

## ***Bangkok Street Food Variety and Its Relationship in Spatial Aspect***

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### **Abstract**

In Bangkok, the capital and the largest city of Thailand, street food provides local with cheap and convenient access to a variety of foods and a means of making a living. Even though, Thai foods are prepared daily in the most of every Thai households, yet, trading food has been a common economic activity since the old days. The development of street food became more functioning and part of daily consumption way of urban living, especially in the city where people spend most of the time outside their houses. Its contributions to urban life go beyond their own informal employment, as it generates demand and supply for a wide range of services provided by other informal and formal workers. This article purposes to examine the relationship between urban dining culture and food varieties in spatial planning aspect with Bangkok as an area of study. Street food business in fifty districts was investigated and analyzed into three parts: street food vendor, street food character, and street food location. The initial result shows that urban dining culture relates to street food distribution, but contrasts with the government policy, which concentrates on abolition. This will lead into policy suggestion for the importance of street food in the city.

Keywords: dining culture, street food, distribution, spatial aspect

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## Introduction

In Bangkok, the capital and the largest city of Thailand, street food vending provided local with cheap and convenient access to a variety of foods and a means of making a living. Even though, Thai foods are prepared daily in the most of every Thai households, yet, trading food is a common economic activity since the old days. The development of street food became more functioning and part of daily consumption way of urban living, especially in the city where people spend most of the time outside their houses.

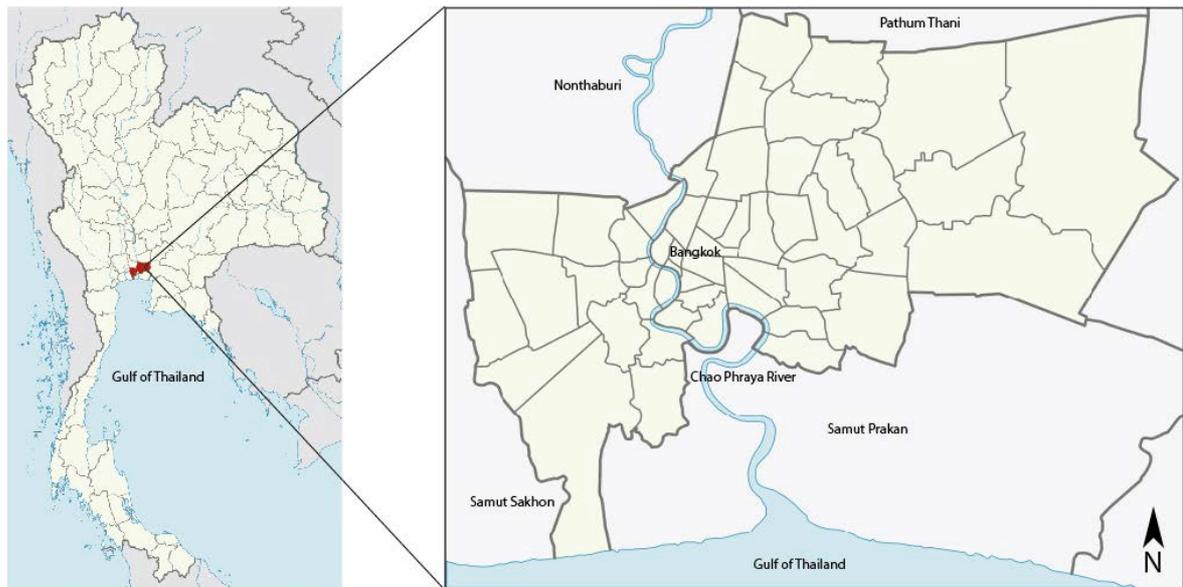


Figure 1: Location of Bangkok

The Times (18 April 2017) stated, “in 2016, Bangkok was voted as the world’s best destination for street food” for 2 consecutive years. It shows that street food is very popular among both local and international tourist, as it is delicious, easy access, and cheap. Most street foods are cheaper on average than restaurant meals. From the study of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2.5 billion people eat street food every day<sup>1</sup>. Its contributions to urban life go beyond their own informal employment, as it generates demand and supply for a wide range of services provided by other informal and formal workers: (1) as a source of food for low to middle income workers, (2) as an economic activity, which generates income for urban poor, and (3) as a social connector due to the variety of its customers<sup>2</sup>.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to analyze Bangkok street food by examining the relationship between urban dining culture and food varieties in spatial planning aspect. With the conclusion of this article, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) can use it as database for street food management and think of it in policy terms as economic assets to cities, while endure in the city within the contemporary urban context. Because street food is one of the important part of the city, which captures and responds to Bangkok’s urban life.

<sup>1</sup> Etkin, N.L. (2009) *Foods of Association: Biocultural Perspectives on Foods and Beverages that Mediate Sociability*. USA: The University of Arizona Press.

<sup>2</sup> Tepwongsirirat, P. (2005) *The vendor and the street: The use and management of public spaces in Bangkok*, Doctoral Dissertation, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania.

## Research methodology

As previously mentioned, this is an empirical study that purposes to examine the relationship between urban dining culture and food variety in spatial planning aspect with Bangkok as an area of study. From the site survey and secondary data analysis in 50 districts of Bangkok, researcher analyzed this street food study into three parts, which are: 1) Street food vendor, this data analysis contains number of street food vendor, gender, hometown, and rights. 2) Street food character contains data analysis of size of food stall, operation time, and food types. And 3) street food location contains data analysis of temporarily permitted areas, location and existing land use, accessibility, and urban functions and distribution.

### The variety of street food vendor in Bangkok

The variety of street food vendor can be analyzed into four parts. The first one is the number of street food vendor. From site survey and secondary data analysis, the total number of registered street vendor is 21,383 vendors, in which 13,006 are street food vendors (60.8%) and 8,377 are other street vendors (39.2%). These numbers show that street food vendors are more than half of total street vendor in Bangkok and is one of primate jobs for the informal sectors here.

The second one is the gender of street food vendor. The result shows that women are occupying the street as 6,986 street vendors (32.67%) are men, while 14,397 street vendors (67.33%) are women, which is two times higher than men. This result matches with the study by Yasmeen (1996) on Bangkok's Foodscape: Public Eating, Gender Relations and Urban Change that showed the street side of Bangkok was conquered by women behind street stalls.

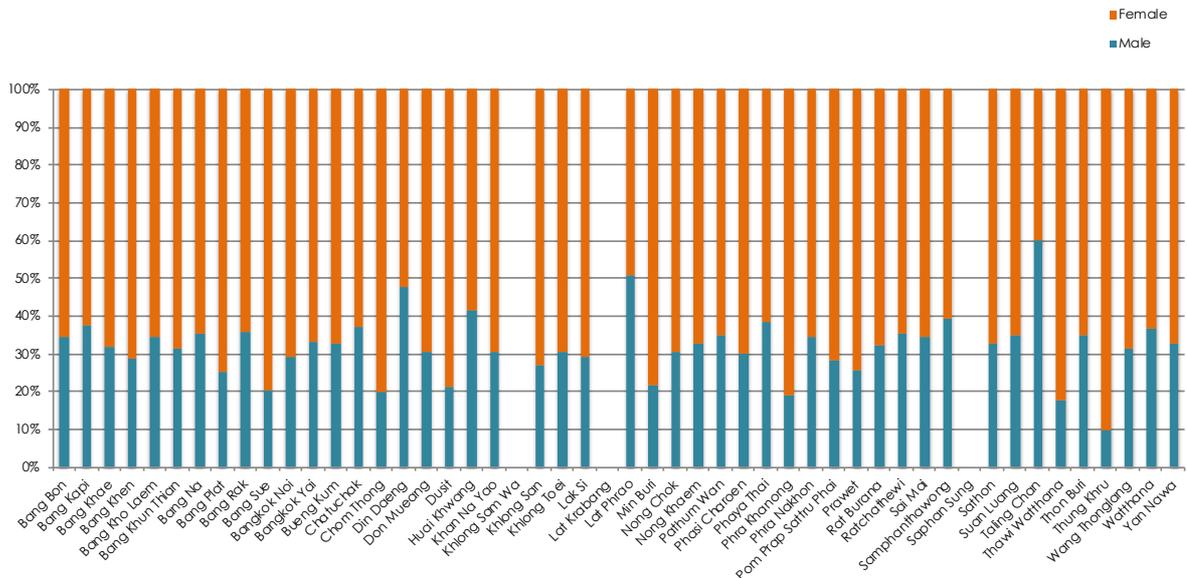


Figure 2: Percentage of Male and Female Street Vendor in Each District.

The third one is their rights of selling street food. These rights do not mean legal but the rights to sell food in the temporarily permitted areas in Bangkok, which is the compromising way between BMA and street food vendors. From site survey and secondary data analysis, the registered number of street vendor in Bangkok is 18,615 vendors (87.06%), unregistered for 1,644 vendors (7.69%), and unidentified for 1,124 vendors (5.26%). The latter one came from the result of disappearance during the site survey as some vendors elevated their status to sell food in supermarket's food court or rent a townhouse for their own operation. Some vendor changed to another job or died already.



Figure 3: An example of street food that upgraded to be a local restaurant in Bangkok

And the last one is their hometown. From secondary data analysis, most of street vendors have their home registered in Bangkok, but some moved from rural areas since their ancestors. However, it can be considered that they are Bangkok citizens nowadays. The total number of street vendor that has Bangkok as their hometown is 14,307 vendors (66.91%), which is more than a half of total number. So, the other 33.09% or 7,076 vendors are from other provinces. In these 7,706 vendors, they can be categorized into six regions, which are 1) Northern Thailand – 430 vendors (6.08%), 2) Northeastern Thailand – 2,339 vendors (33.06%), 3) Eastern Thailand – 298 vendors (4.21%), 4) Western Thailand – 307 vendors (4.34%), 5) Central Thailand – 3,381 vendors (47.78%), and 6) Southern Thailand – 321 vendors (4.54%).

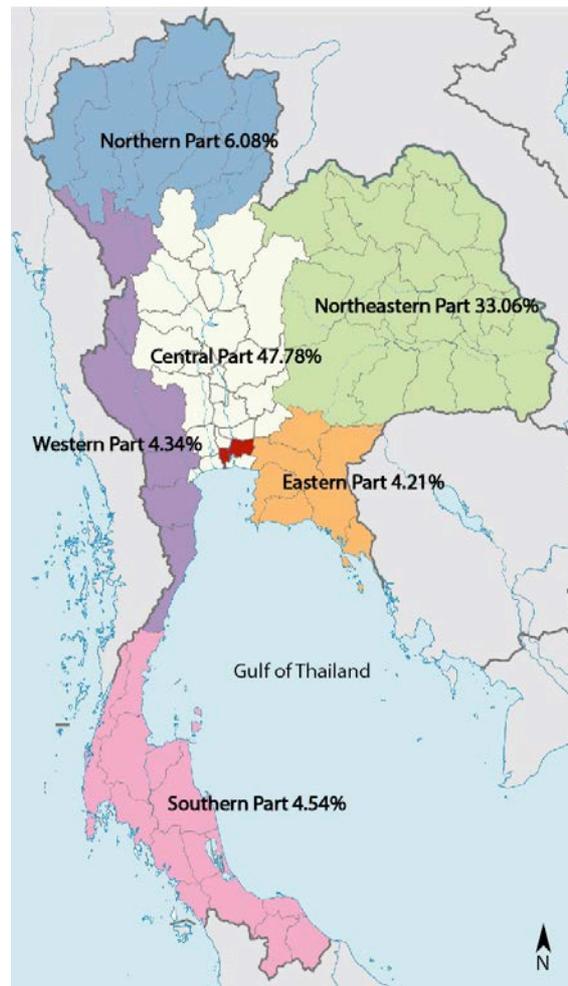


Figure 4: Percentage of Street Vendor's Hometown

However, there are some notes on the issues of street vendor's hometown, which are:

- 1) Central Thailand has the second largest number of street vendor's hometown behind Bangkok, which means central Thailand houses street vendor more than northeastern Thailand. However, this number includes Bangkok's perimeter (Pathum Thani, Samut Prakarn, Samut Sakhon, Nakhon Pathom, and Nonthaburi) as central Thailand, and if we look closely, the ratio of street vendor's hometown between Bangkok's perimeter and central Thailand is 1:1. So, the number of street vendor's hometown in central Thailand is around 1,600 vendors, which is less than northeastern Thailand. This note is leading to the next one.

- 2) Northeastern Thailand is the major hometown for street vendor. According to many previous researches (Sereerat, 2014, Maneepong, 2012, Nirathon, 2005, and Tepwongsirirat, 2005), they said about the majority of street vendor is from northeastern part of Thailand. Due to the urban development context in 1960s, a lot of farmers migrated from northeastern part of Thailand to find better opportunities in the capital. The result of this migration also shows in the menu of street food as there are a lot of Papaya salad stalls in Bangkok and this menu became one of signature dish of Thailand.

- 3) Street vendors from southern Thailand are mostly located in Bang Kapi district as 111 from 321 are there alone. This number conforms to the demand and supply of this

area as there are a lot of southern cuisine stalls in Bang Kapi district, closes to Ramkhamhaeng University, which is very popular among southern people.

### The variety of street food character in Bangkok

The variety of street food character can be analyzed into three parts. The first one is the size of stall, which is categorized into four types. 1) There are 1,193 stalls (5.58%) that use space smaller than 1 sq.m. for operation. Mostly, this size is not for food stall. 2) The size between 1-2 sq.m. This size has the largest number of stall, which is 17,448 stalls (81.60%). 3) The size between 3-5 sq.m. This size contains 2,336 stalls (10.92%). And 4) 406 stalls (1.90%) has the area larger than 5 sq.m., which mostly are food stall.

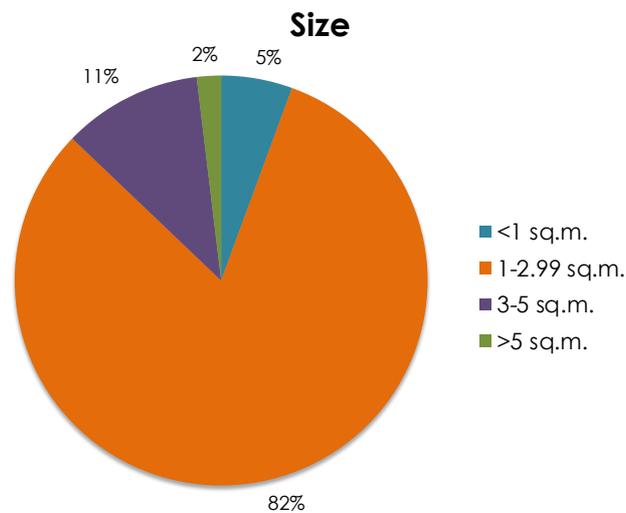


Figure 5: Percentage of Street Stall Size

The second one is operation time. According to the site observation, there are many stalls that operates over 12 hours per day. The total number is 10,326 stalls (48.29%). These food stalls often sell all-day meals rice and curry menu that customer can eat anytime in a day. They often have dining area in their stalls like 2-3 tables for dining. For normal working hours per day like 8-12 hours per day, there are 7,783 stalls (36.40%). This type of food stall often sells fast food like noodle soup, rice with chicken, and other ready-to-eat meals. And last, food stall that works less than 8 hours per day, has the total number of 3,274 stalls (15.31%). This type of stall often sells drinks, sweets, or meatballs.



Figure 6: Street Food and Dining Area in Yaowarat Road

However, there are some notes on the issue of “sharing working space”. As some plots have the same street food vendor, but this vendor sells different foods during the day, like boat vending in the early establishment of Bangkok. The second note is a same plot with different street food vendors. Like in crowded area, some plots have three different vendors during a day. In the early morning from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m., the first vendor sells sticky rice with fried pork as a breakfast to many white collars. Then, around 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., lunch is sold by the second vendor in the same plot. Before the office time out, another vendor comes to sell take away food for dinner. This is one of the example of sharing working space by street food vendor that will be investigated in the future.

The third one is food types. From literature review, Bangkok street food means both meat dish and dessert, which is sold in a simple kiosk, especially fast food or ready to eat meal. Most of all dishes were seasoned in Thai’s style, including international dish. As it is easy to prepare and cook, most of the owners are the chefs themselves. Its mobility could be variety starting from rattan basket to food truck in public spaces. Ministry of Commerce (2009) categorized the level of restaurant by decoration measurement into four levels as follow: 1) fine dining, 2) casual dining, 3) fast dining, and 4) kiosk. Although, Sanprasert and Boonamma<sup>3</sup> (1994) categorized street food into two types; meat dish and dessert. While, Rodsiri<sup>4</sup> (1995) divided street food by timing, which categorized into three types; breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

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<sup>3</sup> Sanprasert, S. and Boonamma, S. (1994) Sanitation Situation of Street Food in Phra Putthabhat Municipality, Bangkok: Veteran Assistance Printing.

<sup>4</sup> Rodsiri, S. (1995) The Opinions of Street Food Consumers: Government Officers in Rajamangla Technology Institutes in Bangkok, Bangkok: Kasetsart University.

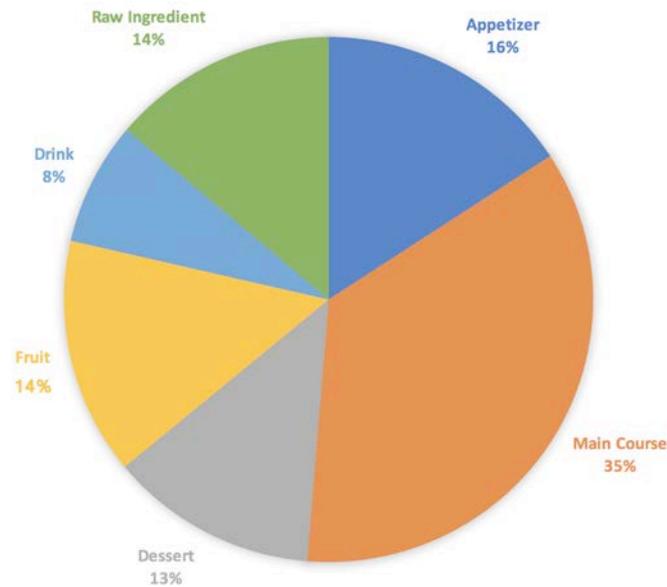


Figure 7: Percentage of 6 Street Food Types

From the site survey, dining behavior, and literature review, researcher categorized street food in Bangkok into six food types, which are: 1) Appetizer (dark blue in figure 7) are foods that can be eaten everywhere, every time, especially during walking from point to point, for example; fried meatball, grilled squid, dumplings, fried insects, etc. The total number of food stall that sells appetizer is 2,061 stalls (15.80%). 2) Main course (orange) are foods that will be served during meal time, customer needs to dine-at-place or take home for dining. There are many famous Thai main course dish such as Tom Yum Kung (spicy shrimp soup), Pad Thai (stir-fried rice noodle), etc. It has the largest number in food stall as the total number of food stall that sells main course is 4,617 stalls (35.50%). 3) Dessert (grey) are everything that sweets such as ice cream, Thai desserts, shave ice, etc. The total number of food stall that sells dessert is 1,648 stalls (12.70%). 4) Fruit (yellow) are both fresh and compote. The total number of food stall that sells fruit is 1,896 stalls (14.60%). 5) Drink (light blue) are everything that is liquid and drinkable, ranged from drinking water to milkshake. The total number of food stall that sells drink is 994 stalls (7.6%). And 6) raw ingredient (green) are cooking materials including raw meat, fish, vegetables, spicy, etc. The total number of food stall that sells raw ingredient is 1,790 stalls (13.80%). This type of food stall often extends from fresh market in every district.

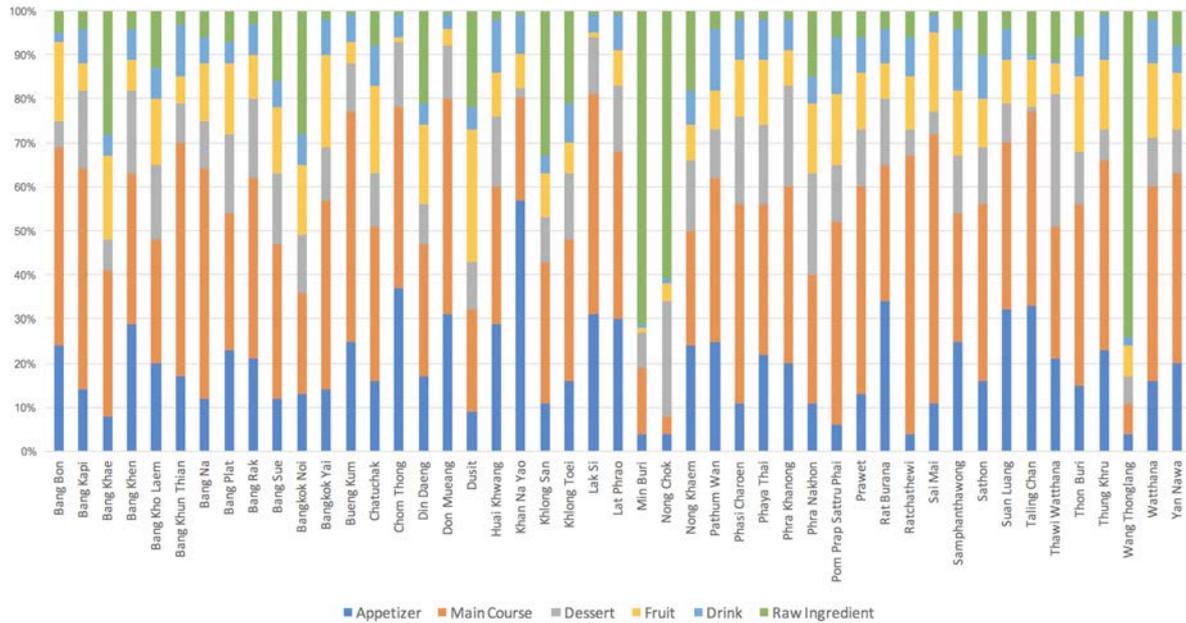


Figure 8: Percentage of Street Food Types in Each District

When looks closely into the detail of each district in figure 8, there are some notes about the differentiated percentage of food types. First, for the appetizer and main course food stalls, there are both of these food types in every district as the meat dish for most of Thai households. The number can be fluctuated, depends on building use in each district. Mostly, main course often gets a large number than other food types, especially in residential area like Bang Bon, Bang Khun Thian, Bang Na, Bueng Kum, Ratchathewi, etc. This note conforms with the daily life activity of urban citizen as they consume street food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Second, dessert food stall. Another note is raw ingredient food stall that usually less than other food types but has a large number in some district like Min Buri, Nong Chok, and Wang Thonglang. From site observation, researcher founded that these raw ingredient food stalls are the extension of many fresh markets in these districts. It conforms with the lifestyle of residential area of outer Bangkok as they buy these raw ingredients to cook for their family instead of buying ready-to-eat meals.

### The variety of street food location in Bangkok

The variety of street food location can be analyzed into four parts. The first one is the attributes of location. The total number of temporarily permitted areas is 658 areas in Bangkok. Six districts have temporarily permitted areas more than 30 areas in each district, which are Pom Prap Sattru Phai (52 areas), Ratchathewi (43 areas), Watthana (40 areas), Dusit (38 areas), Thonburi (33 areas), and Phayathai (32 areas). For total distance of temporarily permitted areas, the total number is 113,133 meters (113 km. – almost the same distance from Bangkok to Pattaya). In detail, districts that have the longest distance of temporarily permitted areas are Watthana (11,260 m.), Phayathai (11,248 m.) Bang Bon (9,800 m.), Khlong San (7,410 m.), Thonburi (6,484 m.), and Dusit (5,599 m.). However, when combining the total number of street vendor and the distance of temporarily permitted areas, the result shows the average of every five meters of temporarily permitted areas will have one street stall. It means

that there will be ten street stalls in every 50 meters, and six out of ten street stalls are street food stalls like the diagram in figure 9.

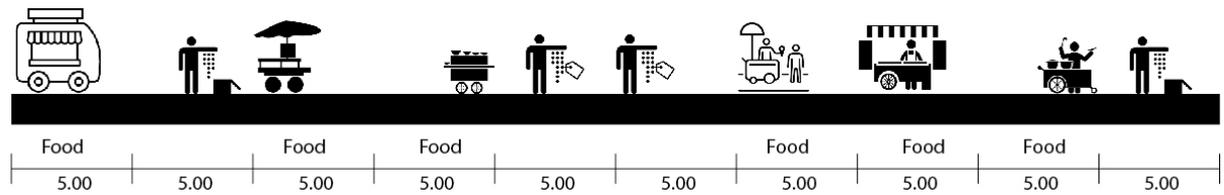


Figure 9: The Average of Temporarily Permitted Distance and the Number of Street Vendor

The second one is accessibility. From site survey, street stalls are located along the main road or the road that wider than 10 meters with the total number of 14,948 stalls (69.91%). While, in the secondary road or narrower than 10 meters, there are 6,435 stalls (30.09%). It shows that accessibility is one of the main factors for street food vending to operate.

The third one is the relationship between location and existing land use map. Street vending mostly locates in commercial area for 8,558 vendors (40.02%), then, in high-density residential area for 6,954 vendors (32.52%). However, when combining all the three types residential area (low-density, medium-density, high-density), the number will surpass commercial area as the total number will be 10,003 vendors (46.78%). For other land uses, the total number is 2,822 vendors (13.20%), which distributes in conservative area for 1,585 (7.41%), public utility area for 885 (4.14%), agricultural area for 307 (1.44%), and industrial area for 45 vendors (0.21%).

Table 1: Percentage of street food location in each land use type

Zone	Percentage	Land Use	Percentage
Residential	46.78	Low-density Residential	3.24
		Medium-density Residential	11.02
		High-density Residential	32.52
<b>Commercial</b>	<b>40.02</b>	<b>Commercial</b>	<b>40.02</b>
Others	13.20	Conservation	7.41
		Government	4.14
		Agricultural	1.44
		Industrial	0.21

And the last one is the relationship between urban function and street food distribution. For urban function, it can be divided into seven types, which are 1) shop house or row house that contains commercial area on the ground floor. Street vending distributes close to this type of urban function for 5,611 vendors (26.24%). 2) Community area, both low-rise and high-rise community, has the total number of 3,297 vendors (15.42%). 3) Public utility such as school, hospital, district office, police station, fire station, etc. has the number of street vending for 2,098 vendors (9.81%). 4) Office has the number of street vending for 1,443 vendors (6.75%). 5) Religious building such as Buddhist temple, church, and mosque has the number of street vending for 763 vendors (3.57%). 6) Fresh market has the number of street vending for 6,278 vendors (29.36%). And 7) shopping mall, ranges from community mall to shopping complex, has the number of street vending for 1,893 vendors (8.85%).

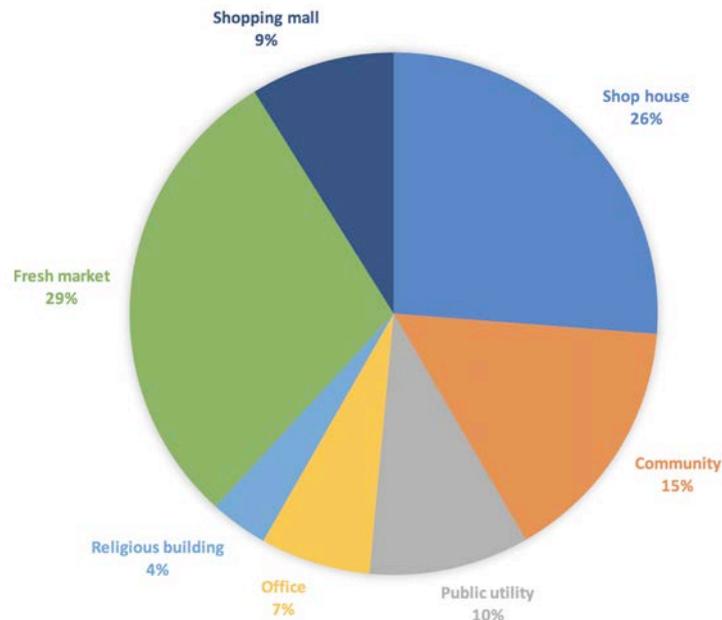


Figure 10: Street Food Distribution in Each Urban Function

When combining commercial activities together (shop house, office, fresh market, and shopping mall), the total number of street vending near commercial activities will be 15,225 vendors (71.20%), which is more than the previous analysis by land use map. It shows that most of street vending activities are connected to other commercial activities of the city.

## Conclusion

The conclusions of the article “Bangkok Street Food Variety and Its Relationship in Spatial Aspect” are as follows:

1) ‘Street food vendor and their hometown’. Most of street vendors are considered that themselves as citizens of Bangkok nowadays, due to the migration of their ancestry during 1960s. The total number of street vendor that has Bangkok as their hometown is more than 66.91%, while the other part of Thailand is just 33.09%. If we excluded the number of street vendor’s hometown in Bangkok’s perimeter, the total number of street vendor from northeastern Thailand will be the second largest to Bangkok and reflects in the street food menu as one of the most famous menu of street food is Papaya salad. Another example of relationship between street food vendor and their hometown is the southern street food vendor as they are mostly located in Bang Kapi district, which is reflecting in a lot of southern cuisine stalls for Thai southern people.

2) ‘Street food character and urban dining culture’, this topic focuses on the supply side of street food as the researcher categorized street food in Bangkok into six food types, which are: 1) appetizer, 2) main course, 3) dessert, 4) fruit, 5) drink, and 6) raw ingredient. The appetizer and main course food stalls have the highest number as 51% of street food stalls are these two types. They are served as main meal, in which everyone can eat it like breakfast, lunch, or dinner. However, appetizer also can be included in the category of foods that can be eaten everywhere, every time, especially

during walking from point to point, together with dessert, fruit, and drink. These types of food reflect the lifestyle of Thai people as it is very comfortable to eat at any time, or anywhere.

3) 'Street food location and urban functions', this topic focuses on the distribution of street food in each urban function as it mostly locates in commercial area (40.02%) and residential area (46.78%) in land use map. But in detail of building use map, the distribution ratio changes to 71.20% on commercial building use. It can be considered that street food is a part of commercial activities as it is mostly connected to other commercial building and areas.

In conclusion, street food is one of the most visible urban elements that connected to other urban activities in Bangkok as the previously mentioned that there are 10 street stalls in every 50 meters, and 6 out of 10 are street food stalls. Even though, Street food stalls are an informal-temporal urban element, it co-exists with other urban elements and activities in Thai public space through social and physical connection. This is why the BMA and Thai government should take it into account in place making and integrate it to urban management for the future inclusive planning and sustainable development of the city of Bangkok.

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