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Towards the Coexistence of Global and Local Socioeconomic Urban Conditions: Comparing Glocalization in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

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Urbanization and globalization have transformed Bangkok from a traditional, community-centered settlement into a vertical metropolis shaped by global capital and economic modernization. As Thailand's economic hub, Bangkok thrives on trade, tourism, and investment, but this growth often costs cultural identity and socio-economic equity. While globalization fosters opportunities, it also brings income inequality, labor exploitation, and cultural homogenization. The dominance of international businesses in Sukhumvit displaces local communities, dilutes Thai heritage, and challenges SMEs facing regulatory hurdles. Conversely, Bantadthong exemplifies a "glocal place," balancing cultural heritage preservation with sustainable development. Its approach integrates modernization without compromising local identity. These challenges highlight the need for balanced policies integrating global practices while preserving cultural continuity. This study evaluates glocal development strategies through case studies, exploring urban policies that bridge global business models with local contexts. It aims to ensure Bangkok remains competitive and culturally distinct as a thriving global city.

Keywords: Globalization, Cultural identity, Income inequality, International business, Glocal.

1. Introduction

As of 2023, Thailand continued to serve as a central economic player within the Southeast Asian, specifically, ASEAN region, with an estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$512.19 billion, maintaining its position as the second-largest economy in the region after Indonesia (Macrotrends, 2024). The country's GDP per capita stood at approximately USD 7,172, reflecting steady and moderate economic growth in recent years (Macrotrends, 2024). This performance was supported by Thailand's well-developed industrial base, particularly in high-value sectors such as automobile manufacturing, electronics, and agriculture. These industries, coupled with reliable infrastructure and active participation in international trade, have remained critical to the country's economic stability.

Between 2016 and 2023, Thailand demonstrated consistent resilience by sustaining its role as a key manufacturing and export hub while simultaneously pursuing structural reforms. Notably, the government's Thailand 4.0 strategy aimed to transition the economy toward innovation-driven growth, focusing on advanced industries such as digital technology, biotechnology, and smart agriculture (Macrotrends, 2024). In addition, Thailand's strategic geographic position, integration into regional trade frameworks, and investments in logistics and infrastructure have reinforced its competitiveness in global supply chains. Despite increasing regional economic competition, Thailand has preserved its influence by prioritizing long-term development and economic diversification (Macrotrends, 2024)(**Figure 01**).

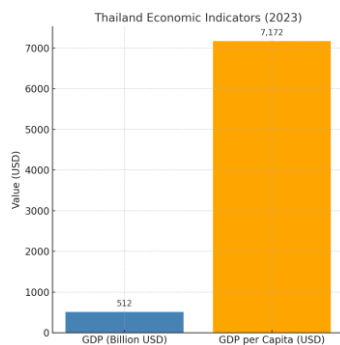


Figure 01: The bar graph comparing **Thailand's GDP** per capita for 2023.

1.1 Background and Context

Thailand's economy has evolved through a complex interplay of historical legacies and globalization. During King Mongkut's reign (1851–1868), Thailand faced Western imperialism and responded by adopting free trade policies, distinguishing itself from China and Japan by maintaining sovereignty while engaging in global trade. From 1960 to 1996, Thailand experienced robust growth, averaging 7.5% annually, lifting millions from poverty and solidifying its position as a middle-income nation (Wisetchai, S. (2023). Today, Thailand is a key player in the ASEAN economic community, benefiting from strategic investments in infrastructure and logistics, making it an attractive destination for international trade (Wisetchai, S. (2023). However, rapid urbanization and globalization have also created significant challenges, particularly in Bangkok, where issues like inequality, displacement of communities, and the erosion of cultural heritage underscore the tension between modernization and preservation.

The global economy is driven by multinational corporations (MNCs) and cross-border interactions, fostering economic growth but often exacerbating inequality and marginalizing local businesses (Rodrik, 2011). Cultural homogenization, as seen with the spread of Western brands, further threatens local traditions (Vignali, 2001). In contrast, local economies prioritize community-based activities, fostering job creation and cultural preservation but struggle against the dominance of MNCs. The glocal economy offers a balance, advocating for "thinking globally and acting locally" (Godey & Lai, 2011). This model integrates global practices into local contexts, enabling businesses to thrive internationally while preserving regional distinctiveness.

Bangkok serves as a microcosm of these global-local tensions. Rapid urban development in districts like Sukhumvit has spurred economic growth but also displaced traditional communities and eroded cultural heritage. This highlights the need for policies that blend global opportunities with local preservation to ensure sustainable and inclusive development in the face of globalization.

1.2 Literature review

Globalization

Globalization has significantly reshaped global economic systems by creating expansive networks of international trade and investment, facilitating the flow of goods, capital, and technology across borders (Kanter, 2014). Many economists emphasize that by opening access to new markets, advanced technologies, and foreign capital, globalization presents substantial opportunities for economic growth, particularly in developing countries (Bangkokbiznews, 2021). Operating on a global scale, it aims to connect nations and regions in an increasingly interdependent world economy. However, this expansive integration often comes at a cost. In urban investment hotspots such as Sukhumvit 24 in Bangkok, marketed as a rising global investment hub the influence of multinational corporations (MNCs) illustrates a broader pattern wherein large global firms dominate local markets, frequently outcompeting and displacing small, locally owned businesses. As a result, globalization has not only driven development but also exacerbated economic inequality by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of transnational actors, often at the expense of local enterprise and community resilience (Kanter, 2014).

Localization

Local economies are often characterized by the presence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), sector-specific specializations, and community-oriented practices that reflect the distinct geographic, cultural, or historical identity of a region. These economies typically rely on local advantages such as regional agriculture, tourism, artisanal production, and traditional crafts which are closely tied to place-based knowledge and consumer preferences (Zhao & Belk, 2008; Trubek, 2008). However, the increasing intensity of global competition has placed growing pressure on these local systems, particularly in sectors where multinational corporations hold a comparative advantage through greater access to capital, economies of scale, and advanced technology (Sichtmann et al., 2018). Unlike globalization, which operates across borders, localization tends to exist within a single country and is often confined to specific geographic areas, with products and services that are tailor-made to meet the unique demands of local markets, cultures, and consumers (Sichtmann et al., 2018).

Glocalization in Bangkok

The concept of "glocalization", a blend of "globalization" and "localization" emerged in the 1990s as a response to globalization's homogenizing effects. It highlights the simultaneous spread of global influences and local adaptations, reshaping global practices to fit regional needs and cultural contexts (Bangkokbiznews, 2021). Glocalization emphasizes integrating global strategies within local realities, creating hybrid approaches that are both efficient and contextually relevant. As Miguel, Joan, and Rialp (2019) note, balancing global and local elements allows economies and organizations to leverage

the strengths of both scales, enhancing competitiveness, resilience, and inclusivity, especially in urban centers like Bangkok, where global forces and local identities intersect.

As global business and urban development continue to grow, local communities in Thailand especially in Isan are seeing big changes. A study by Wichianwanna (2023) looks at how these changes affect poor people in Khon Kaen and Sila, where new projects and outside investment are on the rise. Interviews and observations with 25 residents show that while development brings better roads and more jobs, most of those jobs are low-paying and risky. Big companies, both global and local, often prefer skilled workers, pushing out many locals and making the gap between rich and poor even wider (Wichianwanna, 2023).

Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of being Global by Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy

The term “global city” is often used to describe how a small number of major cities have become central players in the world economy. Since the late 1970s, there’s been a noticeable shift in how certain cities function—not just as important national centers, but as deeply connected nodes in global networks of finance, trade, and services. Cities like these are often home to international banks, tech firms, law offices, universities, and corporate headquarters, making them crucial to global economic flows (Sassen, 1991; Taylor, 2004; Friedmann & Wolff, 1982). But as these cities grow more integrated with the global system, it raises concerns about how that affects everyday urban life (Amen 2021; Amen and Kuzovic 2018b; Aziz Amen 2022; Al-Dujaili, and Amen 2018). While everything might seem more connected on the surface, many local communities find themselves left out of the decision-making processes that shape their environments, facing new forms of inequality and exclusion (Sassen, 1991; Zukin, 2010). Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy, in their book *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, take this idea further by looking at how Asian cities are not just influenced by global trends, but are actively shaping what it means to be global. Their work highlights that there’s no one-size-fits-all model—cities across Asia are experimenting with their own ways of being global, often challenging the Western-dominated narrative of globalization.

Image of the city

The concept of the "image of the city," introduced by Kevin Lynch (1960), is essential for understanding how urban environments reflect global, local, and glocal dynamics. Lynch emphasized that people form mental maps of cities based on physical elements like paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks, which shape how they experience and remember urban spaces. In the context of globalization, this concept helps identify how global forces such as international brands, standardized architecture, and tourism-driven development alter the visual and spatial identity of cities, often making them feel less distinctive. At the same time, Lynch’s framework highlights the importance of preserving recognizable local features, such as historic markets or cultural landmarks, which help maintain a sense of place and community identity (Lynch, 1960). In glocal spaces, where global and local elements coexist, the image of the city provides a way to analyze how these layers interact visually and spatially. This is particularly useful in areas like Bantadthong in Bangkok, where traditional food culture blends with modern retail, revealing how urban identity is negotiated between global change and local continuity. Urban planners and policymakers can apply this understanding to create environments that balance development with cultural preservation, ensuring cities remain both livable and meaningful to their inhabitants (Lynch, 1960).

Place-Making Theory

Place-making theory is a valuable framework for understanding how urban environments can support cultural identity, community resilience, and inclusive development, particularly in rapidly globalizing cities like Bangkok. At its core, place-making emphasizes the creation and enhancement of public spaces that reflect the unique cultural, social, and historical values of a community. Rather than viewing urban spaces as static or purely economic assets, place-making encourages participatory processes that involve local stakeholders in shaping their environments (Silberberg et al., 2013). This approach fosters a strong sense of belonging and social cohesion, while also enhancing the cultural authenticity of urban areas. In the context of glocalization, place-making enables cities to integrate global development models without erasing local identities. By embedding local narratives, aesthetics, and traditions into the urban fabric through architecture, food culture, street design, and public art, cities can create vibrant, inclusive spaces that serve both local needs and global demands (Softaoğlu, 2019; Softaoğlu, 2022). In Bangkok, place-making strategies that prioritize cultural preservation alongside modernization can help manage the pressures of tourism and investment while maintaining the city’s unique character (Project for Public Spaces, 2009; Gehl, 2010).

1.3 Problem Statement

Globalization, according to its critics, can exacerbate income inequality, exploit labor, erode cultural diversity, and cause environmental degradation. These globalist dynamics affect social, political, and cultural systems in ways that often disrupt local economies and traditions. The complex and varied impacts of globalization on local contexts such as urban centers in Bangkok or other Southeast Asian cities raise important questions about how to preserve local identity while maximizing socioeconomic potential.

Research Gap

Despite the growing emphasis on glocalization and place-making, significant gaps remain in their application to rapidly urbanizing cities like Bangkok. Existing literature often highlights the benefits of globalization but overlooks its nuanced impacts on vulnerable urban communities. Similarly, while glocal strategies and place-making are conceptually promising, their practical implementation in contexts that balance economic modernization with cultural preservation remains underexplored.

This research addresses these gaps by examining and comparing successful cases of glocal development and identifying actionable policies for Bangkok. By exploring how global practices can be integrated into urban settings while safeguarding local identity, the study contributes to the development of inclusive, sustainable urban policies. These policies aim to ensure Bangkok’s socio-economic resilience and cultural continuity in an era of globalization and rapid urbanization.

Ultimately, the findings will offer a framework for harmonizing global and local dynamics, positioning Bangkok as a model for balancing economic growth with cultural preservation in the face of globalization.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to evaluate successful examples of glocal development through comparative analysis and case studies, focusing on strategies and policies that promote socio-economic resilience and preserve cultural identity and heritage in both physical and social contexts, with a particular emphasis on Bangkok.

1.5 Significance of the Paper

This research examines how Bangkok can balance global economic integration with the preservation of its local identity. As globalization continues to transform the city, it brings rapid development but also increases inequality and puts pressure on local communities and cultures. By analyzing glocal sites within Bangkok, such as Bantadthong and Sukhumvit, this study provides insights for urban policy that promotes inclusive growth, strengthens local economies, and protects cultural heritage amid global change.

2. Methods

This qualitative research will use comparative case studies of Bangkok districts and apply placemaking theory to explore “glocal places.” Focusing on Bantadthong-Samyan and Sukhumvit, this research examines how these areas balance global influences with local identity.

These case studies were selected because they represent strong examples of global and glocal spaces. Bantadthong-Samyan is chosen for its ability to blend local identity with global influences, making it an ideal example of glocalization. In contrast, Sukhumvit represents a global place, characterized by intense commercialization and international investment.

This study examines the two Bangkok districts Bantadthong-Samyan and Sukhumvit (Figure 02) to explore contrasting responses to globalization. Bantadthong-Samyan exemplifies a glocal place, where cultural preservation is integrated with modernization through community-driven programs and policies. In contrast, Sukhumvit illustrates a globalized urban landscape, where rapid development and commercialization often overshadow local culture and small businesses. This comparative analysis provides insights into how urban policies can balance global integration with local identity, guiding the development of sustainable and culturally vibrant city spaces.

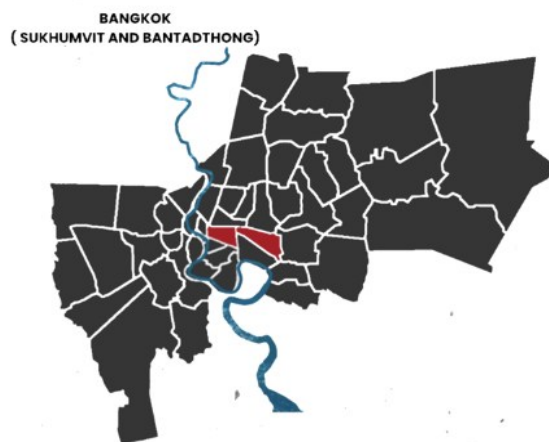


Figure 02. Sukhumvit and Bantadthong in Bangkok, Thailand. Image by Author.

Data Collection Methods:

- **Text mapping:** Identifying and categorizing international vs. local businesses in each district, followed by color-coded analysis.
- **Secondary data review:** Analyzing policies, laws, and regulations shaping urban development and globalization in Bangkok.
- **Street elevation analysis:** Examining architectural and spatial transformations influenced by globalization.
- **Physical site observations and photography:** Documenting urban change through images and field notes.
- **Site surveys:** Collecting first-hand insights on the conditions of the districts and how globalization interacts with local heritage.

2.1. Text mapping methodology

Studying Bangkok through the lens of glocalization and analyzing its unique urban characteristics can be enriched by the theoretical contributions of Venturi and Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Their insights on globalization, urbanization, and neoliberalism provide a critical framework for understanding how visual language and spatial arrangements in cities reflect deeper power dynamics. In this research, their work (such as their signage mapping of the Las Vegas Strip) supports the application of text or word mapping as a tool to analyze how global brands adapt, local brands resist, and how

urban economies evolve. This method helps uncover branding strategies, consumer identities, and market forces that shape globalized urban environments.

Additionally, the concept of "Vast space" (Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., & Izenour, S. (1977), explored through architectural and urbanist theories, is central to understanding how globalization manifests spatially. In global cities like Bangkok, vast spaces often materialize as shopping malls, office towers, or high-rise condominiums, reflecting international investment and consumer culture. Conversely, within the local economy, vast spaces include markets, temple courtyards, and community squares, which serve as anchors of social interaction and local commerce. Analyzing how these spaces function and transform offers insights into whether they facilitate or fragment local economic systems and cultural practices in the face of globalization.

3. Findings

3.1 Case Study Area 1: Bangkok, Sukhumvit

Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok has become one of Southeast Asia’s most globalized urban corridors, shaped by strategic location, strong transit connectivity, and pro-investment urban policies. Its central position and accessibility via BTS and MRT make it a prime destination for affluent locals, expatriates, and tourists driving demand for international brands (Figure 03).

Since the 1990s, Thailand’s neoliberal policies have encouraged foreign investment with limited cultural safeguards. This has led to the rise of luxury malls like Emsphere, EmQuartier (designed by New York based architect Thomas Leeser), and Emporium, reinforcing Bangkok’s global city image. This globalization has come at the expense of local identity. The dominance of international brands has displaced local businesses and traditions, highlighting the tension between global integration and cultural preservation in urban development.

- International = blue
- Local = red

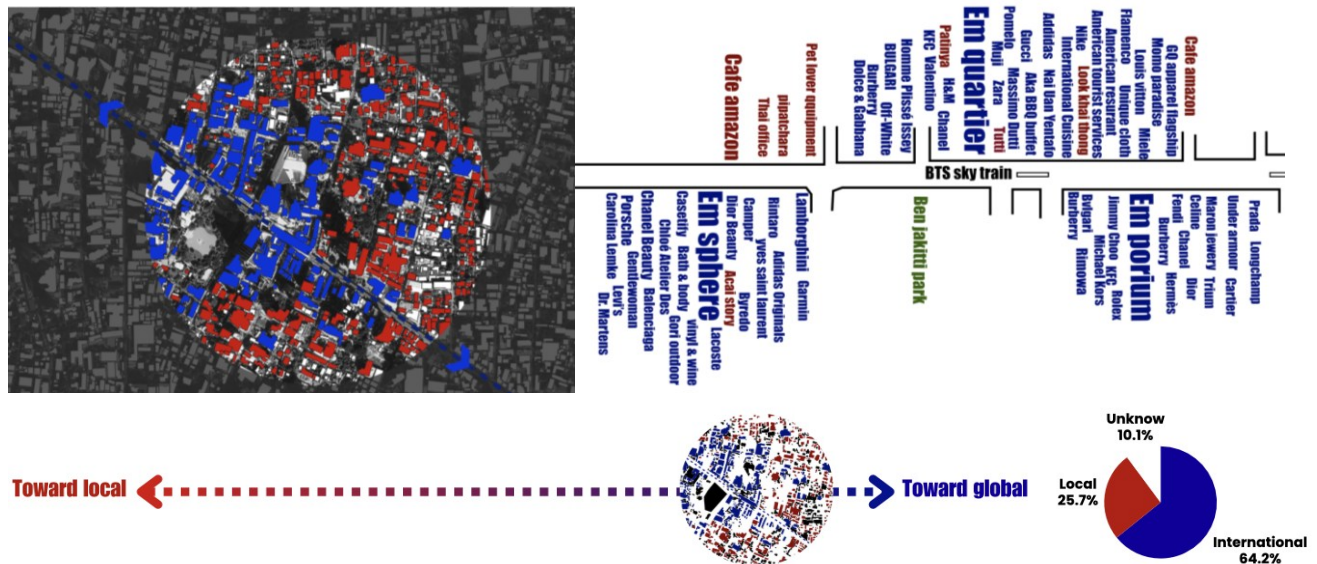


Figure 03. Mapping international and local in Sukhumvit by using color code and text mapping.

3.1.1 Key findings of Sukhumvit, Bangkok: Policy and regulation: The failure of “global place”

The transformation of the Sukhumvit area in Bangkok resulted from weak policy guidance and the advancement of globalization. With minimal supervision, the area became flooded with luxury hotels, shopping malls, and international brands like Terminal 21, EmQuartier, and Emporium. This development, driven by a desire to compete for global investment, has led to rapid tourism growth in Bangkok, fueling the city’s global positioning. While these developments may boost the economy, they strip the area of its unique cultural identity. Policies overly focused on business and economic growth have ignored local culture and heritage (Thuncharoen, 2019). Unlike the weak regulatory control seen in Bangkok, other countries, like India (Jenks, 2003), have implemented stronger policies to better manage such developments, reinforcing national power and reducing the influence of supranational forces. This highlights the risks of prioritizing global norms over local governance, resulting in a loss of cultural identity and national sovereignty (Figure 03).

3.1.2 Law: Loss of Policy Control

Sukhumvit in Bangkok has evolved into a globalized urban space due to a combination of weak policy control, neoliberal urban development, and transnational influences.

3.2 Case Study Area 2: Bangkok, Bantadthong

Compared to Sukhumvit, the Bantadthong area in Bangkok has grown into a strong example of a glocal place, where global and local elements blend naturally. Unlike heavily commercialized areas like Sukhumvit that are mostly full of international businesses and brands, Bantadthong maintains a strong sense of local identity through its vibrant street food culture, community-led businesses, and preserved architectural character.

While foreign entrepreneurs and global influences are present, they are integrated into the local context rather than dominating it. Policies supporting cultural heritage, zoning regulations, and community involvement in development have helped maintain a balance between modernization and tradition (Douglass, 2008; McGee & Lin, 2011). As a result, Bantadthong thrives as a culturally rich, economically active area that reflects both global connectivity and local authenticity (Figure 04).

- International =blue
- Local =red

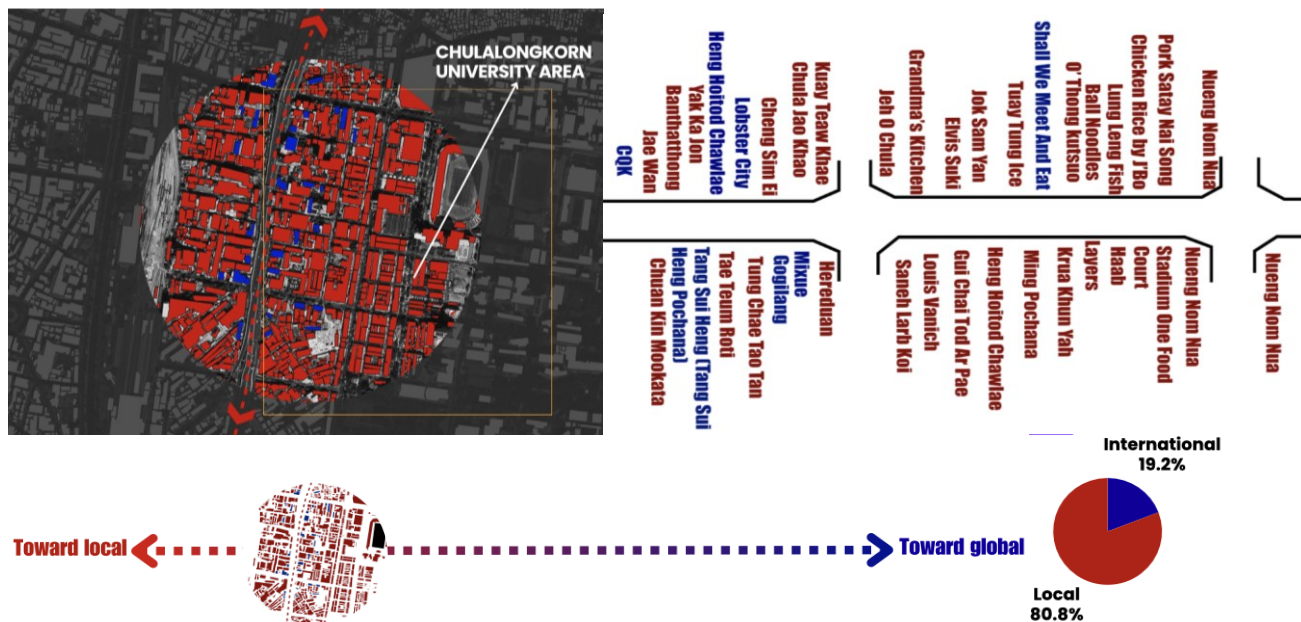


Figure 04. Mapping international and local in Bantadthong by using color code and text mapping.

3.2.1 Key findings of Bantadthong, Bangkok: Policy and regulation: The successful “glocal place”

In Bangkok, the Bantadthong-Samyan area is represented as a “glocal space” where local street food culture intersects with foreign entrepreneurship. Such spaces embody the interplay of global and local elements. The policies protecting historical sites in this area underscore the optimal balance between preserving culture and architecture and maintaining sustainable development as well as in terms of business control. One clear example of this “glocal” balance can be seen in how the area manages its street food vendors. While informal vendors are often pushed out in other parts of Bangkok, in Bantadthong-Samyan they are supported and integrated into the urban plan. Instead of removing them, new developments create cleaner, safer, and more organized spaces like designated food zones or upgraded street corners so vendors can continue their work while fitting into a more modern environment (Yasmeen, 2006).

At the same time, global businesses like foreign-owned cafés and co-working spaces are not simply imposed on the area. Many of them adapt to the local style by using renovated old buildings or collaborating with local creatives. This shows that development here does not aim to replace the local identity, but rather to grow alongside it. Bantadthong-Samyan becomes a living example of how urban spaces can stay culturally grounded while embracing global trends in a respectful and sustainable way.

Modern development respects the area’s heritage by using Heritage Impact Assessments to determine the historical value of the new projects (such as new street food landmarks in Samyan) and ensure modern development does not conflict with the existing heritage. Preservation of the historical character of the area alongside construction zoning is achieved by the strict zoning laws, while the community-driven preservation programs foster local participation and use inclusivity as the best educational tool (Yasmeen, 2006).

These measures, along with allowing residents to actively participate in decision-making through local tours, workshops, and events, promote awareness of the site’s cultural and historical significance, help Bantadthong-Samyan in demonstrating the harmony between preservation and modernity alongside cultural development and contemporary advancements (Figure 04).

3.2.2 Law: Protect cultural identity

Buildings on properties owned by the monarchy are governed by strict legal protections, ensuring they cannot be altered or modified without official approval (Askew, 2002).

4. Discussion & Comparison

4.1 Comparing Sukhumvit and Bantadthong in Bangkok, Thailand

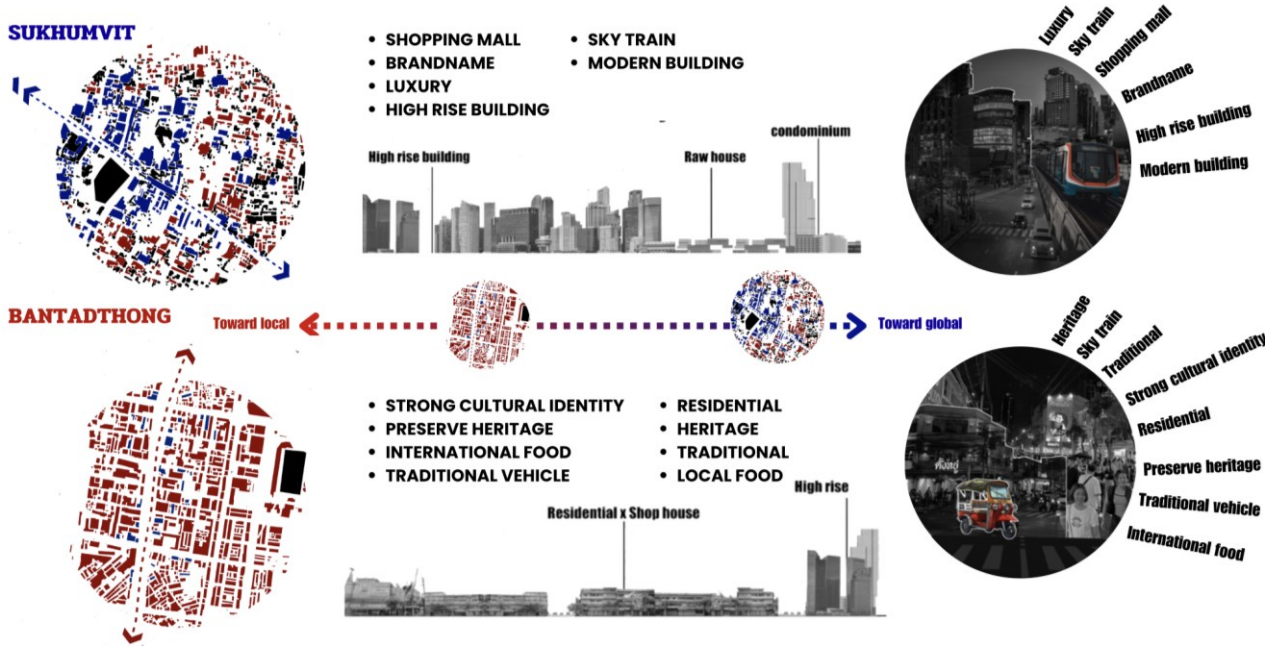


Figure 05. Comparison between Sukhumvit and Bantadthong identity.

4.2 Comparison

In this study, color code and text mapping is employed as an analytical tool to explore the presence and interaction between global and local identities in Bantadthong and Sukhumvit, Bangkok. The mapping process involves visually representing spatial arrangements, land use patterns, and key activities to identify zones where global and local elements intersect. Through this method, areas such as local food vendors, international stores, and residential buildings are geotagged and mapped to reveal their relationships. By integrating urban zoning laws, text mapping highlights how regulatory frameworks, such as strict zoning and Heritage Impact Assessments, shape the spatial and social dynamics districts such as Bantadthong-Samyan (Figure 05).

In Bangkok, the contrast between Sukhumvit Road and Banthat Thong Road offers a clear illustration of glocalization at work. Sukhumvit has become one of the most globalized zones in the city, lined with luxury hotels, condominiums, international restaurants, embassies, and offices of multinational companies. It reflects the city's integration into global networks of finance, tourism, and trade. However, this transformation has also led to gentrification, as the real estate boom and influx of international brands have dramatically increased property values and living costs. This process often results in the displacement of long-standing, community-based businesses and residents, thereby disconnecting the area from its local roots and cultural identity (Investopedia, 2023).

Bantadthong-Samyan serves as a prime example of a "glocal space," where the blend of local traditions and global influences creates a dynamic environment. The area is known for its street food culture, where Thai culinary heritage coexists with international food vendors and entrepreneurs, demonstrating the integration of global and local economies. Policies such as heritage preservation, zoning laws, and community-led preservation programs ensure that local communities are actively involved in decision-making, helping preserve the district's cultural integrity while allowing for modernization. This combination of local involvement and global economic integration positions Bantadthong as a model for sustainable Glocal development.

By using text mapping, this study offers a visual and analytical framework that uncovers the spatial relationships between global and local forces, providing insight into how regulatory practices influence these dynamics. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how urban spaces can balance the demands of globalization with the preservation of local identity.

5. Conclusion

Glocalization, the coexistence of global and local dynamics within a single urban space, is a growing trend in many Southeast Asian cities, including Bangkok. As a key player in the global economy, Bangkok has been shaped by international investment, tourism, and shifting urban priorities. Yet, its success lies not only in connecting to global markets but also in how it manages the inclusion and support of local communities within this transformation.

In Bangkok, the between Sukhumvit Road and Bantadthong Road clearly illustrates glocalization at work. Sukhumvit has become one of the most globalized zones in the city, lined with luxury hotels, condominiums, international restaurants, embassies, and offices of multinational companies. It reflects the city's deep integration into global networks of finance, tourism, and trade. However, this transformation has also led to gentrification, as the real estate boom and influx of international brands have dramatically increased property values and living costs. This process often results in the displacement of long-standing, community-based businesses and residents, disconnecting the area from its local roots and cultural identity (Investopedia, 2023).

On the other hand, Bantadthong Road stands as a more balanced glocal space. While it has undergone modernization, the area continues to preserve its local food culture, family-run businesses, and community-oriented atmosphere. The street remains vibrant with local vendors, students, and long-standing residents, blending tradition with new economic opportunities. What makes Bantadthong unique is its ability to embrace development while keeping local identity intact. It does not reject globalization but rather negotiates with it, ensuring that local character is not fully consumed by global forces. This contrast revealed in this research demonstrates the importance of urban policies in shaping the outcomes of globalization in cities facing rapid development. Without strong regulatory frameworks, areas like Sukhumvit can become overly commercialized, prioritizing international investment at the cost of local identity. Meanwhile, districts like Bantadthong demonstrate how careful planning, cultural preservation, and community involvement can support inclusive growth. Glocalization in Bangkok, therefore, is not just a spatial phenomenon; it reflects deeper choices about whose voices are heard in urban development and whose identities are preserved in the face of global change.

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