

Flowers on the Streets of Bangkok

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Introduction

Walking along the streets of Bangkok, either in the financial district or the residential neighborhoods, one easily finds flower vendors on the streets. The flowers are uniquely displayed. A commonly seen picture is a wooden tray filled with an array of *Malai*, garlands made from jasmine buds, marigolds and rose petals. These flowers are not to be put in a vase as a piece of home décor.

Since the old days, flowers have been intricately threaded and arranged into garlands by the ladies of the Palace. The art of making a garland has now become a job for ordinary people who thread flowers into garlands of different flowers and sizes on the streets. They also sell different flowers such as roses and lotus that are bunched up with local leaves. These garlands and flowers sold on the streets serve the purpose of being an offering to the gods, spirits and Buddhism; a belief and religion that is deeply intertwined with the Thai way of life.

This paper investigates the background of flower garlands, four major locations where flower vendors station themselves, the changing faces of flowers and the attitude of people in Bangkok as reflected through the look of the flowers we see on the streets.

Background

The art of making *Malai* or a garland can be dated back to the Sukhothai period, around 700 years ago. It was a royal art the ladies of the palace invented, threading one bud of jasmine at a time to decorate the king's receptacles. *Malai*

became more elaborate with touches of red, yellow and purple colors during the Rattanakosin period when the country was more peaceful.

Malai is commonplace in India, Nepal, the Philippines and Hawaii. It is believed that Thai people adopted this form of threading flowers from India. However, Thai people have found their own ways to reinvent the style and make a garland that is uniquely Thai. They do not use the whole flowers and string them together like Indian or Hawaiian Malai. Instead, they use the miniscule parts of the flower to construct a big garland with fine details. The best Malai makers, such as the ladies of the palace, would strip off petals of roses, pick jasmine buds of the same size, select green leaves of orange jasmine (Bai Kaew in Thai) and crown flowers (Dok Rak) and trim the stem of the bachelor's button (Ban Mai Ru Roay). When threading, the Malai makers would hold a long needle in the left hand and pick up the flower with the other. They would start by threading each bud of jasmine first. Then they would fold each petal of rose and leaf before threading them to create elaborate patterns.

These fine garlands come in different forms that suit specific purposes. They can be used as a greeting flower just like a bouquet in the western world. One would hold a garland in the hand or wear it around his or her wrist. Garlands can also be used in a Thai wedding often with fascinating patterns that take more than 10 hours to finish. Besides, people gather at their friends' funerals to weave and arrange flowers to decorate the coffin, an act of devotion that shows the love and remembrance of the living for the deceased.

At present, the art of Malai making is undergoing change. It has a variety of pedestrian versions. On the streets, we see much rougher and simpler types of garlands that are for sale at cheap prices, a big alteration from the fine art of the palace to the ordinary world. A garland made by the roadside might take less than a minute to make to meet the demands of buyers strolling along the streets.

The art of flower threading is practiced to serve religion. Other than paying respect to gods and spirits, the main purpose of the whole trade in flowers on the streets is Buddhism. Ninety-five percent of Thais are Buddhists. They pay respect to Triratna or the Triple Gems which include the Buddha, the Dharmma

(the teachings) and the Sangha (The Buddhist brotherhood). Traditional Buddhist offerings are flowers, incense and candles.

Life as a flower garland vendor

The life of a flower vendor starts as early as 3 in the morning, he or she goes to the biggest flower market, Pak Klong Talad, in Bangkok to select the best flowers from among jasmines, roses, crown flowers, white champaka (dok jam pee) and other decorative leaves. This flower market, Pak Klong Talad, is a mecca for flower related occupations. It is a wholesale flower center and a place to find florists of all sorts with a myriad of styles such as the finest traditional Thai Malai, western bouquets of imported flowers to ubiquitous garlands. The working hours of each flower garland vendor are different depending on where they are stationed. For example, a stall in front of *Wat Khaek* would be open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., while Suree, the owner of a little stall in front of a wholesale department store would open her stall later in the afternoon. Early in the morning, she takes her flowers home in a Tuk Tuk (three-wheeled mini-truck) and distributes her flowers to three of her freelance workers to start threading flowers. These workers get paid a minimum wage (140 Baht/day). Then she goes out to set up her stall at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, threading white buds of jasmines while selling her finished garlands. She stays there until she has sold all her flowers which is around 10-11 p.m.

Selling flowers is a pleasant job for the twenty-seven-year-old Id or Rampueng Nuan-ngarm. She used to sell grilled meatballs before this. "I couldn't really stand it. I found it hard for me to sell meatballs. And I didn't do well financially," said *Id*. But with flowers she found her peace and became more mentally healthy. "It is more pleasant to be working with flowers than meatballs," she concluded. *Yod*, a male vendor at *Wat Khaek* sharing his experience as a garland vendor said that this job keeps him busy. "It helped me quit smoking because I have to constantly use both hands to thread flowers. At the same time, I need to take care of customers who come to buy specific patterns of garland."



Id and her stall. She is still working on threading more flowers to fill up the trays.

Geographical distribution of flower vendors

Most of the flower vendors are scattered around busy areas, usually by the pavement where there are a lot of pedestrians. There are four major types of places where vendors can be found.

The most common place to find flower garland vendors is big intersections. The vendors hang flower garlands around their arms or on a blue plastic pipe. These vendors wait for the red lights. Then they will dash to the drivers in the cars stopped in the streets. The reason why the intersections are a huge marketplace for them derives from the Thai traditional belief in spirits. A number of Thai motorists, especially, taxi drivers, buy these garlands and put them on their rearview mirror. They believe in paying respect to spirits that will protect them from accidents. Some drivers even set a little Buddha image in the middle area on the dashboard as a shrine. As mentioned earlier Thai people use three incense sticks, a candle and a bunch of lotus or a flower garland to properly pay homage to the gods or Buddha image. However, it is not practical, even perilous, to light a candle and incense in a vehicle. A flower garland is therefore used to complete the ritual. The same idea also applies to other types of motorists. Bus and truck drivers also adhere to this belief.

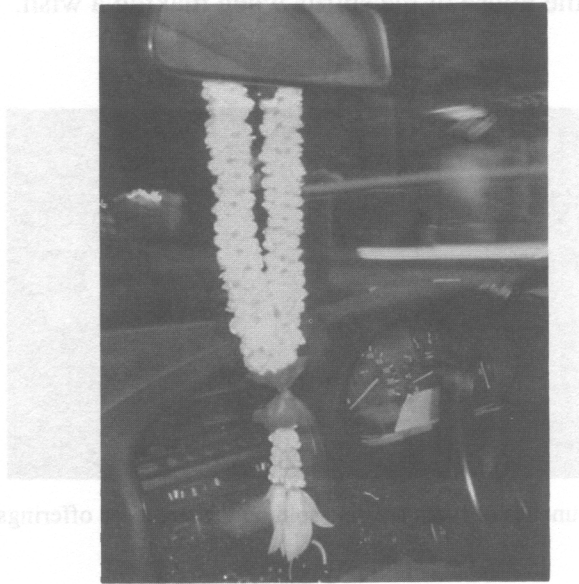


A bus driver accumulates fresh garlands at the little “shrine” in his bus.

Since the flower garlands sold at intersections are to be hung from rearview mirrors, the garlands, therefore, come in longer and bigger shapes or in a single line of jasmine with two roses at both ends. The vendors set up their work station underneath the fly-overs or under the trees around the intersections. They usually thread the flower garlands themselves. The prices are set at 20 Baht per piece, convenient to sell in a short time while customers are waiting at a red light.



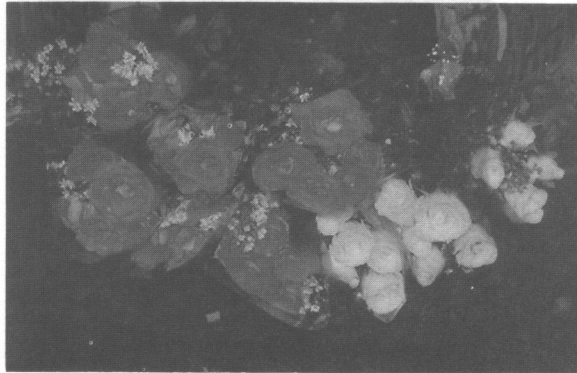
The boy and the elderly woman can be seen day and night selling flowers at intersections.



After buying a garland, the driver hangs it from the rearview mirror.

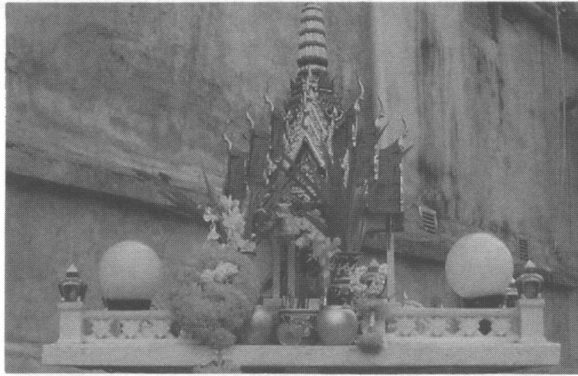
Garlands sold in the residential area come in the simplest and most common form. Vendors set out these garlands along with tobacco on a tray and bunches of other flowers in a big basket. The best location for them is usually in the market, along the pavements or near the bus stops. Vendors are usually female. They thread flowers themselves and, sometimes, they hire other freelance females to thread flowers to help maximize the number of garlands on display. These garlands perfectly serve pedestrians who wish to pay respect to numerous

places. One of the buyers at a convenience store in a busy residential area bought 7 garlands to cover all the places she wanted to pay respect to. To make it cost-effective, some of these garlands are made more from crown flowers than jasmine. Garlands in residential areas are priced the cheapest; 3 garlands for 10 baht. Id, has been threading flowers almost all her life. Her mother used to sell flowers where Id does now. Over the years, she has built up a strong clientele who have particular orders. “There is a taxi driver who picks up 8 lotuses every Thursday,” said Id with enthusiasm. “I have one customer who buys 9 garlands on a Wan Phra (or the Buddhist Sabbath day). There are also customers who wish to win the lottery. They offer a garland along with incense and a candle to the house of the spirits when making a wish.



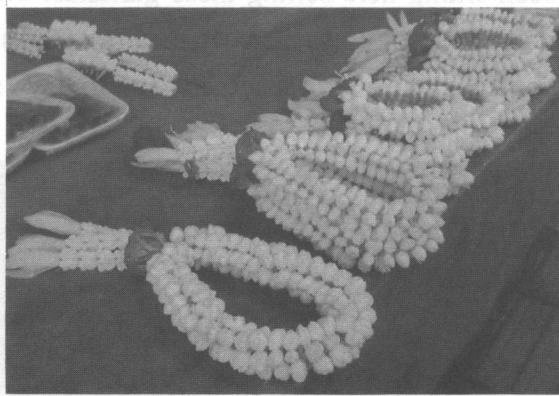
Bunches of roses are also sold on the streets as offerings.

Most of the time, Id would offer a price break for her regulars. “Those small garlands are 3 for 10 Baht. But I would normally charge my regular customers only 8 Baht.” Apart from garlands, these vendors also offer flowers in a bunch. These bunched flowers are lotus, marigold, chrysanthemum, orchids, pink and red roses. These bunches are to be put in a pair of vases that lie on both sides of the house of spirits or the shrine.



The house of spirits with garland offerings and white orchids in the vases.

Another common market place for flower garlands is the financial district and downtown Bangkok. Along the pavements of Silom Road's financial strip, lie, at least, six stalls of flower vendors. The crowd walking up and down the Silom area is made up of office employees and businesspersons with more buying power. This factor affects the choices and prices of the flower garlands. These flower garlands are much more elaborate. They are usually made of more jasmines and form more complicated patterns. The regular customers buy these flowers to pay respect to the Buddha image shrine in their offices or the house of spirits of the office building they work in.



More elaborate versions of Malai or garlands boasting their beauty and pleasant smell.

Below is the owner of this stall and her friend in the financial district.



Another distinguishing characteristic of vendors in this area is the ages of the vendors. They are mostly old women from upcountry. These women do not make garlands by themselves but they set out their garlands on a tray on top of a basket. *Has*, a seventy-four-year-old woman from Sri Saket, Northeastern Thailand has been selling garlands at the foot of the sky train escalators for three years. She told us that her grandchildren help make garlands at her house in Bangkok and then she takes a taxi to the downtown area in Bangkok. She makes approximately 500-600 Baht a day. However, from the writer's observation, she is making double what she said. Prices of garlands here range from 20-50 Baht. Most vendors here usually set their stalls next to each other. *Has* said, "I had been sitting here selling these garlands. Then one day, she (pointing at another vendor sitting less than two meters away) showed up sitting next to me. But I don't really mind. It's actually fun to have someone to chat with".



Two old vendors stationed at the foot of the Sky Train escalator in downtown Bangkok.

Garlands sold next to religious places are the fanciest of all the flowers sold on the streets. One of the best examples is *Wat Khaek*, or Maha Uma Devi Temple, situated in the financial district. People from around the country including Thai celebrities come to ask the Indian Goddess Uma Devi for a child or fame. An array of unusually long loops of flower garlands are hung from a pipe. Each is threaded with lots of jasmine buds with touches of red roses or lotuses at its ends. One of the customers of these elaborate garlands said that she bought it for a monk who has been given a new title. She admires the garlands made by this particular stall in front of this temple. Besides this, there are garlands of extra length (approximately 2 meters) that are made to put around the shrine. The long garlands are often decorated with marigolds. Prices vary, ranging from 10 Baht to 100 Baht, depending on the pattern and the length of the garlands. Along with these garlands, there are coconuts, bananas, cooking oil, tobacco, and sugarcane which are the staple offerings to the Goddess Uma.



The fanciest garlands sold on the streets can be found at Wat Khaek.

Below is the staple offerings to the Goddess Uma Devi.



The Changing Faces of Flowers

The looks of the *Malai* do not remain the same over the year. The loops of garland are made of several different types of flowers, for example, jasmine buds, *dok put*, crown flowers, rose petals, marigolds and white champaka, among others. The major factors that affect the changes in the look of the garlands are the season, the changing preferences of customers and the urbanization of the outskirts of Bangkok.

Normally, the vendor would use jasmine buds to make a loop because of jasmine's refreshing fragrance. *Dok put* is also used but only when one wants to make an elaborate and fancy garland. *Dok put* looks similar to jasmine but has no aroma and is smaller in size. In the cool season, jasmine becomes more expensive. Vendors, therefore, switch to using crown flowers which are available all year round. The garland will still look as nice but without the fragrance of jasmine.

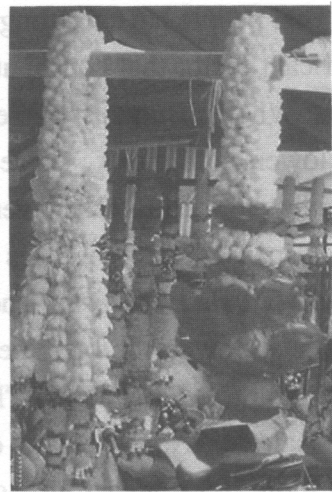


An example of a garland made out of *dok rak* instead of jasmine.

The decreasing supplies of jasmine in winter motivated some flower wholesalers to use dangerous chemicals to preserve the life of the flowers. The chemical strips the natural aroma off jasmine. The jasmine remains looking like buds, but can never bloom, until eventually they go bad. Besides this, if a

vendor threads jasmine laced with this chemical, his or her hands get irritated. *Yod* said it is the duty of the vendor to choose the chemical-free jasmine because it is not only dangerous for customers but for the vendors as well.

Another factor that affects flowers is the ever-changing demands of buyers. Customer demand inevitably influences the look of the types of flowers seen on the streets. Some customers want to buy a lot of garlands because they have a lot of shrines to pay respect to. These people therefore prefer smaller garlands at more affordable prices and as a result with less jasmine. The Indians who worship the Goddess Uma at Wat Kaek ask flower vendors to make garlands in the Indian style, whereby a garland of jasmine in full bloom and a garland of whole marigolds are strung together into a huge bright yellow loop. According to the vendors in front of Wat Kaek, threading fully-bloomed jasmine is simpler, yet takes more time to finish. At the same time, the marigold loops are more expensive because they need to use the whole flowers to make a big loop. This style of using marigolds in a garland is popular because of its name, *Dao Reung*, meaning a Glowing Star, in Thai.



The garlands of marigolds, influenced by Indians in Thailand. (Small picture) The garland on the left has jasmine in full bloom at its end, another influence of Indian customers.

The urbanization of the outskirts of Bangkok has transformed gardens, orchards and agricultural areas into buildings or real estate development projects. This affects the look of the flowers that are bunched. The vendors who were stationed in the community once sold bunched lotuses and orchids. The modernization and expansion of city life has depleted the fading supplies of lotus, causing the prices to skyrocket. Id told us that now lotus costs much more than before because the swamps where lotuses are grown are decreasing. Those places that grow lotus are now much farther from Bangkok. Lotus is therefore a bigger investment for vendors. Thus, vendors turn to affordable flowers such as chrysanthemums and red and pink roses. Orchids, once common flowers here, are disappearing from the streets. I vividly remember the old days when orchids were sold in big bunches for 5 Baht but I hardly see them today. Orchids are now nursed only to be exported to meet the increasing demand from abroad. Suree, a vendor in front of a convenience store said, "orchids are really expensive. I remember when I was a child, I helped my mother bunch up orchids. Now when I go to the flower market, there are not many available. If there are orchids, they are often too costly to invest in". A small bunch of orchids now costs 15 Baht while a small garland costs three times less.

The changing attitude of city people

Thai people have a strong belief in spirits and Buddhism. Religion is the significant factor that contributes to the popularity of the flowers sold on the streets. When a Buddhist makes merit, he or she gives food, incense, candles and flowers to a monk. Those flowers are often lotus, orchids or a garland. According to *Id*, the garland vendor, the scandals involving monks, reported in the newspapers affect the sales of flowers. "When there is such news, it affects people's faith in Buddhism," she said. This can be measured through the plunge in sales of flowers. In fact, the overall sales when compared to 15 years ago have plummeted drastically. "My mother was making good money in those days," said Id. "Now it's more difficult because of the decrease in demand. So I take more risk than before. Some days I almost don't break even."

Pictures of men performing women's tasks were unusual in the past. It was not common to see men threading flowers on the streets since Thai men were supposed to have masculine jobs such as being a construction worker, a policeman or a government officer. Nevertheless, the perception of men threading flowers has changed over the years. There have been more men performing this job and they feel comfortable doing it. Yod, a twenty-year-old guy revealed, "It's a job. My wife has been doing this for years. Now she's seven-months pregnant. It's not good for her to sit long hours threading flowers at the stall." He took over her job and let her stay at home. A female customer who is one of Yod's regulars said, "I don't see anything wrong with men doing this feminine task." Another male vendor in front of a convenience store is also threading flowers for a living. Today he's at the stall by himself because his mother is sick. "It is not hard for me to do this because my mother has been doing this for years. I don't really have any problems with my friends knowing that I'm threading flowers."

As the day comes to an end, flowers that are not sold must be dumped. Vendors then start their new day fetching new batches of fresh flowers to be threaded again. Those garlands that were sold the night before are now put on the shrines, the houses of the spirits, the rearview mirrors in cars or taxis. These flowers are short-lived and give out their aroma and beauty for only twenty-four hours. It is a spiritual reminder of the Buddhist teaching that life is impermanent. The beauty and the pleasure these flowers give is fleeting. Tomorrow, there will be new flower garlands dotting the streets of Bangkok. They might come in different patterns and styles and be gone in a day. These flowers are a token reminding us that we, too, are not everlasting.



Male vendors threading flowers are not uncommon.

