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Cleavage, Connection and Conflict in Rural, Urban and Contemporary Asia

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Place, Society and Politics Across Urban and Rural Asia

Eric C. Thompson, Tim Bunnell, and D. Parthasarathy

1.1 Introduction

The chapters in this volume concern the politics of place in four Asian nations: India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. They are about the ever-evolving relationship between and across rural and urban places. The categories of rural and urban are deeply embedded and naturalised in our imagination and in the cultural schemes of places across all the nations discussed in these chapters. One irony of what Gavin Jones (1997) calls the thorough-going urbanisation of Asia is that even as any sharp distinction between urban and rural ways of life has become increasingly blurred, the social and political implications of our imagination of rural and urban difference have, if anything, intensified. We present the chapters here as case studies of the many modes in which ideas and practices of the urban and rural play out across varied Asian contexts.

Our title, *Cleavage, Connection and Conflict*, refers to the crosscurrents, even contradictions, inherent in the rural-urban spatial relationships of contemporary Asian societies. Rural and urban are at once divided and connected. We set out, particularly in this introduction, to question the legitimacy of the cleavage between urban and rural while recognising that it is a conceptually powerful way in which many scholars as well as inhabitants of Asia continue to think about the world and

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social life. We draw attention to the connections between rural and urban, but here too, we suggest that the structure of these connections can no longer usefully be thought of as a continuum or examined mainly in the transitional peri-urban or ‘*desakota*’ zones between city cores and rural peripheries (McGee 1991; Jones and Douglass 2008). Rather, following Castells (1996), the rural-urban relationships of contemporary Asia are configured in a complex often irregularly structured, non-linear space of flows. The dynamics of this space of flows is far from smooth and throughout this book, authors draw attention to the social, economic and political conflicts that Asian societies and the people of Asia face.

We expect many readers will be interested in specific chapters or sections which speak to themes or countries in which they hold particular expertise. The chapters are arranged according to the 4 countries in which the 12 case studies are situated: India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. However, in this introduction and the volume as a whole, we wish to highlight a set of more general concerns in the ongoing evolution of social theory in contemporary Asia. As important as the chapters here are in their own right to the concerns of the peoples and places about which they are written, they also point to an ongoing rethinking and reconceptualisation of social, political and spatial configurations across urban and rural in contemporary Asia. In the following section, we provide a brief chapter-by-chapter sketch of the topics and themes of the individual chapters. Following the outline of the chapters, we turn to the more general themes and arguments of this book as a whole – that is, the ways the case studies here, when taken together, demonstrate that social, geographic and political understandings of Asia today need to re-examine and go beyond taken-for-granted imaginings of traditional rural-urban divides.

1.2 Places and Themes: An Overview of Chapters

In the first section on India, Parthasarathy (Chap. 2) examines political networks and capital flows connecting urban and rural sites in India through which ‘regional’ elites are able to gain political power. Maringanti (Chap. 3) shows how ambiguities of rural and urban play out in the boom and bust of a peri-urban real estate market in Andhra Pradesh. And Louw and Mondal (Chap. 4) examine the politics of exclusion operating around the peri-urban hinterland of the mega-urban region of Mumbai.

Section two of the volume provides case studies from Indonesia. Hudalah et al. (Chap. 5) offer insights into the politics of metropolitan governance in Yogyakarta, arguing that the combination of both urban and rural sorts of governance is important in a region at once rural and urban. Writing on post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh, Miller and Bunnell (Chap. 6) demonstrate that the dissolution of a rural-urban divide, exacerbated during years of civil conflict, is now reconfiguring the increasingly decentralised and democratic politics of one of Indonesia’s most troubled

provinces. Focusing on the Javanese cities of Cirebon and Gresik as well as their hinterlands, Riwanto (Chap. 7) presents a case in which urbanisation has proceeded apace, without producing prosperity and arguably exacerbating both urban and rural poverty.

Chapters in the third section turn to Malaysia. Suriati (Chap. 8) writes on the transformation of a Malay *kampung* (village) area in peri-urban Penang and the tensions that ensue over the transformation of the landscape through land acquisitions and building of new urban housing and industrial estates. Stivens (Chap. 9) focuses on the gendered dimensions of rural-urban cleavages and connections in Malaysia. Thompson (Chap. 10) argues that the ideology of rural backwardness and urban cosmopolitan chauvinism can be seen as one of the clear dividing lines between the two largest Malay-oriented political parties in Malaysia.

The final chapters in the fourth section concern case studies from Thailand. In Sirijit’s (Chap. 11) analysis of international marriage between women of rural origins to foreign (*farang*) men, we see another example of the insertion of an ideologically powerful rural-urban divide into the criticism of such marriages emanating from urban-based elites. Chairat (Chap. 12) recounts political conflict and unrest between ‘red shirt’ and ‘yellow shirt’ factions over the past several years in Thailand and the sources of that conflict in rural-urban economic and ideological division. Johnson (Chap. 13) writes on contemporary Thai experiences of the city, full of ghosts, spirit mediums and irrational fear, risk, hope and ruin, putting pay to taken-for-granted associations of cities with modernity and rationality and rural hinterlands with tradition and superstition.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume address social and political dimensions of urban-rural relationships. The sorts of relationships they describe challenge us to think beyond rural-urban divides. In doing so, contemporary Asian society can be thought about not as an urban-rural continuum but sociologically in its various political, economic and cultural dimensions, as a space of flows (Castells 1996). By evoking Castells’ concept, we are not proposing that the social relations and spatial relationships of Asia today exist as an undifferentiated sea of humanity. Tremendous variations exist in size, density, extent, intensity of settlement and relationship (i.e. from mega-urban corridors to gated communities to market towns to relatively isolated homesteads). We suggest a “space of flows,” in Castells’ sense of a complex, networked society, rather than “rural-urban continuum,” in order to highlight the multidimensional complexity of socio-spatial relationships, as opposed to linearity of more or less urban and more or less rural that earlier ideas of urban-rural continuum implied. Furthermore, the persisting imaginings of rural-urban difference are themselves more an idea (or ideology) with ideological effects that flow along with people, commodities and the like through this networked space of flows, rather than being a substantive reality. It remains important that people continue to think in terms of living in cities or villages as different ways of life, even if the substance of that difference is now diminishingly small in many cases. In the remainder of this chapter, we lay out our case in greater detail.

1.3 Beyond the Rural-Urban Divide

One of the more difficult tasks in bringing critical social theory up to speed with the fast-changing realities of contemporary Asia is grappling with the deeply embedded, essentialised idea of rural and urban difference. We need to move away from thinking of rural and urban as essentialised social difference (Thompson 2004, 2007). If they ever were distinctive ways of life, the reality of that distinction has fast dissipated in much of Asia through processes of urbanisation and agrarian transition. India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are all experiencing what Gavin Jones describes as ‘thoroughgoing urbanisation’ (Jones 1997). These are not societies in which there exist distinctive, dichotomous rural and urban ways of life. Rather they are thoroughly urbanised societies linked by networks of interconnections through infrastructure, media and other means among more and less dense settlements, be they villages, suburbs, city centres, housing estates or single homesteads. If urban and rural ever was a useful dichotomy for thinking about these places, it no longer is.

Distinctions between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ communities and associated spaces have been influential in the development of a range of social science disciplines, including sociology, geography, political science and urban planning. Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) famously contrasted *Gemeinschaft* communities (built around kinship and cooperative action in rural areas) with *Gesellschaft* societies (characterised by impersonal relationships based on formal contract and exchange in urban areas). This dichotomy was largely perpetuated by Chicago School scholars such as Louis Wirth (1938) in the early decades of the twentieth century, before giving way to more graduated classifications of settlement types. However, subsequent understandings of a urban-rural (or urban-folk) ‘continuum’ (e.g. Miner 1952) were themselves premised on the existence of poles of truly urban and truly rural places. The underlying belief that particular forms of society were effects of population size and population density or particular types of social and physical environment – whether ‘rural’ or ‘urban’ or something in between – was eventually demolished by Ray Pahl (1966). The work of Pahl and others (see also Newby 1986) served to evacuate the causal or explanatory power attributed to rural and urban environments. Nonetheless, the terms ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ continue to have representational purchase in popular consciousness, spreading through and reflected in cinema, literature and media, as well as in academic work and census systems across the world (Champion and Hugo 2004).

Despite critiques of the polarity of urban and rural in social science, the two remain key categories (e.g. in ‘urban geography’ or ‘rural sociology’) and remain deeply inscribed in social theory so much so that we have trouble thinking our way out of this dichotomy. In Asia, this is a double inscription. The first inscription comes with the dominance of Western-based social science, forged in Europe and America at a historical moment (especially the nineteenth century) when societies there were experiencing a shift from rural agrarian political economies to urban industrial ones. In Asia, the second inscription of the rural-urban divide came with

European biases of civilisational superiority and the European reading of Asia as primitive, backwards, undeveloped, pre-modern and despotic (how long a list one can come up with!). Lazy natives in their villages entered into the social scientific imagination as a reflection of modern Europe’s pre-modern past and a savage other to its civilisation. It is long past time for a thoroughgoing rejection of that imaginary of the Orient seen through the distorted lens of colonial-era Europeans (following Alatas 1977; Said 1979, and others).

Attention to the questionable distinction between rural and urban in Asia is by no means new. Kemp (1988) has argued that the concept of the ‘Thai village’ was a seductive mirage constructed by scholars and administrators. Writing on Malaysia, Shamsul (1989, 1991) did much the same in his examination of the ‘administrative village’ imposed from above through authoritative discourse. There is as well a long history of scholarship which has adopted a combined rural-urban political economy framework. Influential examples include the work of McGee (1991) in Southeast Asia and the work of Redfield and Singer (1954) in South Asia. Nevertheless, as with scholarship more generally, a tension remains in Asia between critical theorists who question the dichotomy of urban and rural and everyday discourses in which such an imagination is deeply embedded (Thompson 2007:201–204). The urban/rural dichotomy remains ideologically powerful and a part of the (cultural) consciousness of Thai, Malays and others (e.g. in conceptual differences between Bangkok and *ban nok* in Thailand; between K.L. and *kampung* in Malaysia).

Our concern in this book is not so much with attempting to undo labels or categories of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ but rather interrogating the tendency to use them to demarcate spatially distinct and discrete domains. Work in development studies has highlighted the limitations of policies that treat rural and urban separately, suggesting instead the importance of approaches which straddle the rural-urban divide (see Tacoli 2003). In introducing a special issue of the journal *Environment and Urbanization* on links between urban and rural development, Cecilia Tacoli contends that ‘the linkages and interactions have become an ever more intensive and important component of livelihoods and production systems in many areas – forming not so much a bridge over a divide as a complex web of connections in a landscape where much is neither “urban” nor “rural”, but has features of both, especially in the areas around urban centres or along the roads out of such centres’ (p. 3).

The divide, distinction and dichotomy between rural and urban in Asia are far too complex to capture in any simple way. Social science writing is rife with ambivalent attempts to address the cleavages and connections between rural and urban. In their comprehensive approach to urbanisation, *The City in Southeast Asia*, Rimmer and Dick (2009) unwittingly highlight this complexity and ambivalence by asserting at one point that, at least for mega-urban regions, ‘There is no sharp rural-urban dichotomy. No longer is it functional to bring labour to the city. It is easier to take work to rural areas to avoid social overhead costs as bulging cities outstrip their infrastructure’ (p. 36). Yet elsewhere, in the same book, they propose that ‘The boundaries between urban and rural location, or perhaps better expressed as between capital cities, other cities, towns and villages have, if anything, widened. People

may now move with remarkable facility. Poor villagers can migrate in search of work, even internationally. They have the option, such as it is, to participate in the global economy. What cannot be done, however, is to bundle and miniaturise all the elements of global urban society and transfer them to small city, town or village' (p. 126). In the sort of urban studies pursued by Rimmer and Dick, rural space increasingly disappears to the margins of analytical consciousness to be replaced by an interconnected network of global cities and mega-urban regions (e.g. 2009:1–19; see also Jones and Douglass 2008). Similarly, work on agrarian transitions, such as the impressive CHATSEAS (Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia) Project, remains focused on rural spaces with relatively little reference to the urban places with which they are intimately connected (e.g. Hall et al. 2011; De Koninck et al. 2011; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012). These works, with their singular focus either on urban or rural places, remain important contributions to scholarship, but taken alone, they re-inscribe the rural-urban dichotomy we are questioning here. The contributions to this book do not provide a simple answer to the complex problem of cleavage and connection between urban and rural places. Rather they highlight the multiple, sometimes contradictory ways in which rural and urban are configured in contemporary Asia.

1.4 Urban Sprawl, Rural Transformation and Space of Flows in Asia

Urban sprawl and rural transformations are simultaneous processes shaping contemporary Asia. While the interaction between urban and rural is most intensely felt – and attended to by scholars – in the peri-urban fringes of large 'mega-urban' regions, based on the cases presented in this book and elsewhere, we argue that urban and rural transformations are more pervasive and more interconnected than a focus merely on the peri-urban contact zones between sites otherwise conceived as properly 'urban' and 'rural' might suggest. A generation or two of geographers and other social scientists have drawn heavily on Terry McGee's seminal concept of '*desakota*' regions at the fringes of very large cities, where the rural countryside (*desa*) and built urban environment (*kota*) are interlaced.

Conceptually, urban sprawl extends beyond the peri-urban intersections of urban and rural spaces. The tendrils of urban networks of various sorts extend and branch out far beyond the places that most people would consider to be urban fringes. Diminishingly little of the human habitat of contemporary Asia is made up of isolated or self-contained settlements, of the sort one imagines to be an autonomous village of swidden farmers or encampment of mobile foragers. Many smaller settlements, villages with their 'little traditions', in Asia have long been more interconnected with global society and the world economy than premises of modern scholarship of the twentieth century would have one believe. That said, over the past century or more, interactions via infrastructure and telecommunications have certainly become more intensive. Those areas, such as the uplands and hills which were in the past relatively

autonomous, are now largely interlinked as well (Scott 2009:324–325). Urban centres of varying sizes, whether in terms of area or population, form the nodes of these networks (Dick 2005). Dwelling at once in these nodes and in these networks, the peoples of Asia as much as anywhere inhabit a social and cultural 'space of flows' of the sort proposed by Castells (1996) in theorising the networked society.

We are not suggesting that urban and rural lose all distinction in this space of flows. Conditions of life at the heart of Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta or Bangkok are not the same as those in the countryside, village or for that matter wildlife sanctuary to which they are connected. Yet the strength of networked connections today is such that rapid, continuous flow between them, of people, commodities, ideas and the like, constitutes the new *normal* of contemporary Asia, not an aberration. In all the nations we focus on in this book, the society's underclass is made up in large part of a 'floating population' (a term commonly used in reference to China – see Liang and Ma 2004) whose lives are defined by frequent, if irregular, movement between more or less urban and more or less rural places. People described as 'urban poor' and 'rural', for instance in Chairat's discussion of Thai politics (Chap. 12), are more often than not one and the same. Similarly, the remittance economy described by Stivens (Chap. 9), in which money flows between urban and rural, generally from urban to rural sites, has become a staple of economies and livelihoods throughout much of Asia, in many cases replacing subsistence farming.

Aceh, as described by Miller and Bunnell (Chap. 6), provides an example in which the city (Banda Aceh) and countryside surrounding it were for a very long time separated from one another to a much greater degree than found in most of Asia. The fact that this occurred during a protracted period of armed conflict between the Indonesian state which occupied the city and the Free Aceh Movement or GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) occupying the countryside underlines the extreme and aberrant conditions that must prevail to counter the general trend of intensive urban and rural connectivity described in other chapters.

The urban, as we understand it both materially (e.g. in the form of infrastructure and built environment) and conceptually (as ways of life, attitudes and orientations – such as the cosmopolitan chauvinism described by Thompson, Chap. 10), is, for the most part, that which sprawls outwards asserting itself and transforming the rural. To a lesser extent, rural forms, such as the ghosts and uncanny of the city discussed by Johnson (Chap. 13), insinuate themselves and inhabit the urban as well. In other words, the flow, sprawl and transformation are not a simple one-way process, though as the concept of thoroughgoing urbanisation suggests, there is little doubt that Asia today is conceptually and otherwise increasingly urban and decreasingly rural.

Processes of rural transformation and agrarian transition, influenced though not entirely governed by urban sprawl and networked flows, are likewise part of the social dynamic of contemporary Asia. In their recent book outlining 'powers of exclusion' in which access to land is configured (and reconfigured) through force, regulation, markets and legitimisations, Hall et al. (2011) demonstrate the complexity and irregularity of these processes. Although certain grand-scale trends, such as commodification of land and marketisation of crops and labour, can be discerned in the current era of neoliberal globalisation, on the ground, at the fine

scales these authors' work examines, many competing forces and counter trends are evident (see also Rigg and Vandergeest 2012). The one thing that can be concluded based on their evidence is that rural social relations, economics and politics are every bit as dynamic as those located in or associated with urban centres. In considering the sorts of transformations, conflicts and dynamics discussed throughout the chapters of this book, it should be clear that social change is not simply driven by urban centres and exported to rural countrysides. Dynamics of change are as much part of or, to put it another way, indigenous to the rural landscape itself.

1.5 On the Politics of Rural-Urban Cleavage and Connection

The relationship of urban and rural across Asia has important political consequences. Several chapters in this book focus on these explicit politics (e.g. Parthasarathy, Thompson, Chairat, Hudalah, Miller and Bunnell). The rural/urban divide is everywhere culturally (or, if readers prefer, ideologically) constructed. In Chap. 4, Louw and Mondal describe the political, social and economic consequences for people classified as 'tribal' and rural, who find themselves squeezed between land classified as a wildlife sanctuary on one side and expanding urban Mumbai on the other. In Chap. 8, Suriati examines the inclusions and exclusions engendered through geographical imaginings of rurality in peri-urban Georgetown (Penang). In both of these cases, cultural ideas of rural and urban – classifications attributed to both people and places – drive diverse practices of inclusion and exclusion. Other chapters, particularly those situated in India (Parthasarathy, Chap. 2), Malaysia (Thompson, Chap. 10) and Thailand (Chairat, Chap. 12), address more explicitly political cases, ones in which identity and democratic politics (i.e. bidding for votes) are at stake.

Parthasarathy (Chap. 2) and Thompson (Chap. 10) provide contrasting accounts, highlighting ways in which the relationship between rural and urban can play out very differently under conditions of democratic, electoral politics. In the case of India, Parthasarathy demonstrates the ability of rural-based elites to capture the politics of cities by drawing on rural vote banks. It becomes questionable to even call these elites 'rural based' given that their power derives as much from their ability to negotiate both urban and rural settings as well as the connections between them. Thompson, on the other hand, draws attention to the rhetorical, ideological cleavage between urban and rural in Malaysia and how the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) attempts to capitalise on the urban, cosmopolitan chauvinism of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). A similar story is found in Thailand (see Chairat, Chap. 12), where the clash between 'red shirt' and 'yellow shirt' movements is drawn in large part along rural and urban lines.

The political dimensions of urban-rural cleavages and connections cannot be reduced to contests for votes alone. Politics is also about governance and even more profoundly about the structural conditions of societies in terms of class, gender and other dimensions through which power is regulated and legitimated. As Hudalah,

Fahmi and Firman demonstrate in their study of Yogyakarta (Chap. 5) and Maringanti demonstrates of Hyderabad (Chap. 3), concepts and classification of 'rural' and 'urban' impinge on everyday infrastructure management and negotiating risks and rewards of real estate speculation. While less spectacular than political rallies and nationwide election campaigns, these micro-level, fine-scale negotiations of urban and rural paradigms set the parameters for the politics of 'who gets what, when and how'. Similarly, ever-evolving configurations of gender and class across Asia, embedded in urban-rural networks and ideologies, are implicated in everyday politics as well, as the case studies presented by Stivens (Chap. 9), Sirijit (Chap. 11) and Chairat (Chap. 12) all highlight.

1.6 Conclusion: Promise and Dystopia of Thoroughgoing Urbanisation and Rural Transformation

Praise and condemnation for one form of human habitation or the other, rural or urban, remain commonplace: the egalitarian village, the backwards countryside, the cosmopolitan metropolis and the alienating, morally corrupt city. Authors, filmmakers or even political movements may find such polemically stereotyped places useful. One can think of the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand with its overly idealised imaginary of an egalitarian rural past (Hall et al. 2011:185–188) or the Malaysian and Singapore governments which have championed shiny, hypermodern urban landscapes (e.g. Bunnell 2004; Thompson 2007:25–28). Actual social and spatial dynamics in contemporary Asia are everywhere more complex, messy and usually contradictory, than such imaginaries would suggest. Neither valorising nor condemning the dynamics of urban and rural and of thoroughgoing urbanisation in contemporary Asia is of much value. Thoroughgoing urbanisation and the sociological space of flows across places more or less urban and rural are simply a social fact of life in nearly all of Asia today.

Urban sprawl – as the disorderly nomenclature itself suggests – is almost always figured as dystopian. Writers and scholars, overwhelmingly based in urban centres, tend towards the romantic and nostalgic in their views of the village and the countryside. Work on Asia's expanding middle classes has long noted how the more detached such middle-class cultures become from any substantive connection to rural roots, the more nostalgic they become for an imagined agrarian past (e.g. Kahn 1992). Yet, scholars who work on the ground in rural settings find that the power of urban aspirations – a genuine desire to be urbanised, either through migration or through in situ transformation of the local built environment – is almost everywhere in Asia a powerful force (e.g. Thompson 2007).

As a contribution to our understanding of the ongoing transformation of contemporary Asia, the chapters of this book set out to examine the diverse dimensions of contradictory forces involved in urban and rural dynamics: cleavages dividing rural and urban, connections through which they are inseparably bound together and conflicts arising from both the cleavages and the connections. We do not propose a

singular construct through which to understand these relationships and forces, such as the rural-urban continuum popular in the early twentieth century or McGee's influential *desakota*. Even with regard to Castells' space of flows, we suggest it as a loosely theorised concept for readers to keep in mind while considering the many intersections of urban and rural detailed in the chapters that follow. Our hope is that readers and researchers can build on the work presented in these chapters, both individually with regard to particular domains such as politics, urban planning, gender and class analysis, as well as drawing on the collection as a whole in our ongoing efforts to theorise and understand the fast-changing societies of Asia.

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