

HEADLINE: Penny-wise and pound-foolish?

SUBHEADLINE: Megastores have sprouted everywhere, sending mum-and-pop shops into a tailspin. Is there any light at the end of this tunnel?

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There I am again, down with shopping fever, off on a buying frenzy, a spending expedition, filled with an irrepressible desire to do the rounds of shopping malls, the feverish urge to go shop-hunting, to chase the ``on sale'' red tag, to track down the 40 to 50 to 60 percent discounts, to shop, shop, shop until I have exhausted both myself and my bank account, which is inversely proportional to my beleaguered, stuff-infested cupboards ... but I have a cure for all this.

You might laugh, especially if you see me coming back from the open market near my office _ best deals in town! _ every Wednesday noon looking like an overburdened donkey. The truth is, I tend to refrain from pointless shopping. Better still, I find it disgusting, obscene _ all the more so when it is a collective and contagious frenzy striking everyone at the same time, shrinking away one's minimal salary and the breathing space in shopping malls and supermarkets as too many frenzied zombies compulsively push overflowing carts up and down crowded aisles.

As we do during the Christmas season, for example, with its twinkling lights and tinkling sounds of ``Jinger Benz'' and ``Frosty the Snowman''. While rather out of place in a Buddhist country, the season has another drawback: its compulsory nature. I genuinely love giving away presents and tokens of my affection to people in my surroundings, but don't enjoy it so much when I feel obliged _ that takes the fun out of it.

And yet, in modern Thailand with all the hypermarkets springing up like mushrooms on every corner of the city, who can escape this persistent consumer frenzy? Very few, even if the orgy is confined to a few out-of-the-ordinary instant noodle packs and juicy oranges.

Of course I wouldn't dare say these proliferating megastores lack convenience. In a split second and few turns of the steering wheel, one can

find oneself in a dazzling, air-conditioned cosmos with hundreds of metres of well-stocked shelves caving in under the weight of goods, all waiting to assault our not-long-empty trolley.

I experience a feeling of uneasiness when I drive by these megastores where hordes of fellow countrymen are shopping frantically as if a time of rationing were just ahead _ what possible bargains could I be missing?

In all this collective confusion, one thing is clear: Thailand has passed a new turning point in its economic development, and foreign and Thai-owned giant retailers are waging all-out war on downtown properties.

Another thing is perfectly clear: This invasion by giant retailers on all vacant parcels of land in high-traffic areas has sprung up over the past few years without curb or oversight from any law or regulation _ a free-for-all, with little importance given to the fact that rival stores located only a few blocks from each other might be cancelling out each others' profits.

The Ministry of Commerce declared a few months ago that a new retailing law was in the pipeline, with zoning provisions to limit these large discount stores to certain areas on the periphery of larger cities in a rather futile attempt to help small shops survive.

It goes without saying this salutary plan _which still has to be finalised and voted on _ is too little and much too late. The shopping behaviour of the people has already largely changed and the harm has been done.

The Thai United National Resurrection Group, led by Narong Chokwatana, claimed a few months ago that 300,000 small retailers have had to close their doors over the past few years due to the economic crisis and competition from foreign retailers.

No matter how hard such small retailers try to rearrange their product displays or manage their stock in an effort to retain customers _ as per the official ``how-to'' booklet and training sessions given out and sponsored by the government _ there's little doubt that giant retailers have been draining off customers from such small shops for miles around. The irrepressible attraction of the megastores has been the death-knell for countless mom-and-pop stores and fresh markets.

A faint glimmer of hope remains, that this buying frenzy of ours
might
indeed boost the economy and in the long run, generate benefits that
will be
redistributed to every strata of society.

With such thoughts in mind, I'm off to do more shopping for a
prolonged stay
in Europe ... the devil take miserliness!