to Right)

(Source: The National Archives of Thailand, 1906a; The National Archives of Thailand, 1906b; UWM Libraries Digital Collections, 1937a; 1937b)

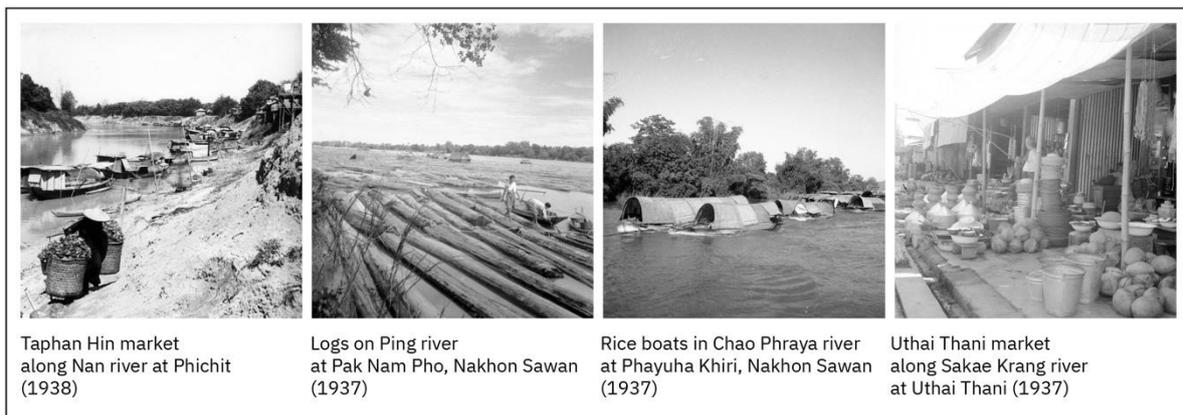


Figure 7 Riverside Commercial Districts and Trading Activities (Left to Right)

(Source: UWM Libraries Digital Collections, 1938; 1937c; 1937d; 1937e)

Such changes began simultaneously with the migration and occupation of overseas Chinese groups and Siam Chinese. During 1850–1900, the towns in the upper central region, such as Sukhothai, Tha-It (Uttaradit), Phitsanulok, and Phichit, developed into trading centres with many Chinese residents (Skinner, 2021 : 133). However, before this, the Hainanese were the first Chinese to pioneer and settle in the towns in the upper central region, from Phichit to Nan, and Sukhothai to Phrae (Skinner, 2021 : 129). This led to the establishment of raft trading communities, sawmills, and shipyards along the riverbanks, such as Tha-Lo in Phichit and Pak-Nam-Pho in Nakhon Sawan (Skinner, 2021 : 131). It also led to the construction of shrines on the riverbanks, such as Talad-Tai in Phitsanulok, Wang-Krot in Phichit, and Pak-Bang in Sing-Buri, etc. (See Figure 8).

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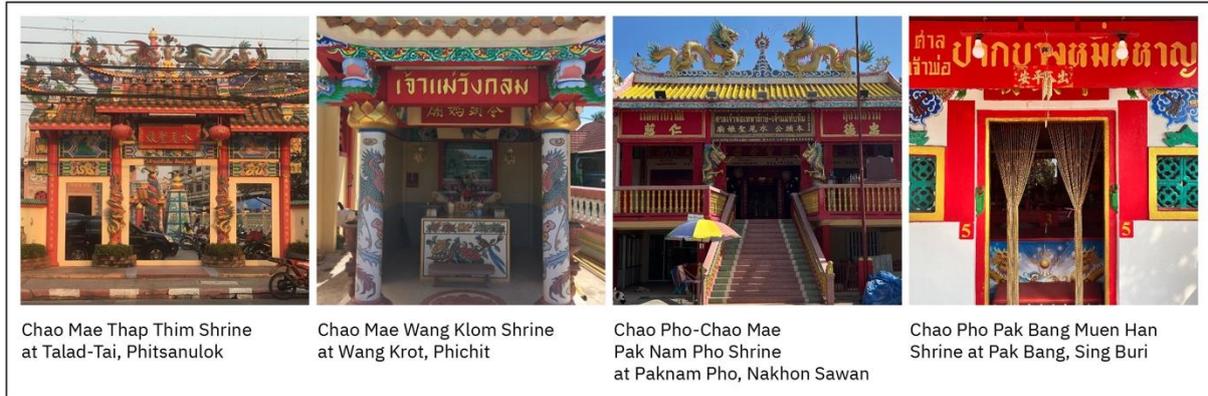


Figure 8 Shrines Near the Riverside Commercial Districts

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025b)

When Siam opened the northern railway lines as Lopburi to Pak-Nam-Pho and Pak-Nam-Pho to Chiang-Mai in 1900 and 1922, respectively, people began to travel and transport goods between areas by railway. As a result, new communities and commercial districts emerged in front of the railway stations, which were often located not far from the river, such as Lopburi, Thap-Khrit, Bang-Mun-Nak, Taphan-Hin, Phitsanulok, and Sawankhalok (See Figure 9). Skinner (2021 : 277) stated that from 1918–1931, the most significant Chinese immigrants entered Thailand, with an average of almost 95,000 people per month, to work as labourers. Teochew and Hakka people, who originally lived and worked in Bangkok and old towns in the lower central region, such as Ratchaburi and Nakhon Pathom, began to migrate to work in the upper central region by railway. The raft trading community began to expand its trading area to the shore. Shops along the river developed from small wooden huts to wooden shophouses with folding doors (Kanokphongchai, 2007 : 178–179). It became a riverside commercial district with the operation of hotels, theatres, opium dens, brothels, distilleries, gambling dens, and ferry services. Government officials or private individuals assume the responsibility of being a tax collector called Chao-Pasi-Nai-Arkon (เจ้าภาษีนายอากร). In Nakhon-Sawan, there were Khun Prajak Chinkit, Khun Kamchorkaikit, and Khun Rueangthai (Chemsripong, 1985 : 218).

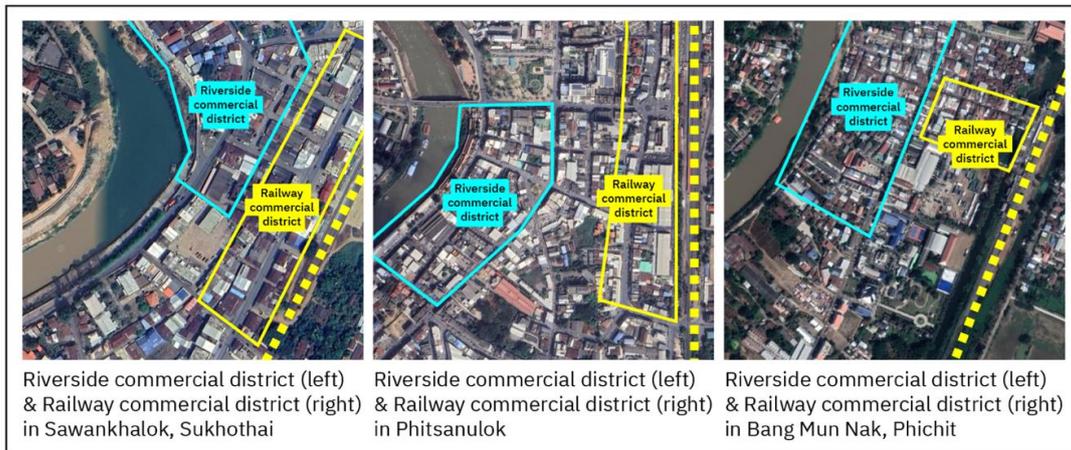


Figure 9 Commercial Districts Along the Riverside and Railway.

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025c)

During this era, Free trade spread to cities and villages in the upper central region. The transportation of goods between the North and Bangkok led to the development of railways and roads. Trade moved up the riverbank, and there were many wooden shophouses and commercial buildings.

Riverside Commercial Districts After the opening of the Decha-Tiwong Bridge in 1950

1. The physical aspects of the towns and how the towns use the rivers

After the opening of the Decha-Tiwong Bridge in Nakhon-Sawan in 1950 to connect land travel between Bangkok and the upper central region, the Chao-Phraya Dam and Bhumibol Dam were in operation in 1957 and 1964, respectively, to prevent recurring flooding in Bangkok and its vicinity (Songsiri, 2021 : 199) and to alleviate droughts affecting agriculture in the central region (Royal Irrigation Department, 1957 : 29). This coupled with the end of the northern teak concession in 1959 (Saranukromthai, n.d.). Water transport activities between the North and Central gradually lost significance. The central region of Thailand changed from an agricultural river society to an industrial society. Wooden shophouses in the town gradually changed to western-style shophouses and commercial buildings. Roads were built to accommodate urbanization and factories, filling canals in many areas to build roads and residences (Vallipodom, 2021 : 24). Concrete bridges were built across the river to connect the town and the countryside. People lived more on land and preferred to travel by car, bus, and train. As a result, passenger boats and cable cars gradually closed.

Many towns along the river often face problems of riverbank erosion and collapse, such as at Wang-Krot in Phichit. They had to demolish the old wooden shophouses to build flood barriers. (Pinwanich & Mallikamalai, 2012 : 194). In some areas, the height of roads and flood barriers block the river's perspective, such as Sukhothai, Sing-Buri, and Pak-Nam-Pho in Nakhon-Sawan. The communities barely use the river and canals in their daily lives. In addition, wooden shophouses in old commercial districts often caught fire, such as Talad-Tai in Phitsanulok in 1957 and the commercial district along Thesa Road in Kamphaeng-Phet in 1963. As a result of the fire, the old commercial district began to lose popularity. Although modern commercial buildings replaced the burned wooden shophouses, people and vendors preferred other commercial districts far from the river.

2. The characteristics and the commercial roles of the districts

There has been urbanization in the suburbs. New commercial districts are being developed to meet people's lifestyles. The old commercial districts along river in the inner city have become shrinking cities because there were no new business models (Rattanawaraha, 2020). Alleys and roads in the districts, which were once suitable for walking and shopping, have become congested due to the density of people and the number of vehicles. Many entrepreneurs have moved to operate or expand their businesses in the suburbs because of traffic congestion, lack of parking space, and the high rent for buildings in the districts. This is consistent with the study by Sriwichien, Keeratiboorana, and Soungsaweng (2015 : 51) that found that external factors that caused some riverside commercial districts in Suphan-Buri to collapse include the emergence of road transportation, the construction of new bridges across the river, the increase in local fairs, and the construction of supermarkets. Internal factors include a need for more unity in the local community and vendors moving out of the area.

The riverside commercial districts that had water transportation and goods transport links and still maintained the atmosphere of the past through shophouses and cultural activities have become old markets or old riverside commercial districts. They have started to lose their significance as a place for goods transport and water transportation, becoming land-based commercial districts along the riverbanks. Riverside commercial districts have become old markets with few operators. Many shophouses have deteriorated or have been abandoned because there was no successor to the businesses. They are used as warehouses or cheap rental accommodations, such as Wang-Krot Old Market in Phichit, Som-Siew Old Market in Nakhon-Sawan, Pak-Bang Old Market in Sing-Buri, and Talad-Lang in Lopburi. Many commercial

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districts outside the towns have also been abandoned, and there are no commercial activities because the commercial centre has changed its location to be closer to the road network, farther from the rivers. Then, people in the areas moved out (See Figure 10).

It is consistent with Wrenn (1983 : 10-11), who stated that when the railways were built, the coastal roads began to decline in use. The city centre was separated from the coastal areas. Highways were built close to the coast, limiting access to the city. Office buildings and shops along the coast were converted into warehouses. If waterborne trade declined in importance, the coastal buildings were demolished to make way for roads or expressways. The waterfront deteriorated when people turned to railways (Pekin, 2013 : 174). However, many districts in the towns have maintained their status as commercial districts by expanding their commercial districts inland. However, the river was hardly used for trade.

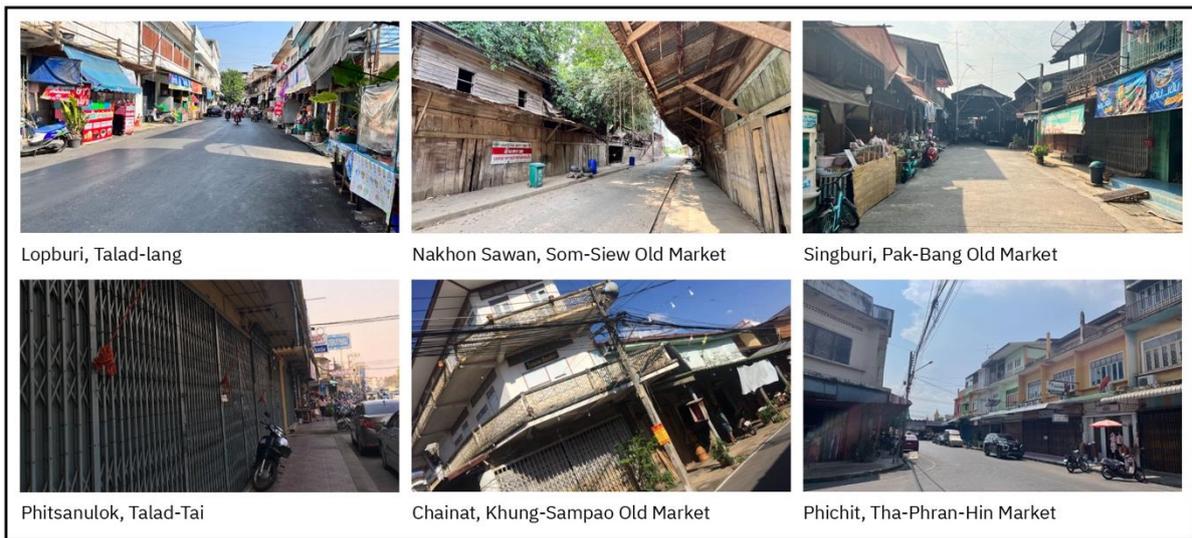


Figure 10 Riverside Commercial Districts in Central Region of Thailand

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025d)

This process of change towards degeneration is continuous. In the early days, although water travel and the transportation of goods had become less critical, the riverside commercial districts had remained the central business districts, where people from other areas travelled to shop. Later, they became old, crowded and deteriorated. Old shophouses are unable to accommodate expanding businesses because most are located on temple land or state property and cannot be easily renovated or altered. They gradually moved to more spacious and convenient outer areas. Residential areas, housing estates, and modern shopping malls emerged on the outskirts of towns and highways. People did not need to travel into the old commercial districts along riverside to buy goods.

Tourism has a role in stimulating the domestic economy (Sawangchot, 2018 : 101). It began with establishing the advertising department of Thailand's Railway in 1924 to encourage travelling by train. Then, it became the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) established in 1979 (Phumthani, 2003 : 165, 167). Later, the Tourism Year of Thailand was organized in 1987 to present Thainess in terms of rural areas. The government encouraged local people to bring their local culture to showcase for tourism, such as the boat parade in Phichit (Sawangchot, 2018 : 101) and the Khlong-Lat-Phli Floating Market or the Lao-Tak-Luk Floating Market in Ratchaburi (Pongajarn et al., 2016 : 112). After 2000, the concepts of cultural capital (Throsby, 2001) and the creative economy (Howkins, 2001) as a new economy were disseminated and played a role in developing creative works in Thailand. To further develop the economic value, in 2015,

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the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC) and the Creative Economy Agency (CEA) jointly promoted Charoen-Krung district, Bangkok, to become a prototype creative district of Thailand (Songwanpong & Kosolkanchan, 2016 : 33).

Many agencies see opportunities and the value of the old commercial districts along rivers, starting to present old architecture, cultural diversity, and local stories to present local identity for the economic revitalization of the districts. In Bangkok, investment has been in developing and improving old properties such as ports, warehouse areas, rice mills, factories, and vacant areas along the river into modern shopping centres. They often integrate historical stories, cultural activities, objects and the environment of the old districts as part of the brand, such as Asiatique, Iconsiam, and Terminal 21 Rama 3. Some areas have been developed into community malls, such as Tha-Maharaj and Tha-Wang-Lang, and some were developed into creative spaces, such as Jam Factory. Upcountry, old commercial districts along rivers have been developed into cultural tourist attractions, old markets, walking streets, and cultural streets, such as the Khlong-Kang Pier Market in Nakhon-Sawan and Wang-Krot Old Market in Phichit. Many markets have become successful and well-known. They have continued to develop. However, many are unsuccessful due to a lack of management and support from both the government and the community, such as the increase in local trade fairs, resulting in a decrease in the number of customers from the riverside markets (Sriwichien, Keeratiboorana, & Soungsaweng, 2015 : 50).

Many old commercial districts have been revitalized to be outstanding by taking advantage of the riverside scenery and local lifestyles as tourist attractions, such as Sam-Chuk Old Market in Suphan-Buri, Khung-Sampao Old Market in Chai-Nat, Ban Sakae-Krang Old Market in Uthai-Thani, and Nakhon-Chum Retro Market in Kamphaeng-Phet. The role of old commercial districts is not just a place for shopping, but also a place for learning culture and creating inspiration. This fulfils the needs of middle-class people who are tired of suburban life and yearn for the past to return, to travel, and to create businesses in the old districts, such as coffee shops, boutique hotels, contemporary art galleries, and co-working spaces (Wongrujirawanich, 2019). This brings the once quiet old commercial districts back to life driven by creativity or waterfront 3.0 (Carta, 2012 : 4), such as in Song-Wat, Talad-Noi and Bang Mot Canal communities in Bangkok, Talad-Tai in Phitsanulok, and The Old City Hall of Sing-Buri. They have become venues for various outdoor creative activities, such as the Bangkok Design Week (Bangkok), Bangmod Festival (Bangkok), Phitsanulok Ploi-Kai (Phitsanulok) and Sang See Sing Festival (Sing-Buri) (See Figure 11). In addition, the local citizens have used stories, lifestyles, products and tools, and places in their areas to conserve and resolve conflicts in the communities, such as the gathering of people in Khlong-Sam Community, Pathum-Thani to preserve the community from demolition to build a road, which led to the establishment of a community museum.

The old district has taken advantage of the cultural capital, developing it into a cultural and creative economy district to attract tourists who desire authenticity and discover stories from the past, including creating unity among people in the community.

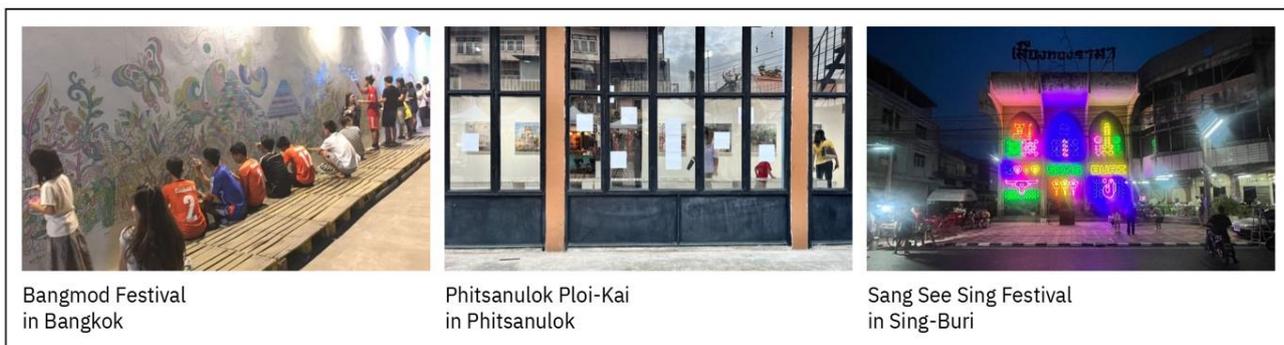


Figure 11 Creative Activities in Riverside Communities and Commercial Districts

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025e)

Discussion and Conclusion

1. Discussion

This academic article divides the evolution of the riverside commercial district according to the trading activities and social changes in Thailand, which is different from the study of Kanchanakpan (1968) and the research of Jiwakul et al. (1982) that divides according to the era of the kingdom. However, this article is consistent with the study of Pekin (2013) in terms of waterfront development, which starts from emergence, growth, decline, and rediscovery. However, in terms of growth, this article divided into the traditional period and the prosperous period, which are related to the governance and social changes in Thailand.

In the past, the city's lord was the one who chose the location of the city, leading to settlements, residential areas, agricultural fields, and commercial districts along rivers. The government centers were then moved to these densely populated areas. When there was free trade in the upper central region, new trading hubs and commercial districts outside the old cities emerged. If an area had a lot of ethnic diversity, there would be many temples, Chinese shrines, mosques, Sikh temples, Hindu temples and Christian churches. Local architecture and places, originally used to support activities and lifestyles of people in riverside communities, had been developed to include passenger piers, floating oil pumps, ferry pontoons, etc. to support the entry of people from outside. Businesses such as shops, restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues, as well as factories, repair shops, and manufacturing sites emerged.

As population density increased, commercial districts expanded inland. Commercial buildings replaced agricultural fields. Vacant and public spaces began to disappear, along with the architectural features related to the river. Due to transportation restrictions and land utilization issues, businesses and industrial factories relocated far from the river, where they were newer, larger, and more affordable. As a result, the state of urban shrinkage occurred in small riverside commercial districts, followed by large commercial districts (CBD) in the cities (See Figure 12). These reflect that people's lifestyles had changed from relying on riverside areas for their livelihoods and daily uses to living on land, which was more convenient. Such changes led to the decline of river-related activities and their popularity. Land-based activities are now given primary significance in architecture, facilities and urban planning.



Figure 12 Evolution of Community Maps of Nakhon-Sawan City

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025f)

Evolution of Riverside Commercial Districts in the Central Region of Thailand, E4566 (1-20)

The entry of outsiders (buyers, sellers, investors, labourers, tourists, etc.) and the needs of local people have influenced the transformation of the districts over the past, leading to the exchange of goods and resources, and transportation and technology between communities inside and outside the district. However, suppose that any district lacked effective planning, management and politics to solve transportation, environmental, natural disasters, economic, and societal problems. This would affect those people, possibly leading to the deterioration of the old districts, leaving them in a state of shrinking or decay. At the same time, the deterioration of the riverside commercial districts has resulted in the emergence of new commercial districts in nearby areas. These phenomena have always occurred in the past, but currently, the newly emerging commercial districts are usually not located along the river.

2. Conclusion

2.1 Evolution of the Riverside Commercial Districts in the Central Region

When considering the physical aspects of the town, the use of rivers, the characteristics of the districts, and the commercial roles, it can divide the evolution of the riverside commercial districts in the central region into five periods (See Figure 13).

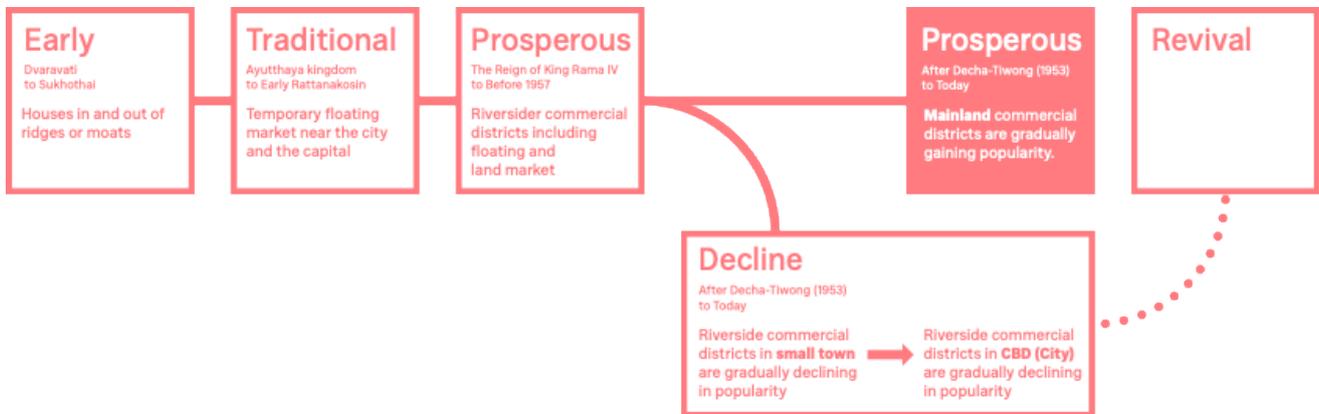


Figure 13 Evolution of Riverside Commercial Districts in Central Region of Thailand

(Source: Rianthong & Pangkesorn, 2025g)

The early period or the riverside community period: This was ancient communities from the Dvaravati to Sukhothai kingdom. The towns had ridges or moats near water sources for making a living, travelling, and transporting goods to various communities and towns. Within the moats were temples and pagodas. People lived both inside and outside the moat. Most of the commercial districts were in open spaces away from the river. It is believed that there were storage buildings along the rivers in the form of stilt houses for storing goods before transporting them onto boats and rafts.

The traditional period or the feudal period: Floating markets in the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods. Towns in this period had moats or fortresses, and many rebuilt without fortresses. Most residences were stilt houses or raft houses near a water source for their living, transportation, and goods transport. There were religious sites and farms located near the communities. The commercial districts were floating markets with rafts, boats, and wooden huts along the riverbanks. Trade flourished in the lower central region, especially the Phra-Nakhon or the capital in this period. The ruling class controlled most exported and imported goods. The upper central region, up from Ayutthaya, had sparse populations and towns.

The prosperous period or the free trade period: In the reign of King Rama IV, most raft houses and shops moved to the riverbank. The capital city had roads and commercial districts on land. When the Bowring Treaty of 1855 was signed, there were activities of trading, transporting goods and travelling by boat, spreading to the upper central region. There were many resting points and water trading ports. Later, the emergence of the railway caused more Chinese people to migrate to the upper central region. The water market moved to the shore. There were wooden and brick shophouses in riverside commercial districts. There were government offices, buildings on state property, religious buildings, hotels, entertainment venues, restaurants, bus stations and factories located near the areas.

The decline period or the industrial period: The riverside commercial districts gradually declined, most notably after the Decha-Tiwong Bridge was in operation in 1953. There was urbanization in the suburbs far from the rivers and the districts. Most houses were built on land. People preferred to travel by car and train. When the Chao-Phraya Dam opened, and the northern teak concession came to an end, water-based trade and transportation activities in the upper central region became less significant. Many ports and riverside commercial districts had no use of the river for trade and transportation. In addition, some towns in the lower central region below the Chao-Phraya Dam still have some water transportation activities. The riverside commercial districts in this period began to deteriorate, become crowded, and lack maintenance. Some have been abandoned, with no new activities or businesses, and have become old commercial districts and storage areas. The small commercial districts along rivers in the sub-districts began to decline first, followed by the district in CBD.

The revival period or the creative economy period: The riverside commercial districts followed the concept of the creative economy. Almost all houses have moved to land. People mainly travel by car. Living, travelling, and transportation of goods occur only in some parts of the lower central region. Tourism and cultural learning have occurred in old riverside districts. Some districts have become learning areas, activity spaces, and include new businesses, including commercial, creative, and cultural areas, to satisfy people's yearning for the past.

2.2 Factors of the Change in the Role of the Riverside Commercial Districts

The change in the role of the riverside commercial district in the central region consists of six factors.

Political factors: In the past, the government and city administrators were the ones who determined the direction of city development, policies, economic plans, concessions, urban planning, and the construction of public facilities in the district. Many projects affected people's way of life in the riverside commercial districts, such as the construction of large dams and flood barriers, the construction of riverside roads, and the relocation of government offices and schools from old districts. However, some government projects operated according to the local people, such as relocating the old city to a new location in a gathering place for people.

Transportation factors: Rivers and canals have lost their role in travelling and transporting goods in commercial districts, especially in the upper central region. It is contrary to land transportation, which has become popular, leading to new commercial districts along roads and railways.

Environmental factors: Most old riverside commercial districts are shophouses and commercial buildings, often located on temple- or government-owned land. The streets are small, so the districts have traffic congestion problems and a lack of parking space. Therefore, they cannot accommodate expanding businesses. It causes large businesses to move out of the area. In addition, the old commercial districts are often wooden shophouses or old buildings that are often not maintained or renovated, leading to problems related to the environment, overcrowding, and the decline of urban areas. When there is a fire, shopkeepers move to do business elsewhere. Even though the areas were developed and renovated to be modern, they are often less popular.

Natural disaster factors: Drought in the area is an obstacle to water travelling and transportation. In addition, flooding causes the riverbanks to collapse and flood. In the past, these factors led to the relocation of cities and commercial districts. Recently, the government has reduced this problem by building flood barriers and riverside roads, forcing the residential and commercial districts to be moved away from the riverbank and canals.

Economic factors: During the prosperous period, local products and resources from the north were transported to the lower central region, and products from Bangkok were transported to the north, leading new riverside communities and commercial districts to distribute products to suburbs. Modern trade and new transportation systems have made buying and selling goods easier. In addition, there are always local fairs. Because of this, buyers do not travel to buy products in the district. In addition, high living costs and rents push shops and residents away to the suburbs. However, the creative economic model has helped develop old riverside commercial districts into cultural tourism attractions and creative spaces that attract people to the district.

Social factors: In the past, the emergence of riverside commercial districts often began in residential communities. However, some districts began as commercial gathering places. The role of commercial districts was sustained by relationships between people inside and outside the districts, leading to social activities such as local traditions that helped create unity and connection among people in the communities. However, when old businesses lacked successors, the new generation did not return to the districts, new entrepreneurs moved out, and people outside did not enter the districts. The commercial districts have become quiet and have lost their charm that attracts visitors and investors.

The development of riverfront commercial districts often starts with a place for leisure, such as entertainment venues, and cinemas, followed by investment in services and culture. As the area begins to lose commercial appeal to outsiders, it may be possible to tap into creativity, in line with the concept of Carta (2012: 4). This approach often occurs in small commercial districts that still have human resources, stories, or cultural buildings remaining, while large riverside commercial districts of the city have mostly lost their riverside lifestyle and old architecture to urban development. However, stories and evidence from the past suggest that it could create awareness and lead to the development of the area in a creative way. Therefore, the development of the riverside district is not just about developing facilities and buildings, but also creating awareness among local people about the potential and roots of the area by studying the evolution of the district in each period.

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This article is part of a doctoral dissertation on the topic of Cultural Capital in Pak Nam Pho Commercial District, Nakhon Sawan Province, Towards Participatory Art and Design to Enhance Learning in the Old Commercial District along the River.

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