



Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

*MMG Working Paper 12-04* • ISSN 2192-2357

SOPHORNTAVY VORNG

Incendiary Central: The Spatial Politics  
of the May 2010 Street Demonstrations in  
Bangkok



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*  
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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## Abstract

In May 2010, anti-government demonstrators created a flaming inferno of Central-World Plaza – Thailand’s biggest, and Asia’s second largest shopping mall. It was the climactic close to the latest major chapter of the Thai political conflict, during which thousands of protestors swarmed Ratchaprasong, the commercial centre of Bangkok, in an ultimately failed attempt to oust Abhisit Vejjajiva’s regime from power. In this paper, I examine how downtown Bangkok and exclusive malls like Central-World represent physical and cultural spaces from which the marginalized working classes have been strikingly excluded. It is a configuration of space that maps onto the contours of a heavily uneven distribution of power, and articulates a vernacular of prestige, wherein which class relations are inscribed in urban space. The significance of the red-shirted movement’s occupation of Ratchaprasong lies in the subversion of this spatialisation of power and draws attention to the symbolic deployment of space in struggles for political supremacy.

## Author

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## Keywords

Bangkok, protest, space, class, politics, consumption, mall



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## Introduction: The Burning Centre

In late May of 2010, billowing charcoal smoke rose from Ratchaprasong district in central Bangkok, casting a dark pall over the sprawling city. Much of it came from the flaming inferno of CentralWorld Plaza, Thailand's biggest, and Southeast Asia's second largest shopping mall.<sup>1</sup> What will likely become one of the most iconic images of the conflagration is a photo by Adrees Latif of Reuters featuring a huge golden head with the likeness of a female deity in a square in front of the mall, eyes seemingly wide with surprise as a tattered Thai flag fluttered pitifully overhead and the 500, 000 metre square complex blazed in the background (see Image A, Appendix). Yet, despite the violent military crackdown that ended the siege that paralysed central Bangkok for months, the political turmoil is far from over. After the crackdown, some of the departing demonstrators allegedly looted the mall and then set it alight. Hence, the crackdown was merely the climactic close to one chapter of the ongoing conflict, during which thousands of red-shirted anti-government protestors who were part of the UDD ('United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship') political movement,<sup>2</sup> many of them from the impoverished, ethnically Lao, North-eastern 'Isaan' region of Thailand, swarmed the commercial centre of Bangkok in an ultimately failed attempt to oust the regime of Abhisit Vejjajiva (the Prime Minister at the time) from power.

The UDD formed in 2006 in protest against the military coup that deposed the controversial telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, whom many of the rural and urban lower and working classes in Thailand supported for his populist pro-poor policies. Since then, they have held mass rallies that are attended by up to tens and thousands of people and are often extending for several months at a time, as in 2008, 2009, and again in 2010. Many of the demonstrations were counter-rallies against those of the opposing yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement, which is seen to be a primarily urban middle class movement allied with right-wing establishment forces and Abhisit's Democrat party (although of course the constituency of the movement is far more complex than this and deep factions

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1 Arsonists also targeted the Stock Exchange of Thailand, the Metropolitan Electricity Authority and Metropolitan Waterworks Authority, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, numerous branches of Bangkok Bank, Siam Paragon shopping complex, and dozens of other commercial sites.

2 The 'red-shirt' movement is officially known in Thai as *Naew Ruam Prachaathiphatai Toor Taan Phadeetkaan Haeng Chaat* (Nor Phor Chor). In English, they were formerly known as 'The Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship' (DAAD).

within the PAD have becoming increasingly evident of late). The 2010 UDD protests began in mid-March immediately after the seizure of 46.37 billion baht (1.4 billion USD) from Thaksin's assets (totalling USD 2.2 billion) by the Supreme Court after it found him guilty of a conflict of interest during his 2001-2006 rule as Prime Minister. Accusing Abhisit's coalition government of coming to power through illegal means, the UDD was also agitating for fresh elections.<sup>3</sup> As Ockey (2009) suggests, the developing culture of street politics parallels and may even come to rival parliamentary politics in Thailand. In addition to hurting Thailand's international image as a stable and functioning democracy, the rallies, which have punctuated the political turmoil of the last several years, have taken a severe economic toll. They have also deepened a variety of fractures within Thai society itself. It is, therefore, essential to focus analytical attention on the dynamics driving Thailand's continuing street demonstrations.

Against the backdrop of a severely hierarchical relationship between urban and rural Thai society, the gaping social and structural disparities drive the grievances of protestors on either side of the conflict. What makes the Red Shirts' move to occupy the area – and this particular episode in Thai political history – compelling, is that Ratchaprasong is not just a 'commercial district', and CentralWorld Plaza is not just a 'shopping mall'. Ratchaprasong, in conjunction with the adjacent district of Pathumwan (known popularly as Siam), as well as the nearby Silom business district, comprises a crucible of shopping malls, luxury hotels and skyscrapers in central Bangkok. The area manifests, materially and symbolically, Thailand's intense economic development in the latter decades of the twentieth century. In short, these upmarket districts, as well as the landmark exclusive malls that define them as such, including CentralWorld Plaza, Siam Paragon, and the Emporium, are representative of the physical and symbolic spaces from which the urban and rural working classes have, to date, been strikingly excluded. They are a physical and symbolical spatial reflection of the broader context of the economic and social marginalisation experienced by Thailand's working classes, who have not capitalised anywhere near as profitably – to say the least – from the economic boom (that began in the 60s and 70s) as the Bangkok-based elite and middle classes. Unsurprisingly, they also most heavily bore the burden of the 1997 financial crisis (see Pongpaichit<sup>4</sup> and Baker 2000).

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3 After a series of failed negotiations, the violent military crackdown on UDD protestors in 2010, and consistent pressure on Abhisit's government, an election was held in July 2011. The election results were in favour of the UDD, with the Democrat party losing control over parliament to the Pheu Thai party, helmed by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, the first female Thai Prime Minister in history.

4 Thai authors are cited by first names according to convention.



This paper is based on approximately 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangkok between 2005 and 2007 as well as during December 2009, January 2010 and January 2011. I show how individuals, who are marked as being poor, lower class, or of rural origins, either choose to avoid, or are forcefully kept out of elite city spaces such as exclusive shopping malls, restaurants, hotels, clubs, and the like. These very same spaces are where the Red Shirts' political opponents, the yellow-shirted PAD movement, spend a great deal of their social lives. Abhisit is perceived to favour this movement, which is composed to a high degree of upper and middle class Bangkokians. Many such individuals expressed anger and dismay over the arson attacks on the popular CentralWorld Plaza by the Red Shirts, who have been depicted by yellow-biased media during the course of the conflict as being ignorant, uneducated, and gullible country bumpkins having political mandates of little worth.

Much of CentralWorld Plaza had re-opened by the end of September 2010. However, visiting Ratchaprasong in January 2011, it felt to me like a completely different space; all of the previous glitz and glamour was marred by the ongoing reconstruction and the empty dirt lots left behind by the fires as well as by ongoing rallies (there had been another one held by the Red Shirts on January 9, 2011). The assault on the centre had made its mark. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, I caught wind of rumours – unverifiable, of course – from a number of informants that the Red Shirt protestors had threatened not only CentralWorld Plaza, but also Siam Paragon, which is the other luxury mall in the area. Siam Paragon is practically adjacent to CentralWorld and directly opposite of Siam Square, which was also the site of arson attacks, but had managed to remain largely unscathed. Apparently both malls had been approached with the demand to pay 100 million baht (over 3.3 million USD) or see their complexes looted and burned. Siam Paragon had allegedly complied with the demand, while CentralWorld had not. Another rumour that swirled included the question of why the bulk of the fire damage had hit the older, less popular parts of the complex (with the exception of the newly renovated Zen department store, which looks set to reopen later in 2011), while the newest sections had escaped destruction. The question also arose as to why authorities were so slow to put out the fires once they had started. Furthermore, it had been speculated that the Chirathiwats, the Sino-Thai family conglomerate heading Central Group, who owns and operates CentralWorld Plaza, had probably received more in insurance money than the burnt-down sections of the mall were actually worth.

Opponents of the Red Shirt movement had yet more to gain from the attack on CentralWorld Plaza, which played right into and compounded pre-existing negative

perceptions of the UDD and its members, as being violent and unscrupulous. These images are reflected in a cartoon in the March 29, 2010 edition of the ASTV-Manager Daily newspaper (founded by core PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul), which depicted the red demonstrators as water buffalo that were led by ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra and congested Bangkok's streets in lieu of the usual snarled traffic (see Image B, Appendix). Such intensely negative stereotypes of Isaaners are pervasive in everyday life in Bangkok, to the extent that even middle class Bangkokians with darker skin can be subject to the same prejudices in spatial contexts in which Isaaners are not seen to belong. As we will see, spatiality in Bangkok is inflected with tones of class and ethnic difference.

## Spatial Hierarchies and the Urban-Rural 'Divide'

The maintenance of both real and figurative boundaries of urban space is a symptom of the deeper social divisions that play out along the regional fault lines, which have also come to define the discourses and dynamics of the political crisis.<sup>5</sup> Bangkok and the Southern provinces, as political strongholds for the Democrat party, have come to be allied with the Yellow Shirts. Thaksin's home province of Chiang Mai is in the North, where as a 'local', he enjoys a great deal of popular support. More importantly, however, the rural Northeastern provinces were the source of even stronger voter support, because their residents welcomed the long overdue attention that the Thaksin regime directed to their economic marginalisation. Accordingly, the conflict is typically construed as a modern-day class struggle that is based on an urban-rural 'divide', between the Bangkok-based PAD (which is invariably characterised as an 'urban middle class' movement) and Thaksin's 'rural working class' supporters.

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5 Thailand is roughly divisible into four main regions with different topographies, dialects, ethnic groups, customs, and cultural patterns. The Central (*phaak Klaang*) lowland or valley region has always been the traditional seat of power, and all three capitals of the Thai civilization, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok, have been located here. The North (*phaak Neua*) is known for the ancient Lanna Kingdom that once dominated the area, as well as the many hill tribes that populate the border provinces. The Northeast (*phaak Isaan*), is majority ethnically Lao, although it is also home to some tribal minorities. The South (*phaak Tai*), which is the site of the insurgency has always been distinguished by its large numbers of Muslims and the widespread use of the Yawi language (which is a Malay dialect).

The Thai class structure in premodern times was characterised by an elaborate system of status differentiation called *sakdina*, which originated early in the Ayutthayan Era (approximately 1350-1767 CE). Society was divided into four main categories of people, in descending order of status. There was an upper stratum of *naai*, comprised of princes and royalty (*jao*). Below the *naai* were members of an aristocratic nobility (*khunaang*). Beneath the *naai* were *phrai* (commoners), followed by *thaat* (slaves) (Akin 1979:28-29; Hewison 1989:134-135; Loos 2006:35; Dhiravegin 1990:192).<sup>6</sup> The *sakdina* system was abolished after the 1932 Revolution and the shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy, although remnants of the former remain in the current Thai class system. Recently, the red-shirts have taken to using symbolic language, evocative of the oppression of the *sakdina* era, in order to characterise the conflict, referring to themselves as the *phrai* ('commoners') who are challenging the oppression of the *ammat* class.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of the Ratchaprasong street demonstrations is additionally illuminated through exploring the nature of the urban-rural divide and everyday spatial divisions in Bangkok. The notion that 'space is a construct of power relations' (Askew 2002:6) is a pervasive one in the anthropological literature on space and place. Thus, for instance, Caldeira (1999:102) asserts that urban space configurations often highlight social as well as physical boundaries:

Cities are...material spaces with relative stability and rigidity that shape and bound people's lives...in the materiality of segregated spaces, in people's everyday trajectories, in their uses of public transportation, in their appropriations of streets and parks, and in their construction of walls and defensive facades, social boundaries are rigidly constructed.

Caldeira (1999:324) further suggests that:

When boundaries are crossed in this type of city, there is aggression, fear, and a feeling of unprotectedness; in a word, there is suspicion and danger...for some, the feeling of exclusion is obvious as they are denied access to various areas and are restricted to others. Affluent people who inhabit exclusive enclaves also feel restricted; their feelings of fear keep them away from regions and people that their mental maps of the city identify as

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6 Each category carried privileges that increased in correlation with an individual's *sakdina* marks. All unregistered *phrai* were required to perform *corvee* labour for six months a year. The political strength and wealth of the nobles was built upon the material support, labour and services of their *phrai* (Akin 1979:35,39).

7 *Ammat* is a word which was used to refer to government officials or bureaucrats, but in this sense refers to the socially and politically privileged elite

dangerous' (See also Falzon 2003, Pow 2007, and Leisch 2002 for studies of gated communities in Bombay, Shanghai, and Indonesia, respectively).

Low (1999:7) extends this idea of boundaries into a metaphor of the 'the divided city', in which barriers of race and class are encoded in everyday narratives of 'uptown' and 'downtown', 'upscale' and 'ghetto'.

In such a deeply stratified society as Thailand, it is not entirely unexpected that the configuration of space in Bangkok follows the contours of the heavily uneven distribution of power. Yet, this is all the more compounded by a deep connection between space and power, in which the city and the urban is privileged, while the rural is positioned away from the centre and is seen as inferior. The subversion of these spatial hierarchies has taken on a potent political force, and the red-shirt's demonstration in Ratchaprasong was an act that conveyed their message to an audience of Yellow Shirt, middle and upper class opponents and foreign media with superbly maximal efficacy. It indicates that they are no longer willing to easily accept pervasive societal injustices, such as lack of educational and employment opportunities, or discrimination against poor and rural Thais.

However, the 'urban-rural divide' is both more exaggerated, and more complex than is usually portrayed. Whilst the majority of Thais live in rural areas, no place is more representative of the structural inequalities that exist between Bangkok and rural Thailand, than Isaan, which is the poorest region in the country. It is comprised of nineteen provinces in the Northeast of the country, and hosts approximately a third of the total population (Miller 2005:96; see also Mills 1999). Nevertheless, it may be more productive to conceptualise the relationship between Bangkok and Isaan in terms of a spatial hierarchy, rather than as a dichotomy or difference, as is the usual depiction of the urban-rural 'divide'.

Historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994:79) has suggested that in premodern Thai, 'the political sphere could be mapped only by power relationships, and not by territorial integrity' in indigenous concepts of power and space. Furthermore, in a discussion of Muang (Northern Thai) indigenous space, Davis (1984:81) elucidates that 'political space...is classified according to distance from the centers of culture and political power, along a continuum from the towns, through the villages, and into the forested wilderness'. Within this system of social differentiation, townspeople enjoyed more prestige than country people; the latter were expected by law to give way to the former when the two crossed paths (Davis 1984:82). Hence, instead of viewing it *only* as a structural 'divide', we might also consider the relationship

between Bangkok and rural Thai society within the framework of indigenous concepts of the spatialisation of power relations.

In more recent times, the heavily increased emphasis on consumption and material wealth in Bangkok resulting from the intense economic growth of the latter decades of the twentieth century, juxtaposed against the striking poverty of the Northeast, has only further exacerbated this dynamic. This is expressed in the pervasive and frequently pejorative discourse of *baan nork*. *Baan nork*, must be distinguished from the more neutral terms used to describe rural people and places (normally involving the noun *chonabot*), which is a combination of the Thai word for ‘house’ or ‘village’, and the word for ‘outside’. *Baan nork* is not just a spatial description of the remote backwaters of Thai society, which most people conceive of as ‘upcountry’; it is everything stereotypically negative that derives from undistinguished origins, including being poor, backwards, slow, naïve, rough, and unrefined. Not all of the Bangkokians with whom I spoke referred to Isaaners by the terminology of *baan nork*. Some would not explicitly admit that they harboured these opinions. Many of those who did, recognized that it was not the ‘politically correct’ outlook to have. Nevertheless, urban superiority is profoundly entrenched, and Isaan people are not merely considered ‘different’, they are also considered to be inferior.

As O’Connor (1988:253) points out, ‘Bangkok and the Bangkok elite rule a powerful and elaborate hierarchy...of wealth and style expressed in a person’s clothes, car, house, ideas, and education’. Mills (1999:19) additionally observes that ‘Bangkok-based styles and images of conspicuous consumption permeate Thai society and serve as standards of prestige and success that residents of villages like Baan Naa Sakae [one of Mills’ field sites in Isaan] find as difficult to ignore as they are to emulate’. Discussing the widespread consciousness and desire for being *thansamai* (modern or ‘up-to-date’), Mills (1999:12) argues that ‘among people at all levels of contemporary Thai society...the commodified signs and symbols of *thansamai* consumption and display [are] increasingly essential markers of individual, household, and/or community claims to status among both village and city dwellers’. In other words, in Thailand, the markers of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) are very much embedded in cultural notions of the urban.

Furthermore, as opportunities for education and employment in the countryside are severely limited in comparison to those available for Bangkokians, many rural people seek better prospects in the city (see also Mills 1999:44-46). As a result, the lowest prestige and lowest paying jobs in Bangkok are filled predominantly by unskilled workers from Isaan. Yet, performing menial work in Bangkok still offers

a substantially higher income than working in upcountry areas, which explains its appeal for rural labour migrants. Consequently, most of the Isaan people with whom Bangkokians come into contact, work in unskilled jobs in the service as well as industrial, and construction sectors. As such, while the notion of having servants may conjure up images of fabulous fortunes or blue-blooded privilege for Westerners, it is relatively normal for even moderately well off households in Bangkok to hire domestic servants. The inferior status of domestic servants is displayed in the terminology used by employers to refer to these workers, such as *khon chai* (literally, 'person who is used' to refer to a maid), *dek rapchai* (child servant), *luuk jaang* (employee), and *dek* (child) (Raya 2004:519). Interacting as equals with individuals from a much lower class, like a domestic servant, would result in loss of 'face' and would also constitute 'inappropriate' status behaviour.

Additionally, native and long-time residents of Bangkok find it is easy to pick out upcountry newcomers. Bangkokians tend to have little patience with such newcomers, who make an easy target with existing imperatives to communicate one's own social status by establishing one's superiority in relation to others. Here, the metaphorical frog in a coconut shell ('kop nai kalaa', a local idiom describing someone who has had limited life experiences and a sheltered existence) transmogrifies into the proverbial fish out of water. Many Bangkokians I spoke with related stories of some *baan nork* person they saw somewhere, who obviously did not know the ways of the city. Such knowledge includes ideas of how to negotiate the perpetual motion of escalators, make the death-defying dart across multi-laned roads, navigate the maze-like public transport system, eat at a proper restaurant, use a sit-down toilet, or dress to blend in at the fancy mall.

Education is another basis for urban-rural status differentiation. When I asked Arun, a Bangkokian from an elite family, how he perceived the rural provinces, he replied, 'the provinces are where dumb Thai people come from'. Laughing, he assured me that he was kidding. Arun's attempt at humour was an attempt to capture the prevailing attitude, and he explained, 'I feel that's a perception lots of people have'. As another Bangkokian, an entertainer from an upper middle class family explained, 'the best schools are here, the best universities are here, so you assume...that people from upcountry are more stupid'. Additionally, Bangkok's crisp *phaasaa klaang* (central Thai dialect) is the official language of education and governance, and therefore, the one that carries the most social capital. While all formal schooling is conducted in central Thai, and most Thais from the provinces that I encountered who were living in Bangkok spoke *phaasaa klaang*, they often did so with an accent that distin-



guished them from native Bangkokians. This is especially the case for Southerners and Isaaners, who have highly distinctive accents. Thus, mastering central Thai, and the city accent, endows social status and shows that one belongs to the urban milieu.

Perhaps as a partial result of its large ethnic Chinese population, Bangkokians are also often associated with having pale skin. From my experience of living in Bangkok, however, not all – or even the majority of – Bangkokians are truly ‘pale’, although many are discernibly lighter than Isaaners and Southerners. Countless television commercials, print advertisements, and billboards promote the whitening lotions that fill the shelves of supermarkets, chemists, and cosmetic departments. More invasive whitening treatments are also available in clinics and hospitals across the city. Thai language websites offer a myriad of posts, threads, and indeed, whole forums dedicated to the whitening products that work the best. In Thailand, the relentless pursuit of perfectly milky-toned skin is another way of distancing oneself from the status-diminishing associations of darker skin colour, economic marginalization, and rural origins.

## Segregation of Urban Consumption Space

Until fairly recently, with the establishment of convenience stores and hypermarkets in provincial towns, markets and shop-houses were the main venues of consumption in provincial or rural areas. Hence, a sense of ease and familiarity with shopping malls is another indication of a ‘sophisticated’ urban lifestyle and a particular class *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, it functions as a status distinction to position urban and rural individuals in relation to one another in another expression of the cultural spatial hierarchy. In Bangkok, there exists a striking division between elite space and non-elite space, which can also be known, in the pervasive Bangkokian colloquialism, as *hi-so* (‘high society’) and *lo-so* (‘low society’) space, respectively. Certain malls in downtown Bangkok, like Central Chit Lom or Siam Paragon, are known as prestigious and *hi-so* not only because of their marketed images and expensive merchandise, but because people dress up (‘taeng tua dii’) to go there, and adhere to more rigid codes of conduct than at a place marked as *lo-so*.

Street stalls and restaurants, hawkers and markets (aside from the *hi-so* ones mentioned above) are all considered *lo-so*. Hypermarkets, while technically similar to malls, are *lo-so*, because of their high accessibility in terms of both price and environ-

ment. Lower- and middle-tier malls, like the branches of The Mall in the outskirts of the city, or Mahboonkhrong Centre in downtown Bangkok, might also be described as *lo-so* for the same reason. The same is true for scores of less famous malls found across the city. In these less exclusive malls, as in hypermarkets and markets, patrons need not fixate on personal presentation and comportment to the degree required in more upmarket malls.

If crowded *hi-so* enclaves attract patrons by virtue of their allusions to exclusivity, status and prestige, *lo-so* venues are filled by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of people, who are neither part of, nor pretend to be part of the Bangkok elite, engage in everyday consumption in such places. For many Bangkokians, *lo-so* space – the street restaurant, the cheerful but basic drinking hole, the less prominent mall, or the market or shophouse – is part of the fabric of everyday life, and is undistinguished (in a class sense). Furthermore, within the same locality, space can be further divided into enclaves of *lo-so* space, as well as elite, *hi-so* space. Thus, for instance, even with all the *hi-so* restaurants, malls, bars, clubs, and boutiques in the affluent Thong Lor district of Bangkok, there is a lively hawker centre at the mouth of Soi Thirty-Eight, where people order food from street stalls and eat at steel tables and weather-worn chairs. It is also not simply a question of pollution or ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1966; see also Raya 2004, and Brody 2006). Rather, for Bangkokians, a market or other *lo-so* space is clearly hierarchically distinguished from that of a *hi-so* one, such as an upmarket mall. This, in turn, has ensuing political ramifications. As Caldeira (1999:325) argues,

Contemporary cities which are segregated by fortified enclaves are not environments which generate conditions conducive to democracy. Rather, they foster inequality and the sense that different groups belong to different universes and have irreconcilable claims. Cities of walls do not strengthen citizenship but rather contribute to its corrosion. Moreover, this effect does not depend either on the type of political regime or on the intentions of those in power, since the architecture of the enclaves entails by itself a certain social logic’ (see also Fernandes 2004, Babb 1999).

The next several examples I provide, illustrate the construction of class-based spatial boundaries in Bangkok through both enforced and voluntary exclusion of poor and rural Thais from elite spaces of consumption.

Kai, a thirty-year old Sino-Thai schoolteacher, related to me in a progressively irate fashion, how, after lazing around one weekend morning at the townhouse she shared with her husband, she decided to get some take-out noodle soup for herself and her sister from the popular food court at the exclusive Emporium shopping mall



in the Phrom Phong district of upper Sukhumvit. Real estate in the Sukhumvit area is amongst the most expensive in Bangkok and the residents of the many condominiums and apartments in the area comprise a considerable proportion of the shopping complex's target market. In addition, there are several elite international and prep schools in the area, providing for the educational needs of the children of wealthy Sukhumvit residents.

I had never seen Kai anything but immaculately presented. She embarked from home on that particular occasion, however, without dressing up, or even changing clothes, as she was only planning to 'pop in' to the store. As she wandered up to the entrance of the mall in shorts, a t-shirt, sandals, bare face, and undone hair, she was stopped by the guard, who simply stated that she could not enter (*'khao mai dai, khrap'*). She did a double take and told the guard that she came here all the time, and that her home was just down the road. Again, he only repeated that she could not enter. Frustrated, she pointed out the many people who were entering and leaving the complex who were dressed in exactly the same fashion. The only difference, she said to both the guard, and later, to me, was that they were *farang* (Europeans) or obviously Japanese or Chinese looking, whereas she herself was clearly a 'Thai' person (albeit of Sino-Thai background). She ended the story with the furious pronouncement that *'khon Thai chorp duu tuuk khon Thai'* ('Thais like to look down upon fellow Thais'). Noting Kai's casual appearance, her flip-flops and shorts and cosmetic-free face, the guard assumed she was of a lower class, and perhaps, a rural person. It was assumed that if she were a middle or upper class urbanite, she would most certainly dress as such, or at the very least, realise that she should not be entering a place like Emporium dressed in such a manner. An additional factor in the guard's decision to exclude her might have been her skin colour, which, although not particularly dark, was not particularly pale, either.

Kai's story is not at all an unusual one, and I heard of many similar incidents that provide evidence for a more or less 'unofficial' policy of exclusion' of such people from the most prestigious (and pretentious) malls, such as The Emporium. The complex was developed and is owned by The Mall Group, a retail empire founded by Supachai Umpujh, who manages the company with a core team of family members, and has his eldest daughter Supaluck at the helm.<sup>8</sup> It is promoted as 'Thailand's first

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8 The Mall Group is also responsible for Siam Paragon shopping complex, and the older 'The Mall' shopping complexes, of which there are seven located in and around the central Bangkok area, and another located in Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima). Along with Central Group, their close competitor (which is also similarly owned and run by a close-knit

luxurious fashion and lifestyle shopping complex'. Some of the stores inside the complex include: Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Hermes, Versace, Rolex, Gucci, Prada, Guess, MNG, Calvin Klein, Shanghai Tang, DKNY, and Lacoste. Regular patrons of the complex tend to be working professionals with high disposable incomes, and wealthy, established families. The mall also boasts a strong client base in the prosperous expatriate community of Bangkok, as do other malls of the same tier, such as Siam Paragon, in the Pathumwan district, as well as CentralWorld Plaza. Before CentralWorld Plaza's partial destruction, the three together comprised a triumvirate of the most prestigious malls in Bangkok.

Kai's experience contrasts strikingly with that of Arun's, who is also Sino-Thai, but who has pale skin and markedly Chinese features. When I brought up the topic, he described his own debate with a friend who insisted that he had witnessed people being refused entry to the Emporium because of their appearance. Arun was sceptical, maintaining that he had gone to the Emporium numerous times in what he described as 'an old crumpled t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops', and not been turned away. However, his friend pointed out, 'fair enough, but you're white and you have Chinese *ngo heng*,<sup>9</sup> but if someone who has Thai facial structure and is dark does that, they're not going to let them in'. Arun admitted that he was 'surprised that it would be a mall policy to turn away dark Thai people who wear scruffy shirts'. He later mused, 'now everything's pushed towards being skinny, white, and, foreign. Everything's about whitening cream...everything's about weight loss, and all the condos are about being Manhattan, or being Parisian; apparently it's no longer good enough to be Thai'.

Suda, an MBA student at the exclusive Assumption University (ABAC), was able to blend in at Siam Paragon and Emporium, although she also described such places as 'another society', where one must be conscious of one's appearance: 'well, if I go to a mall...say for instance if I go to Paragon, or Emporium, I wouldn't dress too ugly or poorly, if I went to a mall, like Paragon or Emporium, it's another society, so if I was dressed too shabbily, other people would look at me'. On that particular day, she was dressed in a good quality knit top, pants, and heels, all bought from a department store, and she explained, 'say if I'm dressed like this, then okay, I can go in'. Clearly, stereotypes of appearance have a significant role to play in how others

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family group, the Chirathivats), the Mall Group is a leader in the lucrative Thai retail industry.

9 Teo-Chiew Chinese word for 'facial structure'.

perceive a given individual. Quite often, these stereotypes are strongly linked with the level of *thaana*, or financial status, a person is assumed to possess.

Needless to say, ‘being Thai’ within the context of Arun’s remarks, as well of those of Kai’s, is very much connected with being lower class, and poor. Such individuals are not only excluded from the Emporium, but also other elite spaces in Bangkok, especially if they also appear to be of rural origin. For the most part, however, security guards at exclusive malls and other elite spaces are saved the trouble of refusing entry to those who look as if they don’t belong there. The very real possibility of being turned away, coupled with the sense of feeling out of place if one does make it past the guards, means that there are many who simply don’t even make the attempt to go to these malls. This was typically phrased to me as, ‘*Mai klaa khao*’, which should be distinguished from the phrase ‘*mai yaak khao*’ (‘I don’t want to enter’). ‘*Mai klaa khao*’ denotes that the speaker is ‘not brave enough’, or does not ‘dare’, to enter. As one individual remarked, ‘I know of some cases where people go past but don’t actually dare step into the Paragon, because they find that it’s too *hi-so*’. Obviously, money is a very real issue. Another person felt that Paragon was not his place because the things there were not what he’d normally buy, and that it is not necessary to spend so much on things. In contrast, he feels ‘normal’ when shopping at The Mall. However, The Mall and Robinson carry many of the same median-level brands and lines of merchandise – at the same prices – as Central, Paragon, and Emporium. Moreover, with the Thai predilection for *dern len* (walking around for fun), which does not have to involve spending money at all, the underlying cause behind why some people feel comfortable enough to *dern len* in Paragon and Central despite having low incomes, is arguably related more to anxiety about ‘fitting in’, especially as it relates to not possessing the external markers of class distinction required to blend in within such spaces.

Som’s experiences are a good illustration of this. Som’s husband was a nurse at St Louis, a well-known hospital in Bangkok. Originally from Buriram, in Isaan, Som had completed her education up until *por hok* (grade six), and was a housewife, although she was due to start a job sewing the day after our interview. Her mother-in-law, with whom she and her husband and children live, had never felt Som to be good enough for her son, who has a university degree, albeit from a lower-tier institution. During our discussion, Som had commented:

I don’t want to go to Central. It’s full of people who dress nicely. At Lotus [a hypermarket], there are people who dress nicely and people who dress naturally, normal. I’ve been to Central a couple of times. They emphasise the way you dress, so I don’t want to go.

The Central on Rama 3, it makes me feel inferior. I don't want to go. I don't want to go near there. At Robinson's [a lower-tier department store], it's normal. It's more comfortable than Central. If you go with the group that works in offices, they will dress well and you are just normal, with just jeans and a t-shirt. Then I'm embarrassed. I used to have a friend, whenever she goes out, she has to dress up fancy, to look like a person of a high status, but I'm not like that. Whatever is comfortable, I'll wear that.

True to her statement, when we met, Som was dressed plainly in a t-shirt and shorts, with rubber sandals and she wore her hair in a rough ponytail. Her face was free of makeup. Although she describes her style of dress as 'comfortable' (*sai sabai*), the above comments demonstrate that she feels judged by other people on the basis of her appearance. Thus, inside Central she feels 'inferior' (*toi*), and 'embarrassed' (*aai*).

I found similar views amongst other informants who were born outside of Bangkok, including a teacher, Aek, who was a graduate from Ramkhamhaeng University. His wife stayed at home to care for their baby daughter, and also sold lottery tickets for extra income. In response to my questions, he said that he had been with his family to Robinson department store a few times, but shook his head adamantly when I asked if he had ever been inside any one of the branches of Central, saying, '*mai klaa khao*' (*what does that mean?*). Chaat had an identical attitude toward Siam Paragon. When I asked why, he answered, '*Sangkhom mai meuan kan*' ('It's a different society'). Chaat explained that his life in Bangkok, as a teacher, was worlds apart from his life in Samut Sakhon, where he lived with his wife and mother-in-law, who operated a local street booth selling such things as yellow 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary tribute (to the King's ascension to the throne) shirts, and firecrackers. As he pointed out, a poorly dressed or obviously unfamiliar individual in a *hi-so* place would stand out as one of the minority (*'chon klum noi'*) amongst all the other patrons. As a result, they would 'be looked down upon' by others (*'dohn duu tuuk duay saai taa'*), who would 'stare at you from your head to the bottom of your feet' (*'mong tang tae sii sa jarot plaii thao'*), and wonder why you were dressed that way (*'thammai taeng tua yang nii'*). The experiences I have recounted here are by no means uncommon. In fact, this kind of spatial marginalisation is a major part of everyday life for Bangkok's poor and lower-middle classes, and something which endows an undeniable significance to the occupation of central Bangkok and the subsequent razing of one of the city's most upmarket shopping complexes.

## Conclusions

Although as the primate city, Bangkok has long been dominant, the recent changes brought about by the market economy have exacerbated an already hierarchical relationship between the city and the countryside, especially between Bangkok and the Isaan. Rural *baan nork* people, especially those from poverty-stricken Isaan, are positioned as patently inferior, within a cultural framework that values urban-generated status distinctions such as wealth and city-bred social refinement, as well as the traits stereotypically associated with these things, including a modern and cosmopolitan urban lifestyle, a white-collar profession, pale skin, and the central Thai language, among others. Clearly, the distinction between urban and rural Thai society – Bangkok and *baan nork* – is an undoubtedly potent social differentiator. Structural disparities underpin urban-rural differences, but as I have argued, these simultaneously generate, and reinforce, powerful and pervasive cultural conceptions of urban superiority and rural inferiority.

Hence, the ‘breaching’ of central Bangkok on the part of the Red Shirt movement, and its partial destruction upon the departure of the demonstrators, is merely an amplification of the symbolic significance of the everyday division of space in Bangkok and the – now literally – incendiary dynamics of this. Within this everyday division of space, shopping malls are not merely a playground for passive consumers caught up in the throes of global capitalism, or material representatives of the deterioration of high culture in favour of a vulgar mass culture. They are also not, as more positive discourses may depict, the modern progressive urban future. Neither can they be understood as globalised ‘non-spaces’ lacking distinctive characteristics in the Castellan sense (1996). Rather, I argue that they are the spatial foci of a matrix of physical and social boundaries, constructed and imposed by a variety of actors, which articulate the morass of conflicts – of which ethnic and class prejudices are a fundamental component – that rend Thai society and drive the political crisis.

As we have seen, many of those who comprise the economically disadvantaged constituents of the Red Shirt movement, are those who are typically kept out of ‘high’ elite spaces, or, alternatively, do not dare to enter them. Hence, recent events convey not only a powerful message of dissatisfaction and discontent by the Red Shirts, but also punctuate the important role of spatial politics within cities. The indication is that the urban and rural poor who are excluded from elite urban space – and concordantly, the vast share of benefits of Thailand’s neoliberal marketization – are

no longer willing to be passive about their marginalization or their lack of a political voice.

However, I would argue that the notion of a ‘rural-urban class divide’ also serves to obscure the many other voices of those who are dissatisfied with the same social order, and who are caught in a struggle between the different elite factions vying for supremacy in the face of an uncertain future. In other words, one of the major difficulties with the urban-rural divide analysis, is that it does not always take into account the everyday challenges facing the supposedly comfortable middle class in Bangkok, nor does it consider exactly how complex and heterogeneous the middle class actually is. Research shows that the privileged and affluent ‘urban middle class’ that is usually represented in the popular and academic discourse, refers only to a very small upper-middle class group (Vorng 2009). The rest struggle economically, and the newest members of the middle class – the lower middle class – who make up the largest segment, are those who generally have rural origins themselves, but have managed to very recently move into lower-level white collar jobs in the city. Just to illustrate, there were newspaper reports that the size of the Red-shirt demonstrations swelled considerably on weekends and after working hours, indicating that many ‘Bangkokians’ had joined the protest. In short, both social class, and urban-rural divisions in Thailand are a lot more fluid than typically depicted.

Additionally, the resentments of the urban and rural lower and working classes are not the only factors driving the political turmoil. For many middle-class individuals in Bangkok, the contrast between the urban world and the rural world was often framed in terms of societal competition (*kaan khaeng khan*). For those who aspire towards upward mobility, the very fact that there are so many others in the same position makes the process of acquiring the wealth, connections, and prestige that are essential to enhancing social status quite challenging. An additional sense of injustice arises from the privileges and entitlements accorded to individuals with wealth and influence, whose actions are not limited by the bounds of the law. It should be noted that this has strong parallels with the Red Shirts’ criticisms of the elite classes. However, on the part of the middle class, the most charged discourses centre on public figures such as Thaksin, who are seen to represent the cronyism and corruption that are causing the decay of Thai society. Within this system, those in positions of power and influence are able to manipulate the patronage system to successfully serve their own interests, often at the great disadvantage of others. In this light, it is not entirely unsurprising that these frustrations have been instrumental in the political mobilisation of both the lower *and* the middle class.



The evidence from Bangkok illuminates the inextricable linkages between power, space, and social life. And, as more of the world becomes urbanized, it flags a need for increased anthropological attention towards the mutual constitution of social space and relations of economic and cultural inequity. The recent tumultuous events in the Thai capital suggest that the investigation of such processes have implications that reverberate outside of the anthropological investigation of space and place, as well as discussions of cities and urban society, toward broader overarching questions concerning the unjust distribution of power and the intense political struggles that follow. Nevertheless, the more the urban middle class and the rural working class direct their frustrations at one another in this conflict, the less attention they channel into reforming the unjust social system in which they are all embedded. In essence, until both the 'yellows' and 'reds' realise that there are issues of common interest, which are much deeper than those that divide them, political unrest looks set to continue in Thailand.

## Appendix



Image A: CentralWorld Plaza in flames, May 19, 2010. Adrees Latif, Reuters.

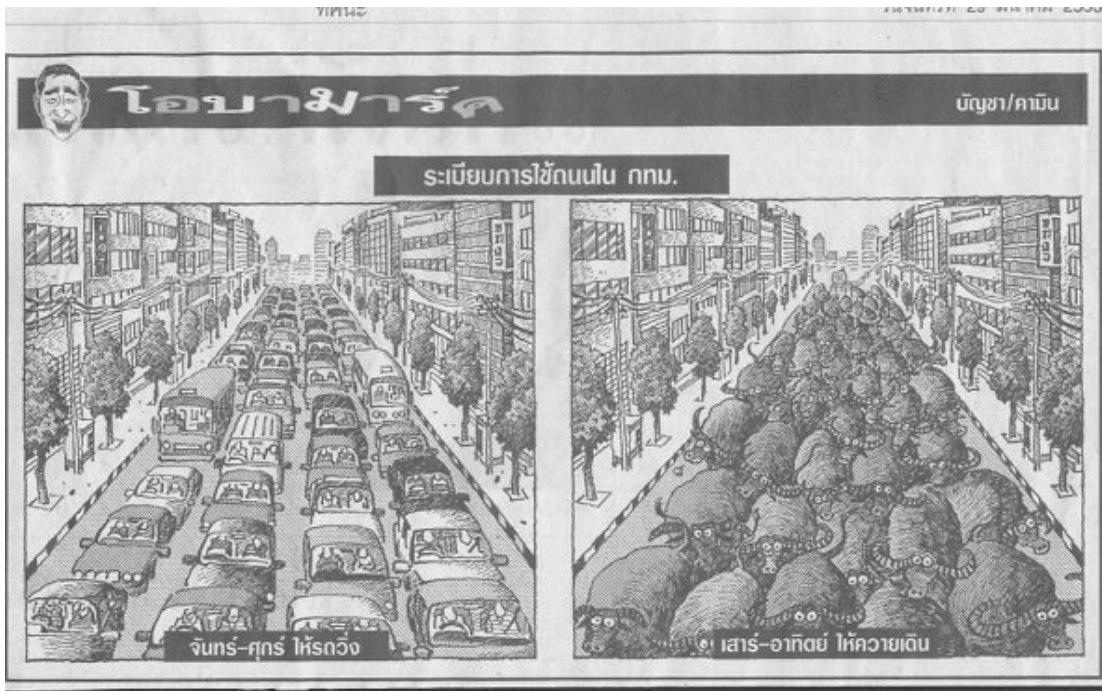


Image B: ASTV cartoon featuring the Red Shirts as a herd of buffaloes invading the streets of Bangkok published on March 29, 2010.



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