

**Asia Research Institute
Working Paper Series No. 150**

**Larger Than Life:
“Central World” and its Demise and Rebirth
- Red Shirts and the Creation of
an *Urban Cultural Myth* in Thailand**

Jim Taylor

Discipline of Anthropology and Development Studies School of Social Sciences,
The University of Adelaide, Australia

jim.taylor@adelaide.edu.au

March 2011



The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm. For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm.

Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee

Michelle Miller - Chair

Gregory Clancey

Liang Yongjia

Peter Marolt

Tim Bunnell

Jeremy Kingsley

Valerie Yeo

Asia Research Institute

National University of Singapore

469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Larger Than Life: “Central World” and its Demise and Rebirth – Red Shirts and the Creation of an *Urban Cultural Myth* in Thailand¹

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at the cultural meanings and political implications on the arson of Bangkok’s Central World (CW) Shopping Complex situated near the Raacha’prasing Intersection which has drawn so much attention since a part of the complex was burned down after the violent crackdown next to the complex on Thailand’s red shirts, 19 May 2010. The building was formerly the site of a palace built by King Chulalongkorn and apparently owned by his 72nd son. Locals said that they believe the site to be spelled. Readers may also recall headline images beamed across the world which came to represent the intensity of the conflicts as the world’s third largest shopping complex was set alight in the centre of Bangkok.

Here, I contest the assumptions and urban myth perpetuated by the current ruling regime that the destruction of the iconic bourgeois site of consumption was a crime committed by the retreating red shirts. The destruction of the building is important as it established the justification for the state violence which took place against unarmed protestors during the crackdown. It also justified the subsequent repression inflicted against fleeing regional protest leaders over the following months. Henceforth the red shirts en-masse and then later their leaders were labelled as “terrorists”; an intentionally delegitimizing epithet which carries considerable emotional force post 9/11 world – much as the term “communist” for progressives and liberals such as the “Octobrists”², or student activists, from 1973-6.

The red shirts are constituted by a number of broad interest groups who are brought together by a desire to see full representative democracy established in the country. They are internally differentiated by class though numerically dominated by the subaltern, especially small-farmers and permanent urban-dwelling informal sector workers. The red shirt mass social movement is known properly as “Red for the land” (*daengthang-phaendin*); or in English the *National Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship* (UDD), while in Thai it is better known under the abbreviated form: *Nor Por Chor*.

Recent attention through red media has been given to events surrounding this arson and has challenged some assumed truths about who was responsible for its destruction. Evidence was presented in Parliament on 18 May 2011 in a censure debate by opposition Phue Thai Party politicians revealing evidence from in-house video footage, interviews, analysis and photograph evidence taken during the arson. Eye witness accounts have already been documented in a recent submission to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague in a case against the regime’s Democrat Party leader and Prime Minister Abhisit *Vejjajiva*, by ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra’s international human rights lawyer, Robert Amsterdam.³ The outcome of these matters is pending at the time of writing.

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for constructive suggestions on improving this paper.

² For an good analysis on the relationship between “Octobrists” and current political events see Kengkij Kitirianglarp and Kevin Hewison, “Social movements and political opposition in contemporary Thailand”, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 22 No. 4 September 2009: 451–477

³ “Application to Investigate The Situation Of the Kingdom of Thailand with Regard to the Commission Of Crimes Against Humanity”, 31 January 2011

The paper shows the meanings attributed to the destruction of CW, elucidating certain elite-middle class consumer values and the symbolic significance of the arson. The current regime at the time of writing is taking a defensive attitude, concerned with protecting its own interests and involvement and is in condition of denial, whatever evidence comes forward. Here I intend to conjecture on the arson from interviews, visual and written documentation and suggest that it was most unlikely that the red shirts could have set light to the building.

RUMINATIONS

How come, I asked myself, could commodity consumption and merchandising among middleclass Bangkokians be placed above the value of human life? The answer: it all depends on whose life it is and the particular circumstances. A mere month after the violent crackdown by the Thai state on 19 May 2010, and shortly before red shirt activist Sombat Boon-ngarmanong's commemorative red ribbon tying exercise at Raacha'prasong Intersection, I visited the CW site, or what was left of the building, and noticed the personal message board along the sidewalk where people were killed. It invited comments from passerby with statements such as: "We Love CW"; "We miss you CW"; "R.I.P. CW", and etc. I was thinking of the 91 people killed at this site and more than 2,000 injured by the military machine of the state. Like many fair minded people, I felt heavy-hearted at the insensitivity of the Bangkok city bourgeoisie to the human suffering of fellow citizens to the well planned bloodbath which was seemingly sanctioned by the summit. In a moment of spontaneity I scribbled candid comment to this effect on the message board and was quickly approached by an educated Bangkokian who flashed a camera in my face and asked aggressively "why" was I doing that, and "why" didn't I like the government? I avoided a narrowly a violent confrontation in the heat of the moment, and unable to find the words to explain how I felt, I decided it was best to move away.

THE PLOT UNFOLDS: UNRAVELLING AN URBAN MYTH

I know of no essays or news reports that do not assume ipso facto the fate of CW, or more precisely part of the complex, the Zen Department Store, was caused by anything other than red shirt arsonists. It has become a truth statement, despite mounting evidence over the past six months to the contrary and new analysis as mentioned above. As stated in the classic Chinese story, "truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; real becomes not-real when the unreal's real"⁴. The first thing that occurred to me when I saw the fire was how could some tired, hungry, and chased Red Shirt protestors have the capacity, time, spontaneous technical knowledge and floor plan know-how to bring about such calculated and well targeted destruction; a building of some ten stories?

The red shirts, even though some may have felt somewhat "out of place" at CW, had been using the toilets in the building from 3 April until 19 May considering it to be a "safe zone". Indeed, the chairperson of the family owned Central Group of Companies which own CW, Sutthitham Chirathivat⁵ commented that he considered the red shirts to have good relations with the store during the demonstrations. He commented that it was a well armed "gang" of

⁴ Cao Xueqin 2006, *The Story of the Stone: a Chinese Novel: Vol 1, The Golden Days* (Penguin Classics), p.44

⁵ See BangkokBizNews.com (12 July, 2010 [2553])

soldiers. He further stated that there is no indication that the red shirts caused the fire and video evidence and affidavits from the security guards at the store who were forced to leave by soldiers from CRES (the state's "Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation") showing that it was not red shirts as the state tried to show.⁶ Boutique store owners trying to get into their shops in the centre at around 1420 hours were shot in the legs by the army using American-issued Remington 870 shotguns in order to prevent them from entering the store.

Interestingly, we have to now ask how could the protestors get into the building after the curfew with so many army and police around and, amazingly, not even get caught! It had already been set fire many hours earlier at the height of the crackdown. The fire-brigade according to affidavits said they were told by the army that there were "terrorists" (Phuu'orkkaanraai) there and that it would be dangerous for them to try and extinguish the fire. Many hours later when they could eventually get inside the military cordon it was too late.

By 1930 hours the building was completely demolished and the military apparatus of the state CRES was already there. Importantly, the fire seemed to have started at the upper levels of the building. It was not until the early hours of the following morning that the fire was eventually doused. Ex PM Thaksin Shinawatra also said that it "must be the work of (a) professional. As an ex-police (officer), I can assure you that this is a well planned and professionally done..." and that it was 'definitely' not the work of red shirts⁷ The fire was also in the interests of state-amaat⁸ so as to construct a neat story for the outside world affirming the Red Shirts as "terrorists"⁹. The surrounding area was under the control according to some estimates of around 70-80,000 soldiers so it was in any case unlikely that red shirts could have been allowed inside or forced their way inside for the purposes of arson (unless of course they were aided).

Appearing in the alternative media "Thai e-news" web site¹⁰ for the first time last year was compelling photographic evidence, first brought to public attention by the more courageous of the Thai print media Khaosod (of the Matichon Group) and introduced to the public by Phue Thai MP and one of the core red shirt leader's Jatuporn Prompan. However, this was not carried on electronic Thai media at the time under state orders of suppression. The reporter had interviewed four guards hired by the two CW contracted security firms: RTS Guard Co. Ltd, and G4S Guard who were working on the 19 May 2010. They remarked that in the morning everything seemed fine, business as usual, but after 1300 hours "authorities"/military moved in to adjacent elite Siam Paragon. Then they heard much

⁶ Interview recorded on "Thai e-news" 16 March 2011 (<http://thaienews.blogspot.com/2011/03/ctw.html>)

⁷ Aljazeera, May 27, 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2010/05/201052743011586383.html>. See also interview on ABC Program "Lateline": <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2010/s2910366.htm>

⁸ the term "amaat" refers to early and persisting bureaucratic notions of ruling elites/aristocracy (*Amaatayattipatai*)

⁹ This accords with the findings in Robert Amsterdam's final report to the ICC, "Application to Investigate The Situation Of the Kingdom of Thailand with Regard to the Commission Of Crimes Against Humanity", 31 January 2011 (pp 68-73)

¹⁰ <http://thaienews.blogspot.com/2010/12/19-6.html>; see also Bangkok Pundit, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/43506/photos-from-may-19-an-update/> Predictably the Bangkok Post (9/12/2010) had a piece entitled "DSI claims Jatuporn's photos show nothing new", <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/210368/dsi-claims-jatuporn-photos-show-nothing-new>

gunshots and explosions. It was assumed that was part of the game plan to create the impression that there were red shirt “terrorists” in the building. Informants said they were asked to move downstairs after the first gunshots and explosions were heard. They were told to lock the gates/doors until 1630 hours when the army invaded into the building and started to clear the area. The CW security guards were told to lie on the floor and place their ID badges on their chest which were checked and then they were released, except those who did not have them. By 1700 hours soldiers had completely surrounding the complex after clearing the building and not letting anyone get inside.

In a brilliant analysis appearing in the Thai quarterly *Aan*¹¹ (“Read”), Chatri Prakitnonthakarn, a lecturer in architecture at Silpakorn University, raises questions: “who” and “why”? Let’s leave aside the “how” for the time being. There are a number of scenarios: Firstly, it was either pre-planned by UDD or a spontaneous act of violence by red shirts after the crackdown. Secondly, it was set alight by the state to blame the demonstrators by either a “third hand” working for the regime or military specialists. Now, for most middleclass Thais the answer is obvious: it was a spontaneous act of violence. Aside from the probability mentioned above, this ignores political implications and gains from such a venture.

The consequence of the arson was a massive outpouring of emotion from Bangkok’s middleclasses; a “mourning” not of a death of a material object, but of life itself which they have long associated in their lifestyle choice. The shopping centre Zen for instance, as an executive of Central Group noted was a “lifestyle destination centre”. The whole CW complex, some 830,000 m², one of the largest in Asia, the third largest in the world, and was designed as a city within a city; a totalising internal space reflecting the hypermodern lived-world of the bourgeoisie. It has more than 500 speciality shops, including 36 new brand name stores, 50 restaurants; multiple cinemas; bowling centre, hotels, etc. It caters for every need of Bangkokians including yoga, fitness centres, education, travel promotion centres, karaoke, mega-bookshops, and so on. It is a one-stop shopping and amusement site of hyper-consumption, of pleasure and unlimited desires in reproduced bourgeois “play spaces”.¹² The open space in the front of the building was one of most popular sites for the middle-classes to celebrate the New Year countdown; there were beer gardens, concerts and fund-raising events that were frequently held there.

BENJAMIN IN BANGKOK; ARCADES AND THE THAI BOURGEOISIE

Middle-class Bangkokians stroll through the internal arcade on each floor of Central World depending on their interest or whim and with whatever free time they have, preoccupied with the pleasure of a consuming gaze. It is an experience that defines certain pleasurable qualities to be generated at certain times and spaces; it orders and regulates the sensuous experiences in being at a particular place.¹³ Walter Benjamin noted:

¹¹ 2553 (2010) Year 2, Vol. 4, Pp 103-116

¹² Rob Shields 1989, ‘Social spatialisation and the built environment: the West Edmonton Mall’, *Society and Space*, vol.7, no.2, pp.147–64

¹³ John Urry 2002, *The tourist gaze*, SAGE, p.145

The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the flâneur. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these went into the construction of the department store, which made use of flânerie itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the flâneur's final coup¹⁴.

In Benjamin's imagining on cosmopolitan nineteenth-century Paris, he attempted to capture the dreams and "illusions of the novelty in merchandise and fashion"¹⁵. The Parisian arcade was the forerunner of things to come in a consumer culture based on intensified commodity circulation apparent in the first mass consumption environment, the Parisian Department Store, which after the mid-nineteenth century markedly transformed the city's commercial landscape. Similar to the arcade, the modern shopping malls in Bangkok are a city in miniature, a simulacrum, and an interior with no outside, essentially a "dreamscape"¹⁶. This is the metropolis transformed through the imagining of the bourgeois consumer.

To smash the "dreamscape", the desires and imaginings of the middleclass in bringing down CW was tantamount to declaring a class war. It must be considered that class boundaries define the "limits on the 'magic' of merchandising" depending on location¹⁷. The Raacha'prasing intersection at Pathum Wan District is the bourgeois centre of the metropolis. The working class equivalent is located some ten kilometres away to the metropolitan northeast, the Imperial World on Lad Prao Road at Wang Thonglang District. Not coincidentally it is also the centre for UDD (red shirt) Movement and heartland for the red shirts located near working class residential and small business areas. It is definitively working class, while CW a definitively "Hi So"¹⁸ shopping and business precinct; and never the twain shall meet, except in terms of relations to capital and consumption. Adding insult to injury, according to the urban myth CW was supposedly brought to its knees by red shirts coming from the "outside". Being on the outside was always associated with danger; wild/forest/bootleggers, uncivilised counter-spaces, and thus potentially worrying to the "civilising" centre or what I call "city-nation"¹⁹.

The contained spaces of consumption noted above, where the city is a "room", are simulations of the metropolis reflecting an intense hedonism and individualism, which generates crowds through the accidental sharing of desires²⁰. The pleasure or desires in being at these places of alternative cosmologies are because in being there one is not actually being anywhere in particular, simply an experience as a collage of smells, tastes, sounds and

¹⁴ 1973 (1935), 'Paris – capital of the nineteenth century', in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (trans. Harry Zohn), London: New Left Books, p.170

¹⁵ Francisco Gonzalez Beatriz Sarlo, 2001, 'Forgetting Benjamin', *Cultural Critique*, vol.49, pp.86–7

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin in Don Slater, 1993, 'Going shopping: markets, crowds and consumption', in *Cultural Reproduction*, Chris Jenks (ed.), London: Routledge, p.196

¹⁷ See Margaret Crawford, "The world in a shopping mall" In *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (ed. Michael Sorkin), New York: Hill and Wang, 1992, p.18

¹⁸ As Thai say, taken from "High Society"

¹⁹ By "city-nation" I refer (symbolically, territorially) to metropolitan/primate Bangkok as an imagining of nation-state that is socially, culturally and economically separated from the rest of countryside and that is defined by specific urban/elite civic (tribal) values, and historically marginalising the nation countryside. It is also the font of *national* imaginings and the sacred-ritual centre/summit of the Thai nation-state

²⁰ Don Slater, 1993, p.201.

tactility. The enjoyment is in moving through the interior; post-modern urban nomadism,²¹ or De Certeau's "pedestrianism", indicative of the value that contemporary hybrid cultures place on mobility; moving around the arcades²². CW recreated, in the sense of Wark²³, a "second" nature which turned inward, away from the public mistrust of the street to the reimagining of comforting interiority of space – "recreating a city in a compressed and intensified space" sealing out the exterior world of the street into a "recreational activity and (like a theme park) ... an escapist cocoon"²⁴. CW incorporated more and more of the city inside its walls redefining the limits between public and private space. It is not hard to see why CW goers felt that it was more than just a concrete box falling down. Indeed, CW repackaged the late modern metropolis in a safe, clean and controlled form which gave it greater importance as a social and community centre. The "enclosed mall supplied spatial centrality, public focus and human destiny"²⁵ – clearly elements lacking in today's Bangkok residential sites.

The burning of CW was an act of destroying the very fabric of middleclass cultural values. The hypermodern shopping centres and arcades are also sites of a postmodern spirituality; places of sanctity and commodity devotion²⁶. I would suggest that the destruction was a message (by whom?) to get the elite and middleclass consumers firmly on the side of the state against alleged perpetrators and to justify in the minds of Bangkokians the state sanctioned killing of innocent protestors by the army. It all worked well; Bangkokians were so outraged that the symbol of their own identity was burned down; it was to them like burning their own hearts. So much so that they even commented (as a relative of mine in Bangkok commented without blinking); the killing of these people "serves them right! They should not have been there (in 'our' space) anyway"! or even taking recourse in believing the military's CRES (Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation) and military alliance PM Abhisit Vejjajiva's propaganda that, never fear, "we did not do it" it was the red shirts killing other red shirts; indeed, killing their own compatriots, their own kin? Social networking (Facebook) comments from Bangkok Thais include such as "CW was our life; now we have nowhere to go – we lose our heart". In fact these consumers would simply find other sites of seduction in the metropolis, which was a concern to CW boss Sutthitham Chirathivat (see earlier) as he bemoaned now having to try and bring back his former patrons – Bangkok's flâneur/flâneuse. Many of the more belligerent comments that were circulating referred to the red shirts as animals, as water buffaloes, or humans "smelling like the fermented fish that they eat" (a northeast regional delicacy)! Or, red shirt female protestors who only went to sell their bodies for a few Baht, and even on one face-book, that all red shirts are basically not really Thai anyway and should be "pushed out of the country"!

²¹ See for instance Tim Cresswell, 1997, 'Imagining the nomad: mobility and the postmodern primitive', in *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, George Benko and Ulf Strohmayer (eds), Oxford: Blackwell; and John Noyes 2004, 'Introduction: nomadism, nomadology, postcolonialism', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol.6, no.2, June, 2004, pp 159-68

²² An example in postmodern literature is on devices that exemplify this detached nomadic experience, such as the Sony Walkman (Paul Du Gray, 1996, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, London: Sage Publications, pp 23–4); though these days, instead of the Walkman it is the ubiquitous "iPod"

²³ This refers a group of experiences reworked by culture and which then take on new meanings (McKenzie Wark 1997, *The Virtual Republic*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, p.23)

²⁴ Margaret Crawford, op cit., p.23

²⁵ Ibid., p.23

²⁶ See Jim Taylor, *Buddhism and Post-Modern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space*. 2008 London: Ashgate Publishing.

URBAN VALUES, REDEFINING MORALITY AND CLASS

Was the burning of CW a message from the mass red shirts or the neo-fascist minority urban yellow shirts? If so, what was the message? If it was in defining the moral logic of a class war, the red shirts were going to wreak vengeance on the elite system and, in a planned or spontaneous moment, burn the iconic building, starting at the summit of the building. But, it needs to be remembered that the red shirts were constituted by interests from various classes who were out to regain democracy, opportunity and justice. This included mobile middleclass urban flâneur/ flâneuse and who had nothing against CW. But another viewpoint which is rarely raised in non red-shirt media is that the elite state-military machinery was seeking a moral sanction to kill the protestors. It waited until it received a nod and a wink from the summit. The state also capitalised on the already arrogant attitude towards the rural and urban poor; an attitude towards marginalised people that democracy cannot work because, in the selfish logic of John Stuart Mill's "tyranny of the majority", it would mean that they would lose (or have to share) their minority urban-centred benefits and comfortable lifestyle to a majority elected government. Furthermore, that such a government of the people would clearly be one that is formed from the periphery and not the centre-nation.

The Bangkok middleclass would reject "democratic" elections or sharing an electoral process with small farmers who are seen as "stupid" (ngo), have no education and thus no real knowledge of "democracy". In any case, according to this view, they readily sell their votes. The bourgeoisie therefore would snub the notion of one-person-one vote, equality and rights-based approaches to governance. So, for safety, they middleclass lean on the bureaucratic elites/"Hi-So"/royalty, patronising and endlessly glorifying the virtues of the summit; whether they really believe that or not. They turn to notions of accumulated religious virtues or "high morals" (taken from the Pali: punyaa-barami) and don't feel ashamed to deny the basic right of people to elections, because this may eventuate in a situation whereby "bad people" are in positions of power and decision-making instead of "good (moral) people": meaning of course their own chosen "people". They can turn a blind eye to the current violent excesses of the regime because it represents a means to an end; to achieving something better.

To many Bangkok middleclass neither are they concerned about "dictatorships", attached to ethnic-nationalism, morality and the monarchy; as long as it benefits their interests and that it does not intrude into their social and cultural fictive space. They talk about village culture in demeaning terms ("baan-nok")²⁷, a term which originally implied simply rural/countryside but since at least in the last century took on a disparaging adjective, implying rustic, uncultivated, uneducated and savage. The red shirts in the centre of the metropolis were thus seen as a direct affront to "sophisticated" urban life ways and values.

There are continuing mediations at work redefining the relationship of urban life to country/rural life through symbolisms and representations (ideological and imaginary) of nature and countryside. In the early 1990s new middle-classes eagerly looked outward to the countryside and sought primal connections, buying new rural homes, "ranches", orchards and rice land. At the same time there was also a proliferation of new housing estates which started to colonize the countryside²⁸. Many among the bourgeoisie see the countryside as an escape

²⁷ See Thongchai Winichakul, "The "germs": the reds' infection of the Thai political body", *New Mandala*, May 3rd, 2010

²⁸ Jonathan Rigg and Mark Ritchie 2002, "Production, consumption and imagination in rural Thailand", *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol.18, No.4, p.365

from the increasingly polluted city-complex heading up-country at every opportunity, colonising first the main regional centres and then working outwards to appropriate scenic rice lands. This was an attempt to consume rurality in its various representations; “an-other” kind of imagining. This is also a feature of late capitalism as new richer urban societies are more and more estranged from the simplicity and totality of assumed (“village”) cultural traditions and rural life²⁹; even as “guilt about the loss of moral authority”³⁰. In contrast to urbanity, rurality has become re-inscribed as certain signs that defined an identity and traditional values that in many ways were distinct from urban. As a representation, rural Thais are seen as the source of primary values. The metropolis on the other hand has to retain its cultural superiority while also de-link itself from the impersonal forces of globalization and its production of specific global-citybodies. The notion of ethic Thai’ness has been uprooted from its traditional, historical, local-rural/village context, and now divested of its aura³¹.

Thus notions of the “rural idyll”, and the “proper” historical place of rural masses and in modern social and cultural life, are articulated by elites and urban middle-classes “armed with a vision of the past”. This is an attempt to reconstruct tradition to meet urban contemporary values and needs³² through memory. It is clear that in Thailand the city-nation discourse sees rural persons/things as low, marginal culture, as a people left behind in time, at the same time it has come to constitute an imaginary and emotional referent of its dominant urban culture³³. The city-nation is caught in an imagined past it cannot shed, a present that needs a referent, and an uncertain future which is reminiscent of Benjamin’s notion of “Now-time” (Jetztzeit). This is an interposed and instantaneous reflection of a recognized past in the present, as the seizure of a memory that affects the content of tradition and its reception. The past is conveniently called upon in a moment of most need. In modernity, and its ideas of progress, history is only meaningful as “time filled by the presence of the now”³⁴.

The aristocracy and ruling elites have been represented as transcending the economy and the geopolitical divide between town and country through relevant rituals that reinforce centre dominance³⁵. It also reinforces binary perceptions of the superiority of culture/city-nation over nature/rurality. The later in fact feeds or provides sustenance to the former. Simultaneously, elite patronage ties modernity (samai-mai) and tradition (samai-korn or Boraan) at a time of intense transition and repositioning of city-nation-state. Post 1997 economic crisis saw an increased yearning for a past in the present, and at the same time in

²⁹ Bryan Turner, 1987, “A note on nostalgia”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol.4, no.1,p.152

³⁰ John Carroll in Turner, 1987, p.154

³¹ Walter Benjamin’s term, see 1936/1973, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, in *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt), London: Fontana, pp.70–82. It refers essentially to a distinctive existence and ‘presence in time and place’.

³² Rigg and Ritchie, *op.cit.*, p.364

³³ Rob Shields, 1991, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, London: Routledge, p.5

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, 1969, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, p.261; see also Marcel Proust’s illusionary perception as a moment of ‘pure time’ (Joseph Frank on Proust in Edward Soja, 1996, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-imagined Places*, Malden.: Blackwell Publishers, p.81 n.15).

³⁵ such as annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony, the Royal Project Foundation’s work in the north, or in a political ecology of centre dominant patronage – the merit-making visitations to famous ethnic Thai-Lao forest monks starting in the late 1960s (see Jim Taylor 1993, *Forest monks and the Nation-State*, Singapore: ISEAS, pp 214 ff.

this new economy there was a sense of loss and remorse for familiar/kindred and to the safety of endogenous notions of home-grown values and “country things” (e.g. clothing, food, music). This, combined with the King’s birthday speech on 4 December 1997 championing the virtues of simple, self-reliant localised economies, in part, explains the intense anti-globalisation sentiment around this time and rise of nostalgic neo-nationalism – as noticeable among the yellow shirts and their attachment to summit. Essentially, modernity weakened the traditional bases of authority, though this was also connected to an elitist myth concerning “pre-modern stability and coherence” where there was once a “unity of art, feeling and communal relations”³⁶. It seems that middle-class urban Thais have a nostalgia for an imaginary rurality and its contentment where “in water there is fish, in fields there is rice” (following a Thai proverb) constituted before the disruptive effects of modernization, rationalism and urban industrialism³⁷. Pastoral nostalgia encouraged many urban born elites to recreate the conditions of rurality “here and now”.

These mediations have more recently torn aside established social relations (a flimsy fabric at best) competing for economic and political control of the nation-state. In the temporary appropriation of city-space by protesting mostly subaltern red shirts April-May 2010, Bangkok’s middle-classes referred to rural people through ridicule, implying as a lineal separation of rurality (low/base/commoners) from city/urban (high/summit/nobility) space; as if there were an imaginary demarcation around outer Bangkok. At one anti-red shirt rally, historian Thongchai Winichakul³⁸ noted a placard which read: “Rural Folks Get Out!” (phuakbaannok-orkpai) constructing a cultural barrier between the city space and that of the countryside. In early Chakri Bangkok it was easier to draw the line between town and country with the inscription of the city wall spatially demarcating the sacred–secular centre.

The domination of city-nation sanctity by the masses threatened the maintenance of existing spatial hierarchies. In one “high class” women’s magazine a highly derogatory comment was made in a letter referring to the red shirts as a group of “foot cleaning-rags” (phuak-phaachet-thao), implying that the rural masses should stay down under the elite’s feet³⁹. Most country people from the North and Northeast provinces residing in the metropolis are maids, taxi drivers, construction workers, security guards, small traders, and so on. In Thailand people are rewarded for compliance to the desires of the elites at the summit and not for innovation from the base. Edward Shils noted, reaffirming the central values of society, rulers/elites seek a universal acceptance and observance of the values and beliefs of which they are the custodians through virtues of descent and the charisma of office. Accordingly “they use their powers to punish those who deviate and to reward with their favour those who conform”⁴⁰. It “serves ‘baan-nok’ red shirts right to die”! Then, the elites simply turn away and deny that there was any violence at Raacha’prasong, referring their audience to source information such as ASTV-Manager propaganda. In this inward and ethno-centred elite logic, it is, after all, only the state doing what it has to do to control so-called “terrorists” working against the interests of the nation- monarchy.

³⁶ Bryan Turner, 1994, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, London: Routledge, p.120

³⁷ Turner, *op.cit.*, 1994, p.125

³⁸ *Op.cit. New Mandala*, May 3rd, 2010

³⁹ See Thai e-news,
http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_dMpI2XX8YYY/TAmLyJTNCQI/AAAAAAAAEnY/vB12qMQvzcA/s1600/27852_131538266858962_100000083698365_347024_7534968_n.jpg

⁴⁰ “Centre and periphery”, in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael Polanyi*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, p.124

As a condition of marginality, persons and places on the outside constitute the social periphery (phrai, or “commoner” spaces) and correspondingly produce counter-hegemonic discourses. These are expressed in particular social forms and practices, as in the “habits of being and the way one lives”⁴¹. The behaviour of millions of red shirts coming and going to the centre of city-nation; their uncouth appearance, simple manners, ethnic/provincial dialect, food choices, luuk-thung country music and language was noted in elite urban-centred gaze as offensive; while maintaining the focus on the appearance, the issues in the conflict were whitewashed, distorted by a corrupted civic media, or else completely ignored. Such was the frustration felt by the masses at the time.

In the red shirt social movement there is actually no unambiguous consciousness of class so much as individuated and shared sense of suffering, communality, but class must surely rise from the collective struggle acted out in the metropolis and framed by historical social hierarchies. As one poster displayed at the main red shirt protest site last year states the problem in a cultural framework of (socio-economic) “class war/conflict” (songkhram chonchan) under a picture of Democracy Monument in the heart of the city-nation with commoners (phrai) as farmers fighting lords (nai). This consciousness will eventually lead to the turning point of the masses as they perceive themselves as exploited in a relation to state, culture and capital and take to the streets in an irreversible democratic revolutionary march to conjoin the present and future.

The prevailing negative sentiment felt towards the red shirts by the city-nation is made good use of by the state; an attitude that was already in the minds of city people towards masses. After the arson of their beloved CW the state could move on red shirts with legitimated tenacity, without any fear of being criticised in the middleclass-elite media. Indeed, even in the follow up killings and incarcerations around the country. Many Bangkokians really don’t feel too bad about the massacre. It is a bit like the right of someone to shoot an intruder who breaks into their home space, but of course on a much larger scale.

The yellow-shirt front-line group PAD⁴² involvement in 2006 (ousting of Thaksin) and 2008 (ousting of Samak, and then Somchai) showed how the yellow movement can put pressure on the governing regime through an assembly of mostly Bangkok-dwelling people. Whenever the ruling regime needs Bangkok people’s support, legal or quasi-legal, it can count on it. Even the illegal coup on the 16 September 2006 was acceptable to well-to-do Bangkokians.

CONCLUSION: SO WHO GAINED FROM THE DESTRUCTION OF CW?

As new evidence comes to light and whistle-blowers start to come forward we are getting a picture of a well planned scheme initiated by state cunning and guile. In the arson of CW and the destruction of the iconic Zen Department store, I suggest that the only winner was the regime as a means of justifying its timely use of the epithet “terrorists” for red shirts and in its ongoing brutal response to the protesters and the pro-democracy movement in general.

⁴¹ see bell hooks, 1999, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, South End Press (later printing edition), p.149

⁴² so-called “People’s Alliance for Democracy” (*phanthamit-prachaachon-phue-prachaathipathai*)

No doubt insurance would have covered much of the destruction of CW brought down by skilled agents of the state. The people of Bangkok clearly remain intimidated by the pro-democracy movement and its implications for them and thus maintain silence on the extra-judicial violence and legal double standards, as does, sadly, civil society organisations including the National Human Rights Commission and the national media. All these civic elements know well that the regime conducts underhand activities and is engaged currently in massive and extensive corruption involving significantly its military partners that must be kept happy at all times. But for these non-state actors they feel it is better to be like the “three monkeys” that hear nothing, see nothing and say nothing.

The destruction of CW has to be understood from both perspectives: from that of the protestors who copped the blame and from its elite and middleclass shoppers and patrons. To many Bangkokians the strategic use of snipers and a military machine with war weapons against unarmed protestors leading to the death of 91 people can be seen as acceptable given the subsequent destruction to their estate which balanced out the equation. Shopping in the extensive mall and interior arcades will never be the same again and has been transformed from crass materialism to an act of patriotism. It is seen now as more a social responsibility or a moral act of regenerating or assisting the nation to recover from the problems of disruption to retail caused by the red shirts. As a sign in English says in front of CW: “Rebuilding Zen (Department Store), Loving Thailand: May this rebuilding bring peace and prosperity to Thailand, we must reconcile as we are one county...one people”.

The motto of the middleclass “I consume, therefore I am”; to the red shirts, “I want to have a voice, so that I too can equally and rightly consume”. I suggest that the destruction of CW was a masterly tactic at the time by the elite regime to reaffirm its iron grip and morally justify its control on society which was starting to slip away from them on that fateful period leading up to the crackdown 19 May 2010. In a final musing, I suggest that we should not forget those ordinary people who were killed in the city-nation and indeed, why they were killed.