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# Cross-Cultural Reflections on Siamese Water Cities as 'Venice of the East'

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## Notes

This lesson looks at the historical and cultural genealogy of the comparison between Venice and the Thai capital Bangkok from the perspective of studies in cultural anthropology. Drawing on the neglected heritage of the 'canal-temple system' that characterizes Bangkok's religious, urban and hydrogeological layout, the argument focuses on the historical connection between the ecological, infrastructural and socio-cultural fabric of the two sinking cities, Venice and Bangkok, and their response to common challenges such as rising sea levels, climate change and unsustainable human development.

## 1 Introduction

Parallels between Venice and other places, in Asia and beyond, are common. These comparisons evoke the paradigmatic position of Venice in a globalized cultural imaginary of waterscapes and water cities. In this lesson, I look at the historical and cultural genealogy of this comparison and at its current possible implications seen from the perspective of studies in cultural anthropology. Drawing on the neglected heritage of the 'canal-temple system' that characterizes Bangkok's religious, urban and hydrogeological layout, I focus on the historical connection between the ecological, infrastructural and socio-cultural fabric of the two sinking cities, Venice and Bangkok, and their response to common challenges such as rising sea levels, climate change and unsustainable human development.

Since the Middle Ages the lagoon city of Venice has been a bridge between Western and Eastern material and intangible cultures, histories and arts. Often acknowledged by academics and scholars, and even abused by journalists and by tourist communication campaigns, the formula 'Venice of the East' is not infrequently adopted to refer to Asian cities and capitals whose urban landscape has historically been characterized by the dense presence of waterways and canals. As an index of the popularization of this formula, also Wikipedia, the online open access encyclopedia, reserves a whole page on this subject.<sup>1</sup>

According to the sources of the page curators, drawn from academic literature and international mainstream media, at least 42 cities can be listed with the nickname *The Venice of the East*: two in Bangladesh, one in Brunei, eleven in China, one in Micronesia, one in Hong Kong, two in Indonesia, one in Iraq, eleven in Japan, three in India, two in the Philippines, five in South Korea, and two in Thailand: the old Siamese capital Ayutthaya and the new one, Bangkok.

## 2 The Siamese capitals as Venice of the East

Phra Nakorn Sri Ayutthaya, the old Siamese capital until its destruction by the Burmese army in 1767, and Bangkok, the new Siamese-Thai capital established by the Chakri dynasty on the delta of the lower Chao Phraya river basin, are still today often advertised as 'Venice of the East'. The nickname appears in scholarly literature, museum captions, in tourist guides and brochures, and functions as a mythomoteur for national identity, academic speculation and tourist promotion. According to the Asian Studies scholar Ying-kit Chan, who criticizes the Singapore government's populist campaign to promote Singapore as the Venice of the East, the Siamese capitals

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice\\_of\\_the\\_East](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice_of_the_East).

in Asia actually embody an historical record in this regard that neither Singapore nor other Asian cities can claim (2013, 311). As he writes:

Bangkok (and its adjacent city of Ayutthaya) was truly Venice of the East in European writings [...]. H. Warrington Smyth (1867-1943), a British mining engineer who had served in Siam, described Bangkok as “[T]hat Venice of the East, delighting the soul with its glided palaces and gorgeous temples”. Henri Mouhot (1826-1861), a French naturalist, called Bangkok “Venice of the East, and whether bent on business or pleasure you must go by water”. Reverend N.A. MacDonald said “[Bangkok] contains about 400,000 inhabitants, and has been called the Venice of the East, from the fact that much of the city is floating on the river in the form of floating houses”. Bangkok, for its idyllic scenery and characteristic canals and waterways, was Venice of the East in the eyes of its European travelers.

Since the first European explorations, the delta has been known to Westerners, and Ayutthaya (located about 80 kilometres north of Bangkok, at the confluence of the Chao Phraya, Lopburi and Pasak rivers) was given the nickname Venice of the East by the Portuguese, the first Christian traders to establish settlements along the Siamese rivers, in the early sixteenth century. A new capital was founded by the new king, Taksin, soon after the Siamese were defeated by the Burmese in Ayutthaya, which was almost completely destroyed. Initially settled on the west bank of the river, in the old city of Thon Buri, King Taksin was overthrown by one of his army commanders, who eventually became the first king of the Chakri dynasty. After his succession, the royal court would eventually settle on the eastern bank of the river, corresponding to ‘Ban Makok (Wild Plum Village)’, later shortened to ‘Bangkok’. The new Siamese capital was officially founded on 21 April 1792. The establishment of a new capital named Khrung Thep Maha Nakhorn, the Great Capital City of the Angels, sealed the rise of the so-called Rattanakosin Era, which today has found expression in its tenth king, Vajiralongkorn, or Rama X.

For the first century after its founding, and before the massive concretization that began in the early twentieth century to modernize (that is, westernize) the royal capital, Bangkok followed the same urban model as Ayutthaya, based on waterway connectivity and on amphibious (royal, religious and vernacular) architectures. From its founding until the early twentieth century, the new capital witnessed important efforts to reengineer the natural waterways of the delta, in order to improve the defensive, infrastructural and agricultural potential of the canal network system. For instance, the main royal palaces and temples were surrounded by two main canals, the *Khlong Rob Khrung* and the *Klong Padeang Khrung Kasem*, deliberately dug to isolate and protect what would become Rattanakosin Island (*Kho Rattanakosin*), the historic centre of the city, while allowing faster communication and exchange. For centuries, life on the river and on the canals has shaped the daily life of the Siamese people, merging elite and popular water cultures, simultaneously shaping religious, political and economic landscapes, but also diplomatic and cosmopolitan relations with the West: indeed, as in Ayutthaya, the main settlements of European merchants, traders and diplomats were established along the river and canals. However, the resemblance between the waterscapes of Venice and the Siamese capital(s) is not the only historical thread linking the two contexts.

### 3 Cross-Cultural Connections Between Venice and Bangkok in the Twentieth Century

The modernization and westernization of the country is historically bound to the royal family’s direct experience of European countries and diplomacy. The visits of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) to Europe in 1897 and in 1907 opened a new chapter in the cultural relations between Bangkok and Venice. Rama V was considered the great modernizer of the nation and was open to exchanges with the Western

colonial powers. During his 'grand tour' of Europe, Venice proved to be one of the most inspiring European cities for him. As Sud Chonchirdsin (2009, 443) recalls, the Siamese king was welcomed in Venice on the 15 May 1897 by the Duke of Genoa, Tommaso Alberto Vittorio, during his European Grand Tour. He appreciated Venetian architecture and arts, but was also struck by the dramatic poverty of a large part of the population. His visit to the Biennale exhibition made him fall in love with the talented art of Galileo Chini, to whom he commissioned the frescoes of the Royal Throne Hall in Bangkok and other prominent works. Chini, a native of Florence and an avant-garde artist who brought the values and aesthetics of the Austrian Secessionists (and particularly of Gustav Klimt) to Italy, spent two years in Bangkok (1911-13), and portrayed the capital, its people and atmosphere, its palaces, canals and temples in several artworks. Furthermore, after his sojourn, he returned to the International Art Exhibition of Venice in 1914 to exhibit some of the results of his artistic experience in the Venice of the East (De Grassi 2019, 79-95). Even today, the Historical Archive of the Biennale (in Marghera) preserves some of his paintings related to the artist's years in Bangkok.

Rama V's return to Bangkok from Europe was also an opportunity for him to incorporate his new knowledge of Italian landscape and art into the urban fabric of the royal capital. The appreciation of Italian sculpture and architecture by Chulalongkorn and by his successor, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), meant major investments in this sector. The kings commissioned Italian architects and engineers to design and build prominent royal, civil and religious buildings. While Carlo Feroci was commissioned with the construction of the Throne Hall, the design and construction of the Norasingh Palace, the Government House of the Thai capital, by Annibale Rigotti in 1926 in resemblance to the Venetian Gothic architecture of the Ca' d'Oro, is perhaps the most significant trace of an emerging cosmopolitan imaginary, a powerful transcultural heritage where the royal capital sought to actively incorporate Venetian aesthetics and semantics. This is not only evident in Chini and Feroci's work with royal architecture and decorations. Also the water landscape, for some years, carried the traces of the tribute paid by the king to the unique atmosphere of Venice. This is the case of the (no longer existing) old version of the Saphan Han, a bridge lying on the southern course of the Khlong rob khruang, in the ChinaTown area, as noted in a recent article in the national newspaper *The Bangkok Post* celebrating the Royal family's photographic collection. At that time, the same could be said about the Saphan Han.

*Saphan Han* (literally, 'turn bridge') was originally built during the reign of King Phutthayotfa Chulalok (1782-1809), and indeed a section of it would rotate to allow oversized vessels to pass unimpeded. The bridge subsequently underwent several reincarnations. Most notably, at King Chulalongkorn's behest, Saphan Han was newly designed to incorporate features from two iconic bridges in Italy: the bowed expanse of the Rialto Bridge in Venice and shops lining the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Saphan Han has been completely transformed. While infrastructural modernization and industrial development in Venice have been confined to the *terraferma*, the mainland districts of Mestre and Marghera, the poor, vernacular architecture and waterfront market centres along the Khlong Rob Khruang and other ancient water arteries have been erased by gentrification projects that have covered, cleaned up and reshaped the human and infrastructural appearance of this and other ancient corners of the old city, where the concretization and development of the urban space often correspond to the eradication of the amphibious vernacular economies, architectures, cults and daily habits of poor inhabitant (Jumsai 1988).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/2736460/black-and-white-reminiscences>.

#### 4 Sinking Cities and the Challenges of the Anthropocene

It is impossible to imagine Venice without its residents: the voices, sounds and smells that emanate from the daily life and work of the local people, in the city and along the canals. While in summer the city centre is overwhelmed by tourists, in autumn, winter and early spring the lagoon sometimes regains a magic coat of thick fog and thin rain, and only the colourful Venetian dialect can be heard along the canals. The city suffers from the dramatic reduction of its original population, rapidly replaced by foreigners with long and short term ambitions and projects that also make Venice a hyper modern cosmopolitan venue and cultural hub. The real estate market and the overexploitation of the city for the sake of tourism have changed the demographic pattern of Venice. The city is sinking due to rising sea levels, underground water pumping and soil compaction. Similar problems are also causing the submersion of Bangkok.

While a policy of resilience has been developed for Venice, the Thai capital's administrators seem reluctant to take this step. Scholars investigating subsidence and related problems in and around the Bangkok metropolitan area and along the Chao Phraya river delta warn that citizen science, popular architectural and hydrogeological knowledge of canal management and local river cultures may be essential in protecting Bangkok from disastrous flooding – such as that which tragically occurred in 2011 – and subsidence. This perspective is reinforced by scholars who have noted that the presence of religious architecture along the canals once favoured the preservation of the waterways, preventing their concretization (Ahamed-Broadhurst 2017). While the hydrogeological importance of revitalizing the khlung network has been recognized by the ruling classes and the municipal technocratic apparatus for many decades, this revitalization also implies the gentrification and touristification of the khlongs, which seriously compromises the conservation of the cultural and biotic ecosystems historically generated by the presence and daily use of the waterway networks. Such processes also entail the loss and dispersal of historical urban communities, cults and customs. In Bangkok these cultural-natural ecosystems testify to the interdependence of human, non-human and supra-human complexes that contribute to the life of the river and of ancient canals as 'cultural reserves' of moral and religious practices and sentiments (Thai Buddhist, Chinese Buddhist, animist and even Catholic and Islamic), often involving water animals, water spirits, water legends, water rituals and so on. Such entanglements are usually neglected by urban planners. The amphibious cultural life of the khlongs is still very dense – even more so than in Venice – but unlike in Venice, it is locally perceived as problematic and inconvenient, and hence undervalued. Given that various ideas and projects are already emerging from civil society organizations and from the work of engaged scholars (Elinoff 2023), further research should be encouraged to make up for the lack of historical and anthropological documentation of Bangkok's waterways as more-than-human ecosystems and as water cultural heritage, following the Venetian paradigm. Also, a space for cross-cultural exchange between Bangkok and Venice should also be promoted in the future, based on the memory of past relations and the common climatic and socio-environmental challenges that lie ahead. The establishment of a Bangkok Biennale of Arts and its links with Venetian art circles,<sup>3</sup> as well as the recent steps recently taken to seal the sisterhood between the two cities, affirmed by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the Honorary Consul of Thailand in Venice in early 2024, might represent significant progress in this direction, furthering the long-established parallel between the Italian and Siamese Venice.

<sup>3</sup> Belcher, D. (2024). "Bangkok Takes Its Place on the Venice Stage". *The New York Times International Edition*, 20 April, 6. [www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/arts/design/venice-biennale-bangkok.html/](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/arts/design/venice-biennale-bangkok.html/).

In conclusion, the comparison between Venice and Bangkok suggests a reflection on the common challenges faced by two cities deeply caught up in the contradictions of their own developmental and infrastructural choices. Connected since the pre-industrial times, in the Anthropocene era they both suffer the effects of the climate crisis more than other cities and in very similar ways. The anthropological reflections presented in this lesson, then, aim not only to highlight the cultural conservation of urban waterways as a source of resilience in the face of the climate crisis. Indeed, we also wanted to convey the idea that, in times of crisis, such conservation efforts can be transcultural in nature, grounded in cultural and artistic exchanges that generate reciprocity, shared knowledge and a common understanding among future generations of the ecological urgency of preserving human and more-than-human water cultures on a global scale.

### Mandatory Reading

Neungreudee, L. (2019). "The Encounter between Italy and Siam at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century: Italian Artists and Architects in the Modernising Kingdom of Siam". *Modern Italy*, 24(4), 469-84. <https://www.cmcc.it/it/projects/apat-climate-change-impacts-in-italy-and-adaptation-policies>

### Further Optional Reading

Ahamed-Broadhurst, K. (2017). *Understanding Canals in Bangkok Using Historic Maps and GIS* [Master's Thesis]. Boston: Harvard University.

Chan, Y. (2013). "Allegories of Venice: Singapore's Vague Concept of a Global City". *East Asia*, 30, 307-25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-013-9199-2>

Elinoff, E. (2023). *City Impermanent. Watery Speculations in Thailand'sinking Capital = Talk held at the New Institute Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE) – University Ca' Foscari* (Venice, 17 September 2023). Venice.

Marks, D.; Elinoff, E. (2020). "Splintering Disaster: Relocating Harm and Remaking Nature after the 2011 Floods in Bangkok". *International Development Planning Review*, 42(3), 273-94.

"Photographic Reminiscences: Thailand's Royal Photographic Glass Plate Negatives and Original Prints Collection was inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register in 2017". <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/photographic-reminiscences>

