

ความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจแบบซุนดรีดผลประโยชน์  
ระหว่างผู้อยู่อาศัยในชุมชนผู้มีรายได้น้อย  
ริมคลองลาดพร้าวและคนเมือง\*

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## บทคัดย่อ

การละเลยความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจที่ชาวชุมชนผู้มีรายได้น้อย ซึ่งถูกเรียกว่าสลัมมีต่อเมืองส่งผลให้รัฐบาลมองว่าชุมชนริมคลองลาดพร้าว เป็นส่วนเกินของเมือง นโยบายการไล่รื้อและย้ายคนในชุมชนจึงเกิดขึ้น อย่างหลีกเลี่ยงไม่ได้ บทความชิ้นนี้ศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ทางเศรษฐกิจที่ชาวชุมชนผู้มีรายได้น้อยมีต่อคนเมืองกรุงเทพมหานครด้วย มุมมองทางทฤษฎีมาร์กซิสต์ ด้วยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกและสังเกตการณ์ผู้อยู่อาศัยในชุมชนผู้มีรายได้น้อยริมคลองลาดพร้าว 7 ชุมชน จำนวน 46 คน

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ความสัมพันธ์ทางการผลิตที่เกิดขึ้นระหว่าง คนเมือง และชาวชุมชนริมคลองพบในความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม 3 รูปแบบ คือ นายจ้าง และลูกจ้าง คนเมืองและผู้ให้บริการเมือง และลูกค้าและแม่ค้า ความสัมพันธ์ทั้ง 3 คู่ เป็นความสัมพันธ์แบบขูดรีดผลประโยชน์ซึ่งเกิดขึ้นจากการที่ชาวชุมชนใช้แรงงานของตนเองในการผลิตสินค้าและให้บริการเมืองมากกว่าค่าตอบแทนที่ได้รับ มูลค่าส่วนเกินนี้ทำให้นายจ้างได้ผลกำไรและธุรกิจเติบโต คนเมืองได้บริการเมือง และค่าบริการโดยสารราคาถูกลง ลูกค้าคนเมืองมีค่าครองชีพต่ำจากอาหารและบริการราคาประหยัด ชาวชุมชนริมคลองลาดพร้าวจึงเป็นกลุ่มคนที่สร้างพลังการผลิตให้เศรษฐกิจและสังคมเมือง การดำรงอยู่ของชุมชนจึงเป็นสิ่งที่รัฐต้องคำนึงถึงในการออกนโยบายปรับปรุงเมือง

**คำสำคัญ:** สลัม, ผู้มีรายได้น้อย, ความสัมพันธ์ทางการผลิต, การขูดรีดผลประโยชน์, มูลค่าส่วนเกิน, เศรษฐกิจเมือง

# The Exploitative Economic Relationships Between the Low-Income Dwellers of Lat Phrao Canal and City Dwellers \*

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## Abstract

Due to negligence concerning economic relationships between residents in slums and cities, the government perceives Lat Phrao Canal communities as a marginalised part of the city. Thus, eviction and people's relocation is unavoidable. This article examines the economic relationships between the low-income and other residents of the Bangkok Metropolis by applying the principles of Marxism. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews and by observing a total of 46 residents in the seven low-income communities along Lat Phrao Canal.

The study found relations of production existed at three levels, between the canal communities and city dwellers, city dweller and city service provider, and customer and vendor. Under exploitative relationships, the community dwellers use extensive labour to produce goods and services, they receive little return. This surplus value has resulted in employers having profitable and growing businesses; city residents receiving inexpensive services and fares; and city customers enjoying low living expenses from economical foods and services. Lat Phrao Canal residents are therefore the main productive force for the city economy and society. The existence of communities is thus a significant part of the economy which the government must consider when planning city development policies.

**Keywords:** Slum, Low-income dwellers, Relations of production, Exploitation, Surplus value, City economy

## Introduction

The economic development of Thailand has resulted in an imbalance between city and rural areas. Therefore, rural people migrate to cities to find better opportunities (Sungkawan and Thepparp, 2010: 41). However, due to economic restrictions, buying a house close to their workplace is difficult. The people thus build their houses on public lands, instead of buying their land, with cheap or available for free materials. Therefore, their houses do not look nice nor neat. Such houses and communities are disparagingly referred to as slums (Ween, 2014: 46-47).

With unique characteristics, slums are perceived as a blight on the townscape, an obstruction of modernisation, and crime area (ibid.). The image of the community where workers in the city live generates an unknown meaning among community outsiders. Rather, it is perceived as no value to the development of the city (Chitnirat, 2005; Tantuwanit, 1999, cited in Chitnirat, 2010).

Lat Phrao Canal communities, slums in Bangkok, are perceived as the source cause of problems such as flooding, water pollution, and blocking access to canal landscape. Such negative environmental and physical perceptions of the communities have turned its dwellers into unnecessary surplus and the communities themselves into 'disparate' areas within the city. Lat Phrao Canal community dwellers are forced to relocate.

To promote positive perceptions of slum, Thai slum dwellers' contributions to city economic have been confirmed (Chitnirut, 2005; Lao-an, 2020: 273). This article develops further understanding of such economic relationships by examining the Lat Phrao Canal dwellers' occupations. This paper begins by introducing the economic aspects of Lat Phrao Canal communities and reviewing the concepts of 'mode of production' and 'exploitation'. Next, it presents the research methods. It then analyses the modes of production of dwellers in Lat Phrao Canal communities and the exploitation relationships between those dwellers and city people. The paper concludes with a discussion in term of their professions, the theoretical applications of exploitation concept, and their contributions to the city. The author uses 'community', instead of 'slum', to remove the negative connotation attached with the word 'slum'.

### Lat Phrao Canal communities

Lat Phrao Canal communities have existed in Bangkok for over one hundred years, starting with people occupying vacant lots along the canal and constructing houses and farming (Phem Sin Ruam Chai Community Committee, n.d.: 2; K. Boonjue<sup>1</sup>, **Interview**, September

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<sup>1</sup>As interviewees were granted anonymity, throughout this article pseudonyms are used to identify Lat Phrao Canal dwellers.

13, 2015; V. Satum, **Interview**, August 8, 2015). When Bangkok industrial and commercial sectors played more important roles, more lots along the canal were used to construct dwellings for new residents arriving in the city to work (A. Pungping, **Interview**, September 19, 2015). Unavoidably, the spaces along the canal overturned into living places for low-income people.

There are over forty communities along Lat Phrao Canal. This 24.5-kilometre canal passes through both the inner and outer areas of the eastern side of Bangkok. Houses in these communities are mostly do-it-yourself types. The houses were parcels of land of different sizes, using different materials and over different construction periods. These houses can be found along the canal with some built directly above the water and some on the land. The front side of the houses faces each other with a narrow wooden or concrete lane in between for people and motorcycles. Approximately 24,300 residents from 6,039 households live in these canal communities (Community Organizations Development Institution, 2015). The communities in the inner business districts of Bangkok are more crowded than those on the outskirts.

## Mode of production

Mode of production refers to how a society organises its material social existence (Dillon, 2014: 73). The capitalist mode of production in capitalist societies, which focuses on profit, consists of productive force and relations of production (Marsh, 1996: 53). Productive force means everything that enables production activity such as labour skill, and social divisions of labour; and factors around a person, i.e. tools, machines, and production technologies (Malcome and Saba, 1980). As such, productive force includes people activities that use machines, technologies and labour skills for production (Knuttila, 2002, cited in Kaewthep and Hinwimarn, 2008; Marsh, 1996: 54).

Relations of production refer to a social relationship that arises from mutual economic or productive activities (ibid.). Production naturally involves at least two interrelated groups: capitalists and proletarians (Giddens, 1971: 35; Kaewthep and Hinwimarn, 2008: 62; Marsh, 1996: 62; Stevenson, 2013: 28). Capitalists represent the group that use their resources and hire proletarians to produce goods and services. Proletarians are the group who do not own any resources but invest their labour in turning capitalists' raw materials into goods and services. They work for capitalists in exchange for wages to survive in capitalist societies. (Appelrouth and Laura, 2008: 56; Dillon, 2014: 72; Ritzer, 2004: 493)



According to Karl Marx, capitalists own and use the resources in production, namely the means of production (Dillon, 2014: 72; Ritzer, 2004: 493). Means of production are private property that capitalists use to expand the quantity or value of the invested property such as raw material, land, factory, capital, machines, and production technology (Dillon, 2014: 72; Marsh, 1996: 54). Means of production thus refer to both the things worked on because they are literal subject of the productive effort, and the tools that work on the subjects of labour (Ritzer, 2004: 493).

Ownership of the means of production make owning or monopolising the means of production by bringing power to specify the use of the means of production such as what business will the land be used for; what kind of product and how it will be produced by using manpower and machine. It also includes the power to specify the means of sharing production and income to social groups. This power is an important mechanism in sharing wealth among different groups of people, for example how much salary each level of employee should receive, and what the ratio of income for of the company owner is (Kaewthep and Hinwimarn, 2008: 62; Rey, 2012: 411-412; Ritzer, 2004: 493).

This article applies the concept of mode of production to explain the economic relationship between Lad Phrao canal dwellers and people outside their communities. In fact, this concept helps to

gain insight into how low-income dwellers along Lat Phrao Canal serve as production force creators and as a group who have relations of production to the city people.

## Exploitation

In the capitalist mode of production, labour represents merely a type of production force under the production control of capitalists whose goal is profit-oriented. Accordingly, human labour is similar to a machine that has to be used to the maximum extent for production to make the most out of it (Bottomore, 2001: 183-184; Stevenson, 2013: 27-28). This is what Karl Marx called 'exploitation' (Wallace and Wolf, 1998: 83-84).

Exploitation originated as an asymmetric economic exchange in the relations of production between capitalists and the proletarians. Such relationship comes from capitalists who use capital to employ production labour and the proletarian who offer their labour for production utilising amount of labour used in producing goods plus factors that contribute the generation of labour consisting of expenses on food, tuition fees, clothing, accommodation, etc. The asymmetry begins when employers pay wages below the amount of labour plus the factors serving to generate labour (Karl Marx, 1818/1883, cited in Bottomore 2001; Kelly, 1968: 32; Wallace and Wolf, 1998: 83-83).

Under this relationship, capitalists control the proletariat (Rey, 2012: 411-412) by paying low compensation, increasing work hours and proficiency, and demanding greater work capacity and labour skills (Marsh, 1996: 54). These controls have resulted in three systems of capitalist employment: low wages to workers who work at normal level; average wages to workers who have to work hard to obtain high productivity; and high wages to workers who are exploited to obtain maximum work capacity to produce high-quality products that will be sold at high prices. Although the value of commodities should equal the number of workers used to produce goods, capitalists always pay wages below the number and capacity of workers. The difference in production and wages is a profit that the capitalists receive, namely surplus value (Karl Marx, 1818/1883, cited in Bottomore, 2001: 182-184). Therefore, exploitation is the way the capitalists take advantage of surplus from the proletariat's hard work and low wage.

Beside gaining benefit from the surplus value under the employment systems mentioned above, John Roemer (1982) proposes that exploitation also refers to the conditions in which certain groups are forced to work. It is a social phenomenon that one social group does not need to work hard because the other group works harder. The former is the group who own more valuable resources or productive property. The latter is the group who do not possess such resources (Mayer, 1937: 61-62). Thus, the exploitation

includes the situation in which people who have higher income and resources work less than those with lower income.

The mode of employment concept is based on how much surplus value capitalists can make in their exploitation of workers as it prevents workers from taking advantage of and the power to access or make use of the surplus product that is produced. However, it is difficult to gain negotiation strength and free oneself from exploitation since many workers in the labour market cannot own production factors. Consequently, there are those who seek to sell their labour in exchange for wages thus reducing their powers of negotiation. When labour is abundant, their powers of negotiation to gain benefits that they deserve is diminished. Therefore, in a society with high levels of labour power, an exploitative relationship exists more easily. In contrast, an exploitative relationship seldom takes place in a society with insufficient labour to meet employment demand (Mayer, 1937: 62).

Applying Marx and Roemer's definition of exploitation, the author views capitalists as those who gain benefit from proletarians' hard work and low wages; and proletarians are those who work hard yet receive benefit lower than what they produce, such an economic relationship also occurs within the relationship outside of the business organisation context. The author thus explains the concept of exploitation in a broader context by considering it as the relationship existing from work as community members concerning

production with other groups, i.e. customer and vendor and city dweller and city service provider.

## **Research Methods**

This qualitative research aims to study how dwellers in low-income communities along Lat Phrao Canal, and other Bangkok Metropolis dwellers relate to each other economically and how such relationship affects the work and way of life of these community members. The author collected data via in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview questions, and from direct observation of dwellers in the low-income communities of Lat Phrao Canal in metropolitan Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. The author divided those communities into four areas based on their administrative districts. A total of 46 interviewees from five to ten residents in each district were selected to gather diverse data from residents living in different areas along Lat Phrao Canal - both in the city centre and on the outskirts. Those interviewees were 11 people from Bueng Rama 9 community in Huay-kwang district, six people reside in Lat Phrao 80 community and six people from Lang Gromwittayasart community in Lat Phao district, five people from Saphan Mai Nueng community and six people from Bang Bua community in Saimai District, and ten people from Phem Sin Ruam Chai community and two people from Khlong Song community in Don Muang district. The interviewees were recruited during fieldwork

from August to September 2015 by snowball sampling via community committees and neighbours and by door knocking techniques.

The author analysed the descriptive data related to the interviewees from an economic aspect applying a Marxist perspective in terms of means and mode of production and exploitation. The data consists of occupation, types and conditions of work, wages and welfare, family member labour, as well as living conditions such as financial status, financial support to family members, house condition, children's education, etc.

To present the data, the author explains the dimensions of work and modes of production that dwellers in the low-income communities along Lat Phrao Canal have with the city through three pairs of occupational relationship, i.e. employer and employee, city dweller and city service provider, and customer and vendor. Then, under these three types of relationship, the author describes how dwellers in the canal communities create socio-economic benefits for the city and its residents under these exploitative relationships.

## **Modes of production of dwellers in the low-income communities along Lat Phrao Canal**

According to the Marxist, mode of production, as far as Bangkok is concerned, consists of productive force and relations of production, both of which reveal participation by community dwellers. The work of these dwellers enables them to use their skills in creating production activities which is referred to as their productive force. Work that creates products and services also allows them to establish relationships with people outside their communities, which are considered to be relations of production. Considering the common occupations held by these canal dwellers, the relations of production can be classified as three pairs of social relationship: employer and employee, city dweller and city service provider, and customer and vendor. Next, the author discusses the productive force generated from these social relationships.

### *Employer and employee*

The employer/employee relationship refers to a relationship between organisations or groups of people outside a community who own the means of production and the community dwellers who do not own the means of production. Therefore, these dwellers earn their livings from selling their labour to owners of means of production, or capitalists, in exchange for salaries, wages, and welfare.

Their labour becomes part of productive force that is used together with the tools, machines and production technologies owned by capitalists. The productive force that is based on the employer and employee relationship can be found in the following occupations:

(1) Cleaners and security guards employed as staff of cleaning or security guard companies which provide staff for organisations in Bangkok. Alternatively, the worker may serve as an employee of a company or organisation. In both work relationships, the labour of the canal dweller is the productive force that generates cleaning or security services for company offices, banks, hospitals, condominiums, schools, news agencies, or state agencies.

(2) Retail business staff, which is a popular occupation among young people (A. Pungping, **Interview**, September 19, 2015; D. Bhubpha, **Interview**, August 8, 2015; D. Daengnoi, **Interview**, September 27, 2015) Capitalist organisations that employ this group of people include department stores and convenience stores where canal residences work as sales staff, cashiers, store controllers, coin exchange staff, and arcade game operators. Also, medium and small capitalists operating restaurants and food shops employ canal dwellers as customer service staff such as waiters and waitresses, kitchen staff, and customer service staff. The labour offered by canal dwellers serving retail businesses is the productive force used in the distribution of goods available to consumers; the production of food products;



and providing relevant services for city residents who consume such services in department stores/stores in Bangkok.

(3) Staff at the operation or general skill level in organisations: several community dwellers are employed as drivers, e.g. truck driver employed by a company operating at cargo port; drivers for bank staff; and motorcyclists who work as messengers and delivery agents for different companies (S. Banyen, **Interview**, September 20, 2015; U. Klinkajon, **Interview**, August 8, 2015). Such types of employment create a form of productive force, i.e. services that fulfil organisation functions such as transporting goods to buyers, taking company staff for business meetings, and delivery documents to company partners.

(4) Staff with professional skills refers to positions held by community dwellers who use their operational skills in their work – not the advanced skills possessed by high-ranking staff. These positions include dentist's assistant, and Thai traditional masseuse, both of whom work under the supervision of a qualified medical practitioner; an aeroplane maintenance staff and maker of explosives in the air force under the supervision of an air force engineer.

(5) Handyman is a popular occupation among men in the communities (D. Deekerdkaew, **Interview**, August 29, 2015; M. Sukgong, **Interview**, August 8, 2015; N. Maireang, **Interview**, September 6, 2015). The example of services which handyman offer to people and organisations near communities are constructing, air-conditioner cleaning

and servicing aeroplanes and building explosives for military operations. These employers own means of production, tools and own lease work sites.

(6) Staff in the industrial sector can be divided into two groups: workers who work at sites owned by capitalists and workers who work out of their own places. For the first type, some community dwellers are employed on factory production lines. Lat Phrao Canal community members work in industrial estates on the outskirts of Bangkok and in the inner city next to the communities themselves. As for the second type, work, e.g. labelling a wool knitwear factory and packing buttons in plastic bags, done at home. In these cases, capitalists own means of production such as raw materials whereas the workplace which is another mean of production, is owned by the worker themselves. The ready-for-sale products are the outcome of the productive force derived from such relationship in the industrial system.

It can be seen that the mode of production sourced in the community dwellers consists of labour which is a part of productive force together with means of production invested in by capitalists in the form of either tools, machines or technologies. Relations of production thus comprise work skills under capitalist supervision and remuneration rate specification, for example cleaning an office using cleaning tools provided by the office under the work load preparation and wages payment precisely specified by the employer;

working in a restaurant furnished with tables, dishes, and food ingredients invested in by the owner; using skills arranging goods on shelves according to specific shelf-stocking methods and programmes specified by a department or convenience store and receiving standard wages set by the retail company; construction work for which a house owner pays for tools and wages; as well as helping dentists by handing them instruments during procedures according to dental centre protocol and receiving a salary specified by the employer.

#### *City dweller and city service provider*

The relationship between city dweller and city service provider exists when the former receives services offered by Lat Phrao Canal dwellers, who act as labour, creating products and services for residents outside the communities. The low-income dwellers who provide services to city dwellers are in relations of production with two types of employer: an organisation and independent city dwellers.

The main organisation providing services for city dwellers in Bangkok is the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) which is a local administrative agency whose responsibilities are to construct and maintain the city infrastructure, develop the city's surroundings, as well provide related services for residents. The jobs with BMA that are prevalent among the canal community members are street cleaning, garbage collection, etc. They usually work for the district office closes

to their communities. Some of them work as civil staff looking after drainage work to prevent floods and deal with sewage problems in Bangkok. Also, the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA) employs some community dwellers as supervisors who prepare and arrange bus timetables. Bus services are part of the mass transit system which is available for use by a large number of city dwellers. The productive force available from working with these agencies is consumption and public services. Keeping the city tidy, making the buses run smoothly and providing the flood relief service, are all important services for the quality of life of Bangkok residents and necessary for solving city problems.

The other type of employment is providing services to city dwellers independently through personal employment or payments received for providing services directly. This group of dwellers work in the transport sector to serve passengers who wish to commute from place to place. The occupations are, for example, motorbike taxi and taxi drivers, etc.

The productive force originating in employment by an agency is sourced in dwellers' activities using their work skills together with machines and technologies or the agency's work procedures, such as collecting garbage by truck following the guidelines for garbage collection specified by district office. Working as a bus supervisor is part of the mass transit system which uses tools and machines, and sites provided by BMTA.

The productive force derived from direct employment occurs when the community members use their labour, driving skills, and knowledge of locations to make productive use of a suitable vehicle, which together are means of production and the property of the workers. Although proletarians own the means of production, such as car taxi and motorbike taxi, owning those means of production is only an investment in a machine used in the productive force. The community dwellers still have to expend their effort to perform the service which is considered part of the productive force. They do not own the means of production as the capitalists, who invest only the capital without investing their labour for the production.

Therefore, city service providers' modes of production consist of, first, the productive force arising from the canal community members expending their labour as employees who use the organisations' means of production, and as employees who possess their own means of production. Second, working based on the relationship between city dwellers (those who benefit from the community dwellers' work) via organisations and direct employment and city service provider (proletarians creating services to city dwellers).

*Customer and vendor*

The customer and vendor relationship arises when Bangkok city residents receive goods and services from the canal community members. The vendor earns a living as a freelance who own means of production rather than work under capitalist's means of production. Such relations of production are different from Karl Marx's concept of relations of production that refers only to the relationship between capitalists and the proletariat. The community members who are vendors cannot be defined as capitalists because they do not gain income from surplus value that derives from the work of proletarians. Rather, they use their own labour in production. Remuneration from this work therefore derives not from wages paid by the owner, but rather from the income and profit received from selling goods to city residents.

Relations of production as customer and vendor arise in food selling jobs. The space accommodating the vendor and customer, who is the outsider, occurs both in and outside the communities. Food selling outside communities includes a chicken in saffron rice vendor in front of a department store; food made to order at the entrance to a side street near offices; a deep-fried beef and sticky rice; vendor in a flea market; a vendor who uses his motorcycle to sell sweet pancake in neighbouring communities; a fruit cart vendor at a nearby hospital; and food vendors at schools, etc. Vendors from communities,

whom people working and living around the community can access, offer several kinds of food services, e.g., made to order, noodles, chicken rice, ready-made food, vegetables and fruits, drinks and desserts, etc.

The vendor/customer relationship also occurs in the sales of other goods and services offered both in and outside the communities. Occupations operating within the communities, especially those using part of their house as a shop, include grocery shops and hairdressers, etc. Outside the communities can be found a cosmetic vendor operating in a flea market, a flower garland vendor in a market, and vendors selling flower garlands at street, etc.

Being both owner of the means of production and the labour themselves means the productive force takes place in the preparing and selling of goods by virtue of their knowledge of production, the skills they possess, and the factors of production they invest in and own. These food vendors start each day's work dispensing their capital, usually working capital, and relying on their labour to purchase the raw materials, ingredients, and tools for preparing and selling food, such as meat, vegetables, seasoning, rice, cutlery, etc. They use their labour and that of family members to prepare and cook. They also use means of production in the form of land, either using their land for production and vending place or a location outside the community that they rent or occupy as a place to sell the food

they produce. Others may have invested in their property or converted the ground floor of their house into a shop or a beauty salon. They further invested in buying tools for preparing and making goods and services such as shelves, refrigerator, snacks, water, beauty salon furniture, hairdryers, etc.

The productive forces of community members as vendors relates to preparing goods, shop displays, and sales utilise their labour and that of family members. Since these are freelance occupations, the vendors need to provide their own means of production to produce and serve foods. These activities include acquiring materials such as ingredients for cooking and cutlery and cooking utensils; buying flowers from a wholesale market to make garlands; paying rent at the market; constructing a beauty salon and buying appliances; adopting technologies relevant to their work such as popular routes and locations for selling goods, cooking knowledge, and selecting appropriate goods for their shops.

It can be concluded that the mode of production of freelance occupations such as food selling involves productive forces that comprise community members' labour with factors of production and relations of production between vendor and customer which represents relations of production that possess different characteristics from that between Marx's capitalists and proletariat.



## **Exploitation: relations of production between low-income community dwellers and city**

### *Exploitation based on the employer and employee relationship*

Under the employer and employee relationship, community members' labour serves as the productive force generated through wages payment under a goal of the capitalist's benefit. Exploitation of community dwellers is thus unavoidable. They have to work under the condition that the employer limits wages and strictly controls the quality of work.

Wages from their employers are considered an imbalanced economic exchange. The former does not receive fair wages in proportion of the labour value they contribute including expenses they incur in executing their labour force on things such as food, transport, accommodation, family needs, etc. Besides, not all products and services produced or made available these workers belong to them because employers retain the surplus value as profit. This can be seen in the fact that the wages calculation is based on the company rate aimed at benefiting the employer, rather than a standard that includes all expenses that the employee has to meet in order to fulfil their work obligations. A woman factory worker whose monthly salary is 12,000 baht (377 USD) describes her living condition as follows:

*“My salary hardly covers my expenses. I’m in a lot of debt. I have to pay interest, but can’t find a way to pay back the principal”*

The community workers’ wage rate and work conform to Marxist’s theory of exploitation of surplus value. The strategy of gaining profit from exploitation of surplus value by limiting wages is still regarded as acceptable. As evidence, a community member who works as a maid with a monthly salary of 9,500 baht (298 USD) but her pay will be cut if she takes days off; or a community member who works for a noodle shop and gets a 350 baht (11 USD) day wage; and another who attaches labels knitting wool packets and receives 300 baht (9.4 USD) for 10,000 labels.

Exploiting the community members’ labour is what employers expect to do. So, employees often work extremely hard and long hours, such as the company maid working six days a week, ten hours a day. Another community member works as a production staff on from Monday to Saturday with overtime shifts. An ATM machine attendant has to work at least 26 days a month looking after 200 machines.

Organisations must rely on labour because a part of their profits is earned from income that exceeds wage costs, in other words, surplus value drawn from the community dwellers’ labour. An example can be seen in the profit from department stores sales which would be

impossible without the labour of cashier, stocking and display staff etc. Banks that own ATM machines pay security companies to look after the machines using community dwellers' labour. However, the dwellers have no authority to negotiate wages and ultimately, are unable to constitute surplus value for their employer. They accept low wages because they see themselves as having to rely on employment. If they ask for more wages, the company may employ someone else. Since many people in Bangkok use labour power to earn their livings, low-income workers living along Lat Phrao Canal remain exploited by employers. The surplus value they create contributes to business growth. These workers are the nuts and bolts that hold the city's economy together.

*Exploitation based on city dweller and city service provider relationship*

The city dweller and city service provider relationship, in which the latter is either organisational staff or freelance workers, can also generate exploitation. The provision of the services, including cleaning and tidying up city spaces, preventing city floods and water pollution, can be considered as a type of exploitation of the surplus value which city people take from community members.

As city service providers working for organisations such as BMA, the community dwellers receive remuneration by means of limited wages and welfare which is similar to the employer and employee relationship.

Exploitation of the surplus value arises when state operators like BMA and BMTA whose budget is from taxes and bus tickets, do not sufficiently remunerate community members whose labour power is harnessed in the provision of services for the city. Remunerating should be in fair proportion to the labour expended and expenses incurred in providing that labours. They still receive low wages with long work hours. This can be seen from the salary of a street cleaner which is 8,600-15,000 baht (270-471 USD) per month; and a BMA water drainage and sewerage staff who has been working here over for two decades receive 19,500 baht (613 USD). Likewise, in a case of work overload, a BMTA bus inspector who works six days a week may be thinking about quitting his job due to the extra workload.

If we consider the benefits that city dwellers receive in return for the low wages paid to city service providers, it can be said that the latter group subsidise the agency money by accepting low wages for their work looking after the city. Consequently, service receivers enjoy low taxes. The money saved in wages is the surplus value that the agency receives. This surplus value can benefit city residents by constructing pedestrian bridges and public parks; improving cityscape; preventing floods; improving public buses, etc. The surplus value that the city service providers generate for tax payers and participating organisations is a benefit they simultaneously provide city residents

in the process of their being exploited, with the service receivers enjoying the benefits of such exploitation.

Through individual employment, the exploitation of the community members by city residents exists in their low financial status because they work as low wage labourers who charge comparatively little for their products and services to the city. Their wages are insufficient for the labour power they expend and to expenses they incur in providing specific services, such as transportation, food, accommodation, etc. One community member who works as a taxi driver mentioned about his income:

*“It costs 700 baht (22 USD) per day to rent a taxi. Each day the income is different. Some days I get 200-300 baht (6-9 USD) profit. Some days I don’t get any, so I can’t pay the rent.”*

A community worker who works in construction said:

*“I hardly get much work these days. This affects my income. Expenses at home are in the hands of my nephew.”*

These community members who work as the city service providers both for organisations and individuals possess few production resources and little property. This forces them to work harder for

the city dwellers who own more resources, to work less. Such exploitation exists in their committing their labour to generate productive force in the form of cleaning, repairing, and facilitating life for city commuters. Bangkok residents thus do not have to worry about having to clean the road in front of their houses; solving flooding problems; repairing their houses themselves etc. They do not even have to own a vehicle or drive themselves. So, they cannot deny that community dwellers sharing these occupations are being exploited by the city dwellers. The community dwellers' willingness to undertake these burdens results in other groups in the city needing to work less.

*Exploitation based on the vendor and customer relationship*

Normally, those who engage in commerce have a good economic status because they receive income directly from selling goods and services to customers, rather than relying on fixed wages paid by an employer. However, those who have a good economic status from commerce are also capitalists who make profits by investing in means of production and reaping the surplus value from wages. As for the community members, their low economic status prevents them to possess all factors of production and productive force themselves. For them, it is their labour that is the productive force, thus they can only engage in commerce by using their own labour.

This type of relationship can be clearly seen in community members engaging in commerce that heavily relies on their own and family members' labour. A community member who runs a food-to-order shop has to start around 02.30 am. to buy fresh ingredients from the market. Then they use their own and their family members labour to cook and serve. This involves preparing ingredients by chopping meat and vegetables, cooking, preparing the shop, selling, and serving. Each workday usually ends with clearing the shop in the afternoon or evening. This heavy workload requires more than one person and usually demands a labour contribution from family members. For example, the son cooks and delivers food by motorcycle or boat; husband and wife work together to open the shop selling ready-made foods, etc. This lifestyle is similar to that of the garland vendor who starts his work at 4.00 am. buying flowers to make garlands and finishes at 3.00 pm and spend the weekday evenings, and weekends with his wife and children preparing parts of garland. Besides that, this type of labour has caused injuries, especially, wrist pain due to repetitive preparation work and use of heavy utensils such as grinding coconut for cooking sweets. Work that generates goods and services in this way is regarded as excessive exploitation of the labour of community members.

The income that these community vendors earn is not a lot because their goods are sold cheap. Additionally, the competitive price at which they can sell the food made from this hard toil is low in comparison with the labour they expend for food services. For example, it costs 20 baht (0.6 USD) for a serving of ready-made curry; 25 baht (0.7 USD) for steamed rice with serving; 30 baht (0.9 USD) for chicken rice, and food made to order; and 20 baht (0.6 USD) for a piece of coconut pancake. Consequently, they do not have high economic status. However, city residents who are their customers are the ones who benefit from these low-priced goods and foods. This type of relationship that benefits the city dwellers is an exploitation of the surplus value, i.e. the city dwellers exploit the surplus value by making the community dwellers work hard to create goods for the sake of the customer's convenience. The prices they charge are equal to the value of the labour used nor the means that help them to create labour power to produce these goods and foods, such as their shops, expenses on food and cost of accommodation, etc. It is as a food vendor noted in describing her income, "*I have little income. I have little savings*", but she has considerable expenses each month, i.e. 3,000 baht (94 USD) to pay for a loan, 1,500 baht (47 USD) for tap water, 2,500 baht (78 USD) for electricity; and 5,000 baht (157 USD) for a mortgage. A garland vendor explained his financial status was



*“enough income but zero savings.”* since he spends no more than 500 baht (16 USD) a day on food and daily expenses for his family of four.

The community dwellers, using their hard labour to sell goods at low prices to city customers who benefit from these inexpensive living costs, can thereby be considered to be exploited and denied the surplus value of their efforts.

In conclusion, under these three types of relationship, the community members invest their labour power as the productive force of the city. They cannot escape exploitation of the surplus value they create in either the employee, city service provider or vendor relationship.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The economic life of community dwellers along Lat Phrao Canal, as the productive force and production labour identified in modes of production, correlates with Richard Ulack’s study of the occupations of low-income community members in Cagayan De Oro in the Philippines, and Sopon Pornchokchai’s study of occupations of Bangkok low-income community members in that one cannot generalise nor categorise people living in low-income communities as being unemployed or unskilled. Several of these community dwellers have full-time jobs. Their occupations involve using their labour-power in producing goods and providing services such as in construction or as specialised

handymen; water and land transportation; as vendors in small markets and street vendors; service work in shops and businesses in and around the communities; as well as farming and fishing (Pornchockchai, 1992: 164-165; Ulack, 1978: 543).

The findings reveal that an exploitative relationship exists between the community dwellers and employers who are individual employers, organisations or city residents. This results in community members receiving limited wages and having to work hard. This situation correlates with Pitch Pongsavat's (2010) findings that residents in low-income communities in Thailand experience structural constraints that separate them from a fair wealth distribution due to complex power relations. The result of their work under this unfair exploitation system is reflected in a study of the time low-income residents in Bangkok spend working. It was found that 43.8 per cent of the residents work seven days a week. Only 16.3 per cent work less than six days a week which is considered standard for middle and high-level positions in the government and the private sector. Furthermore, there are more residents who work over eight hours per day than those who work less than this standard a number of work hours (Pornchockchai, 1992: 165).

In terms of the theoretical application, the author agrees that the concept of exploitation developed by Karl Marx can adequately reveal the unfair relationship. However, Marx mainly defined

the capitalist/proletariat relationship. This left the relationships of community members not working in private sectors or working in the informal economic system unexplained. To embrace a wider scope, this paper employs Roemer's definition of exploitation that refers to the situation in which those who have fewer resources need to work hard for those who have greater resources who can work less. The author then found a range of pairs of exploitation economic relationships, i.e. city resident/city service provider; and customer/vendor. Roemer's concept of exploitation thus helps to form a complete picture of the exploitative relationship between the city residents and community members. It also shows that working neither for government nor freelance helps them to escape from this exploitation.

The productive force generated by the canal community dwellers for organisations, businesses, and city residents in Bangkok confirms that they are an inseparable part of the city economic and service system. Their work is thus valuable and essential to the daily lives of city residents and to economic growth. This conclusion supports David Smith's thesis that people living in low-income communities are a group who relate greatly to the city's economy. Although somewhat marginalised, low-income communities for slums are a vital part of the city's economy (Ween, 2014: 48). They are not a surfeit of the city that obstructs development of the city as stereotyped by people outside the community and the government.

Society thus should accept the existence of low-income communities as an important contributor to the city and its economy. They are inseparable from and essential to the city and its development and constitute valuable residents who drive the ongoing development of Bangkok's social economy.

### **Limitations and suggestions**

The two main limitations to this study relate to its analytical scope and the data collection. The article's analytical scope is narrow in the sense that it, based on Marxist theory, only considers the economic relations between Lad Phrao Canel dwellers and the city. Societal and cultural relationships between those dwellers and the city are not taken into consideration. Future research should apply alternative theoretical frameworks (e.g. derived from cultural studies) and investigate other dimensions of Lad Phrao Canel dwellers' relation with the city. The second limitation is that the data collected possibly was biased as a result of snowball sampling by community committees (which may have generated a disproportional number of interviewees with similar characteristics). To mitigate this limitation, the data collected via the door knocking approach, especially from newcomers and house renters, was highlighted and analysed with extra care.

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