

Trash Recyclers

Freelance gleaners make the most of rubbish

Thailand's newly affluent society doesn't separate for recycling what they throw away. Instead, a caste of roving gleaners called *saleng* do the grimy task for them, sifting treasure from the trash.

Thais historically tossed out packaging, scraps and broken items without problem, since it was mostly biodegradable natural materials like wood, cotton, leaf or bamboo. The habit has barely modified in recent decades with the sudden influx of plastic, metal, synthetics and hi-tech detritus.

You can measure what a society values by what it throws away. And the widening wealth gap reflects ambivalence, among both public and officials, about moderating a status-conscious lifestyle that shows off its cavalier consumption of resources. Recycled products have since the mid-2000s gained trendy cachet – as long as it's someone else's hands that get dirty repurposing the refuse.

Into the resulting mess, the freelance forager thrusts a willing hand. "There are two types: *khon*

geb khaya collect or steal stuff, whereas *saleng* only buy," says Natthaphon, 23, who joins his mother and two elder brothers in buying-up a chunk of Phitsanulok's scrap. *Saleng* – a term indicating the Chinese ethnicity of Thailand's earliest 'rag-and-bone-men' – are a rung higher up the hardscrabble hierarchy, and make a decent living in a socially useful role that's part of daily streetlife.

"I quit working in a BMW car factory to do my father's business when he retired," recounted Natthaphon from his red, three-wheeled trolley. "My mother uses a pick-up truck, not a tricycle. She could earn 1,000 baht a day. I earn about 500 baht." Assembling BMWs clearly hasn't influenced the design of the bare assemblage of steel, rubber and grease that constitutes his tricycle. He rides the largest size sold by his *saleng* depot, costing 23,000 baht. It's pedal powered, though Bangkok's traffic has led to a surge in motorised versions. On luxury models, a collapsible umbrella shades the driver and his scales, though not the assistants dozing in the load tray's lumpy mattress of jumble.

"I buy almost everything: glass, paper, plastic, metal, wood, newspaper, books, magazines, electronics, usable tyres and sometimes clothes," Natthaphon says. He makes 4-5 baht profit per kilo



far left: A *Saleng* weighs paper he collects from households and pays for per kilo. PCS

left: *Saleng* trash collectors trundle through backstreets to collect anything recyclable. JG

right: Students promote the separation of rubbish at the Chula-Thammasat University Football match parade. PCS

below right: Informal recycling bins made from bamboo and fis nets at Bang Khuntien on the sea coast. PCS

bottom right: A trash collector rests in his bin trolley at a Bangkok temple. PCS



on the 3-5 baht a kilo he pays for things the processing centre can ship in bulk to recyclers. He may pay a premium for other useful items, prizing things that won't need repairing before resale.

Squealing their trademark bicycle-pump 'horn', *saleng* trundle urban streets from 9am to 3pm on weekdays and all day weekends. They complete for only a small fraction of the trash, however, while the wider problem eludes solution, as mountains of hazardous, mercury-seeping waste pollutes groundwater. One group of *khon geb khaya* in suburban Bangkok swiped tubs of apparent trash from a prominent company's doorstep, only to lose fingers, sight or life to the radioactive contents.

Thailand produces 15.1 million tonnes of waste per year, according to 2009 figures, a fifth of that by Bangkokians. The amount recycled had doubled to 22% since 2003, when the state was recycling just 3 percent, and *saleng* 8 percent. That compares to 30-50 percent in Korea, Singapore and Japan. Recycling schemes involving colour-coded street bins have foundered through lack of enforcement, changed bin colours and a ban on street bins after the New Year 2007 bombings. Bin men have also been spotted dumping divided trash into the same truck. The solution rests in education, discipline and civic pride, but successive Bangkok governors failed to foster the separation of waste in either household or workplace. The situation was improved by the state finally utilising the local profit-driven *saleng* system that Thais are used to.

NGOs have long treated *saleng* as a socially positive means to educate about waste and to get those in poverty organised and more appreciated by society. A successful pilot scheme in Isaan's Khon Kaen province now runs municipal trash



collection. Yet officialdom feels queasy about such a dirty profession that spotlights a source of shame. A few truly desperate scavengers pick through what ends up at the suppurating, volcanic municipal landfill sites on which they actually live.

Thailand is a well-swept country, only the sweepings end up soiling forest and field, canal and coral reef. Though a Thai proverb decries "hiding an elephant corpse beneath a lotus leaf", bureaucracies tend to do just that. Thoughtless pollution has been a cultural blindspot across Asia, with minds fixed on development, not its costs.