



WAVES IN THE FLOATING MARKET

BY JACK GOLDFARB

Bobbing on the mighty, muddy Chao Phya, waiting bow-on at the jetty behind Bangkok's oldest hotel, a fleet of flat-bottomed, fringe-topped sight-seeing launches loads sleepy-eyed tourists each day at dawn. With rhythmic rumbling the diesel-powered flotilla and its cargo of farangs (foreigners) pulls into the busy river traffic and heads downstream, edging toward the opposite shore as it goes, bound for the gateway to the network of canals or *klongs* that leads to what has become not merely a "must" but an imperative sightseeing destination in Thailand, the famous Floating Market.

Hulking barges plod by, decks nearly awash under burdens of teak logs, rice sacks, gritty heaps of coal. With only slightly more speed, trans-river ferry boats plough incomprehensible courses to and from Bangkok's "Siamese-twin" city Thon Buri across the way. Elongated speedboats called "longtails" zip and skim amidst it all, the river churning white and resounding with their open-throttled roar, as they taxi klong children to school and klong-dwelling "commuters" to their jobs in the city.

The farang flotilla breaks formation as its skippers race each other for the first entrance to the narrow klongs. Turning westward out of the Chao Phya chaos, they deploy themselves into a long convoy.

... slacken and the chimes of temple bells are heard from a Buddhist sanctuary nearby. Along both banks of the klong, thickets of tall breadfruit trees, graceful betel palms, purple-red bougainvilleas, and lanky bamboos lean far out across the water, not quite closing a leafy arch above. Wild orchids, scarlet flame trees, and yellow gardenias dazzle with a profusion of color.

Airy, "see-through" houses of teak and woven thatch project stilted porches over the banks. The farangs are enthralled, and hundreds of cameras are raised to the eye as one. Click, a barefoot monk in golden-orange robes makes his way along the shore with his begging bowl. Click, a klong housewife in a long-skirted *prasin* crouches before a cooking fire, fanning the flame under pots of rice and curried fish. Click, a raven-haired youngster splashes in the murky water in a morning bath as his father stands waist-deep nearby, brushing his teeth and gazing impassively into the battery of lenses aimed his way. The launches' motors burble a deep, resonant counterpoint to the "rakkkkkkkk" of passing long-tails and the sounds echo back from the wave-washed banks.

Women in straw "lampshade" hats skull fruit-crammed skiffs alongside the launches. The farangs trade coins for bananas and plump mangosteens. Someone wonders if the fruit boats sell hot coffee. The guides promise a "coffee break" when the launches reach the Floating Market Annex. In the meantime, they continue to deliver their capsule courses in klong history and geography to their captive audiences. No, there's no problem with water pollution: those huge earthen jugs you see on every porch hold rain water collected during the monsoon. Yes, the people live in these houses year round. No, babies seldom fall out of bed to drown in their own backyards. Yes, no, yes.

The launches veer into a connecting canal. An elderly Thai gentleman calls out "Good morning!" in excellent English from the shore, and bows to each launch in turn. "That fellow loves the tourists," the guides explain. "Unfortunately, not all of the klong people feel that way."

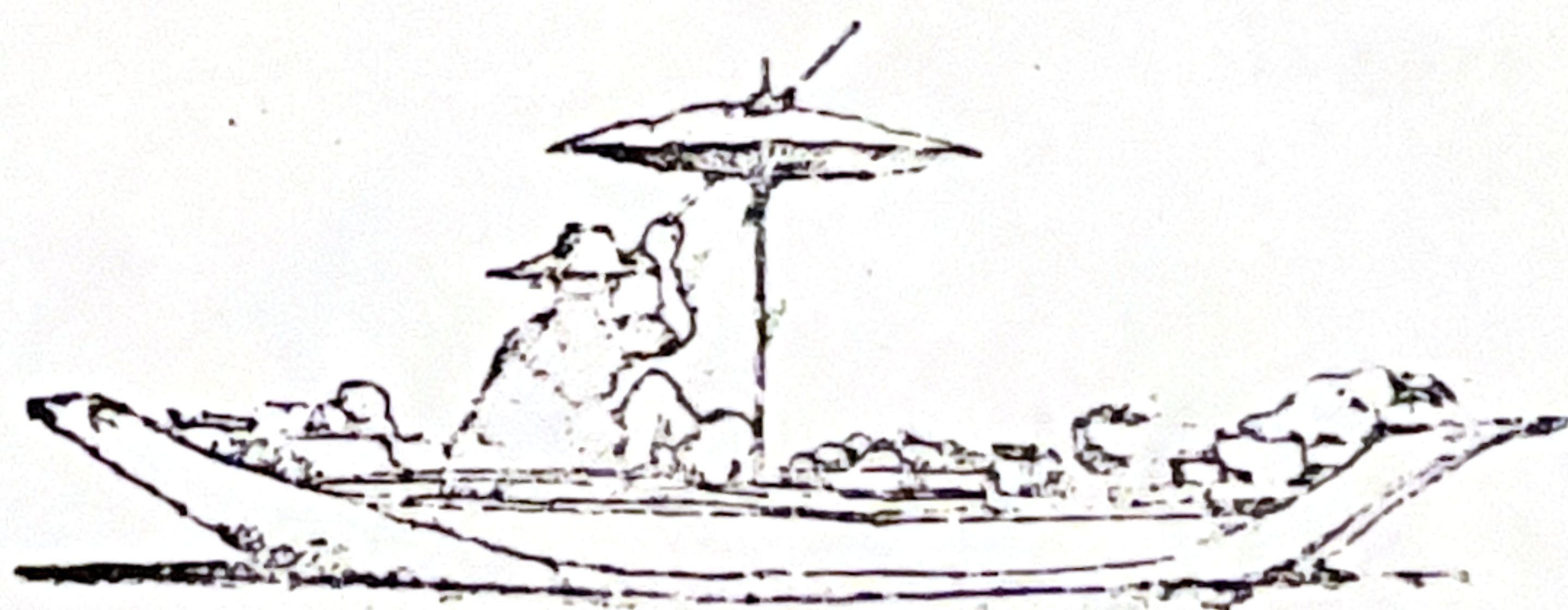
It is now more than a decade since the heavy tourist "invasion" of these lush and picturesque klongs began in earnest. Until the mid-60s, only a trickle of tourists found their way along the watery roads to search out the fabled Floating Market. Most were content to ooh and ahh at Bangkok's fabulous wats and palaces. If they crossed the Chao Phya at all, it was to visit the fanciful stupa of Wat Arun, a good mile upriver from the entrance to the klongs.

Those few tourists who penetrated the maze of klongs were almost unnoticed among the thousands of farmers, fisherfolk, and artisans who gathered daily to bargain, sample, trade and chat — all this

aking place on the water in a gunwale-to-gunwale traffic jam of boats heaped high with their colorful wares and dotted with parasols and pastel-hued sunshades. To the farangs it was fascinating beyond words. The travel agents lost no time exploiting it.

As the tourists advanced, the floating marketeers began a slow retreat landward. Advance parties went ashore and set up shop near the Temple of the Banyan Tree near Wat Sai. Some began trucking in their produce by road, but most of the selling still went on from the sampans and *kleng* boats moored along the klong banks. For these water-loving people, doing business on terra firma was quite unbusinesslike.

The tourists were not at all deterred. For one thing, fewer market boats on the water meant more room for tourist launches. Soon, however, the latter outnumbered the former, creating, literally, serious waves in the marketplace. Special water-cops were posted to keep order. By the late 60s, nearly all market craft had re-berthed in more secluded klongs, or, ironically, joined the shore-based shops at Wat Sai. It was around this time that a large new landing dock was built at the edge of the klong where tourists could disembark and explore a new complex of shops called the "Floating Market Annex," on dry land.



Designed like a general store, the sort one would find at Disney World, the Annex is a souvenir supermarket offering neatly-displayed stocks of trinkets, silks and lacy Thai jewelery — the very same stuff hawked in shops and hotel arcades in Bangkok. In the rear of the Annex is a snack bar set on a landscaped patio where, for a fee, one can have one's photo taken next to a real live elephant.

A three-sided difference of opinion goes on between the "original" Floating Market vendors, the travel agents, and Government authorities. The vendors have no personal grudge against tourists, but protest that their small boats are no match for the high-powered launches, and may scuttle the market unless the launches are limited to a few. Travel agents suggest keeping the market afloat with subsidies. The Government is seeking ways to calm the waters while preserving the unique quality of this, one of Thailand's top tourist attractions. ❀