



left: Motorcycle trolleys – the fastest way to dispense colour to Thai byways. Stickers always seem to be sold alongside a menagerie of spray-painted ceramic animals. JG

below: Pedi-carts enable vendors to cover lots of ground, like this hawker selling coconut ice cream in bread buns. JG

right: Most vendors must trudge the streets by foot. Specialising in peddling everyday necessities like brooms, brushes and dust-pans, they weave through traffic jams so that you don't have to. JG



as a flexible way to ensure that toil reaps fast, tangible results. Vendors become part of life's rhythm. You know which cart is coming by its telltale sound. Ice cream trolleys tinkle with bells. Brush-sellers squeeze rubber-bulb horns, noodle vendors clatter chopsticks on bamboo, and rubbish recyclers induce a whoop from a bicycle-pump clamped to the frame. The black-dye man rattles his stringed bead upon a twirling twin-faced drum, a remnant of the Chinese ethnicity of the earliest urban vendor class. Now they're likely migrants from Isaan, managed by a Sino-Thai businessman.

For all its quality and charm, vending languishes at the low end of the social scale. Not least because outdoor work browns the skin in a land where whiteness brings status. In the ever more frequent confrontations with authorities, vendors rarely win, however much they may pelt officials with smelly fermented fish and its verbal equivalent. Encroachers who've been accommodated for years get evicted in an instant, without compensation and often with no alternative site. When television exposed some Bangkok Metropolitan Authority inspectors asking regular bribes from food vendors in 2003, it was the victims who were blamed and shunted away to save face.

While food courts, markets and malls slowly encroach on custom, the sheer convenience and conviviality of the roving cart will ensure a demand from the millions of poorer Thais in the informal sector who depend on what academics now term the 'urban foodscape'. Supply is ensured,

too, as long as there's a population poor enough to push heavy objects in this heat. However, that may change through the eviction of slum-dwellers to distant suburbs.

An increasing proportion of vendors aren't freelance, but franchisees of both famous brands and less obvious goods on consignment. Those quaint straw hats brush vendors wear don't connote a particular tradition; it's the uniform of those flogging the same company's brooms, mops and dusters. Unsalaries mat franchisee Sawat must travel by bus to central Bangkok, from where he pedals at least 30 kilometres a day around a zone

