

Democracy of the Desired: Everyday Politics and Political Aspiration in the Contemporary Thai Countryside

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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic case study of the “Community of Desire,” a village in the Northeast of Thailand, this study seeks to understand political dynamics and praxis in rural politics in order to explain the shift in rural Thailand’s political landscape. I argue that the recent transformation in Thailand’s rural society shows that it is better to consider rural trajectory as a politics of “agrarian desires” rather than a kind of diversified apprehension and resistance. These agrarian desires have been part of the ongoing transformation in rural society where communities and individuals are better engaged, and seek more to engage, with state development, market economy, and multiplicity of social connections in different scales. By looking at the dynamics and the emerging forms of politics and desires that transcend the rural-urban and local-national divides, I argue that the rural political agency has been transforming, at least over the past few decades, as demonstrated through the mundane expression of everyday politics. This transition—what I term the “politics of desire and entitlement”—takes place as rural people’s ideal and praxis have ceased to be satisfied by “self-subsistence” and traditional patron-client relations. This pivotal transition in rural Thailand is a result of the diversification of economic activities and social relations in the rural community. Amidst these changes, politics has turned into an important instrument in securing opportunities for self and community improvement. I discuss these findings and challenge the dual tracks that dominate the studies on Thailand’s rural political agency.

Introduction

This study seeks to understand political dynamics and praxis in rural politics in order to explain the shift in rural Thailand’s political landscape. In the broader context of Southeast Asia, rural transformation during the past several decades has created numerous forms of political expressions where individuals and communities struggle for their betterment and for the opportunities that modern society has to offer. Turner and Caouette (2009) argue that these transformations, in many parts of the region, have led to “agrarian angsts” against unjust consequences of such transitions,

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creating different forms of rural resistance. However, I argue that the recent transformation in Thailand's rural society shows that it is better to consider rural trajectory as a politics of "agrarian desires" rather than a kind of diversified apprehension and resistance. These agrarian desires have been part of the ongoing transformation in rural society where communities and individuals are better engaged—and seek greater engagement—with state development, market economy, and multiplicity of social connections in different scales.

Although I am reluctant to look at these rural expressions from a "resistance" perspective, I concur with Turner and Caouette (2009) that rural political expressions are multi-scalar, dynamic, and context-contingent, as well as agency-based. In this article, I focus on contemporary Thailand's rural political agency by looking at the dynamics of everyday politics and the emerging forms of desires that transcend the rural-urban and local-national divides. I first explore the transitions in rural societies, including political expressions of the rural people directly related to politics and election, along with other electioneering activities which may at first glance seem irrelevant to rural elections. Without a doubt the issue of election in Thailand, especially in the rural areas, has attracted great interest and generated an astounding number of studies as well as an array of recommendations and arguments over the years. However, the "cultural" perspective from an ethnographic case study in the Northeast of Thailand will prove to be quite a departure from the majority of previous researches on politics and election. In this paper, I discuss these findings and challenge the dual tracks that dominate the studies on Thailand's rural political agency.

"Culture" in Political Landscape

My argument is, in part, inspired by an intriguing argument presented by Chua Beng Huat and Pitch Pongsawat in *Elections as Popular Culture in Asia* (Huat 2007a). In that book's introduction, Chua contends that the "informed choice" model of elections is an attempt to separate the political sphere and its activities from the larger cultural environment in which elections take place. In this light, other electioneering activities that deviate from an ideal and desired forms of election, such as vote-buying and violence, become an anomaly—a fraudulent and undesirable act that should be eliminated from politics. That is because they interfere with an individual's voting decision-making leading one to make an irrational choice. For many political scientists, the ideal and desired type of election, in which a rational voting decision occurs, is when the public chooses the

“best” candidates to govern the country for a certain period of time until the next election. For these people, Haut concludes, election is ultimately supposed to be a set of “universalistic” practices that are carried out in a similar, orderly manner everywhere in the world (Chua 2007b, 2-3). To illustrate this point, Haut provides an example of an election process that has been described by Anderson (1996, 14) as a specific and simultaneously “peculiar activity”:

[O]ne joins a queue of people whom one does not typically know, to take a turn to enter a solitary space, where one pulls levers or marks pieces of paper, and then leaves the site with the same calm discretion with which one enters it—without questions being asked. It is almost the only political act imaginable in perfect solitude, and it is completely symbolic. It is thus almost the polar opposite of all other forms of personal political participation. Insofar as it has general meaning, it acquires this meaning only by mathematical aggregation.

In Chua’s view, the desire of conventional political scientists to separate a “universalized” politics of election from its cultural context is “practically unrealizable.” Election at its core concerns the masses, is participatory, and involves mobilization of people and support. Therefore, it is not possible to study election in isolation of the cultural context to which other agents belong. Rather, one must consider election in terms of local cultural practices (Chua 2007b, 3) in order to understand how election in each place and each case is evaluated by voters, and how elections serve as a reflection of voters’ desires.

Meanwhile, Pitch Pongsawat’s “Middle-class Ironic Electoral Cultural Practices in Thailand” (2007), an article published in a book edited by Chua, is a study of the 2006 national election in Thailand and its aftermath among the middle class. In the article, the election is observed through Pitch’s examination of the campaigns launched by the Election Commission on voting for good candidates, election regulations, understanding of democracy, and roles of the press and online expression. Reinforcing Chua’s argument, Pitch makes a case that conventional views on election, if used, will not yield satisfactory results or new insights into Thailand’s current transition and development of democracy because, according to these views, one’s voting behavior stands for the sum of an individual political decision.

On the other hand, there are election pundits pushing for an economics-based approach to investigate the voting behaviors of each group or class through historical, political, and economic structures. What is missing in their methodology is an explanation of how these structures have been reproduced or expressed in politics and election. To overcome these shortcomings, Pitch proposes that we see election as “popular cultural practices” where the main focus is shifted to observing how people in that particular society “practice and live” during the election process (Pitch 2007, 95). In other words, he is pointing to a need to surpass what he calls “crude western ethno-centric behavioralism” and “crude economic structural determination explanation” by adopting a new outlook and viewing election through the lens of popular cultural practices, where agents will receive more consideration (Pitch 2007, 98).

But what are “popular cultural practices” as well as the relations between election and popular cultural perspective and factors? Citing the cultural theory developed by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, Pitch suggests that

[Ordinary people] are not political and/or cultural dupes, nor merely bearers of structural forces that structurally interpolate them. Elections thus become popular cultural practices that people act out and fight with various forces that try to fix certain meanings, worldviews, and power relation upon them, on the one hand, and somehow unintentionally and actively reproduce the whole complex structure of dominance, on the other. (Pitch 2007, 98)

In this regard, Pitch is pointing out that election is an interactive space in which different forces or power-holders come into contact and fight. However, power, both the structural forces and those wielded by authoritative figures in the political system—for example, the state and government officials, politicians, the election commission, the press, political capital, local influences and the middle class—does not hold absolute authority over the construction of meanings or configuration of relationships between these figures and voters. Voters, seen as agents, have the capacity to act out and negotiate with various forces interfering in an election. Clearly, the “fixing” of power and relationships does not only take place during election campaigns and voting periods, but also includes mundane cultural occurrences in ordinary people’s everyday life. The cultural practices may occur when voters intentionally get involved in

configuring the relationships and the overarching structures or may take place beyond the control and intent of these agents. So far, the incorporation of these untidy and complex relations and dynamic structures as the context of politics and election into an analysis has drawn little attention from political scientists and political enthusiasts. One of the reasons for this may be that the concept resists being neatly summed up and developed into a hypothesis and an established theory. At the same time, the collection of numerical evidence or development of a model for universal election will prove to be a challenging task. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the study of cultural practices in politics and election cannot only be done by observing voters during a short specific period of time. The expression of popular cultural practices appear in the most ordinary, everyday level of existence and are interwoven into other aspects of cultural practices, from identity and social outlook to notions of justice, as well as pursuit of opportunities and self-development in accordance with each individual's aspirations and desires.

If we consider politics (in the broad and narrow sense of the word) and election as a form of structure and technique that shapes the way people live in society, politics and election cannot be separated from the local cultural context in which they are situated. As such, the study of changes in the landscape of Thai politics becomes an exploration of practices and reconfigurations of cultural relationships that influence people's perceptions and attitude toward the political landscape and the benefits, opportunities, or channels available to them within the political landscape. From this perspective, the goal of studying politics and election will not be to create a structure of relations or produce explanations or techniques that look the same from every angle. Rather, we will seek to understand within each contingency how agents choose to utilize, strategize, and reorganize various forces in the political structure and during elections. Certainly, this is the time for us to leave behind old narratives of politics and move beyond attempts to suppress and universalize the understanding of election and "good" representatives. More importantly, we should overcome the propensity to reduce election to *apolitical* and *acultural* practices of individuals. Dynamic and unpredictable, the political landscape and elections in popular cultural praxis occurs in everyday contexts of localized relations and are anything but objectively given relations.

Urban Myths and the Great Divide of Rural Politics

One of the urban myths that act as a major obstacle to understanding Thailand's political transformation over the past several years is the myth about vote buying. The widespread vote buying in rural areas is seen as being a malicious disease that has impaired the maturation of democracy in Thailand. To this day newspapers and other media continue to perpetuate the well-worn narrative of villagers readily selling their votes—as if their political rights are the last possession they have—to trade for a small amount of cash that will sustain their life for a few more days. Likewise, when asked to explain the root causes of widespread and rampant vote buying, state officials, scholars, independent organizations such as the Election Commission, or any concerned persons involved in the elections and polls often resort to a superficial interpretation. They blame vote buying on rural poverty, inertia, gullibility in the face of politicians and power, and dependence on patronage (see LoGerfo 1996 and Suchit 1996). One example is an interview with Somchai Srisuttiyakorn, now a key member of the Election Commission of Thailand, which appeared in the *Thairath* newspaper on 20 June 2011:

For people in rural areas, such a small amount of money is considered valuable because normally they do not have a job or any incomes. They stay home, raise their grandchildren, and just wait for their children who work in the city to send money home...If they are given money, even 100-200 Baht, they will accept it. It's better than receiving nothing.

This discourse has remained constant and permeated the press and public consciousness, particularly when explaining rural people's participation in politics during recent years. Over time it has practically been used as a cautionary tale of stupidity, poverty, and pain of rural voters (Prajak 2009) and has served as reassurance to the Thai middle class who continue to perceive themselves as being democratically superior in comparison to their rural counterparts (LoGerfo 1996). This myth, which originated from the rural vote-buying narrative, has gone on to undermine the value of rural votes as well as create a perception about rural people being democratically immoral, easily manipulated by political parties, and maneuvered into participating in political movements.¹ However, the adoption of this superficial view—of “no money, no votes” or rural gullibility—will only weaken our understanding of localized politics and prevent us from fully grasping all aspects of cultural politics in rural areas.

Here, a case study from the “Community of Desire,” a village in the Northeast of Thailand, is employed to depict everyday politics in rural areas in which the mechanism and relations are far too complex to be studied through the scope of electoral analysis alone. In addition, as a response to a substantial body of research conducted in the field of rural politics—which focuses on analyzing the political agency of rural people through social movements, particularly in relation to government resource management and the effects of state development projects—I argue that everyday politics is one of the key approaches that should be taken seriously in the analysis of the shift and transformation in the political consciousness and literacy of rural people, as well as the arguments of rural people’s political praxis today.

I argue that the rural political agency has been transforming, at least over the past few decades, as demonstrated through the mundane expression of everyday politics. This transition—what I term the “politics of desire and entitlement”—takes place as rural people’s ideal and praxis have ceased to be satisfied by “self-subsistence” and traditional patron-client relations. While in the past, traditional patron-client relations had provided security and social safety nets for farmers who faced many risks in subsistence farming, politics in rural areas has undergone a drastic transformation. This is evidenced by livelihood activities and the development of rural people in recent years. These changes in political expression can be found in rural people’s voting behaviors, the reconfiguration of self in the process of vote buying, and the display of personal preference for different political party policies. The pivotal transition in rural Thailand is a result of diversification of economic activities and social relations in the rural community. Amidst these changes, politics has turned into an important instrument in securing opportunities for self and community improvement. In other words, political expression of rural people over the past few decades has become a reflection of recognition, of entitlement, and benefits to which they “aspire.” In a time when rural places have been modernized to be no different from any other places in the globalized world, my aim is to seek to enhance our understanding of rural people’s political praxis by bringing an additional perspective focusing on “desire” and “aspiration,”² and adding new layers to the existing conversation that has so far been monopolized by the two ultimate points of analysis: elections and social movements.

Dual-Track Studies on Thailand's Rural Politics: Election and Social Movement

In most studies on Thailand's rural politics, the political agency of rural people is often seen through their participation in the parliamentary-based electoral system and social relations tied to representative democracy. Examples of this group of works can be found in numerous studies on election. These range either from a broad overview of the electoral process—beginning with assessing government performance prior to election, political parties, campaign issues and canvassing, vote buying and voting, and election results and formation of a new government (Murray 1996)—or studies on social capital and corruption (Calahan 2005a, Pasuk and Sungsidh 1994), vote-buying (Calahan 2005b, Calahan and McCargo 1996), and vote-canvassing networks (Anyarat 2010). In some cases they go back much further to explore issues such as the patron-client system (Amara and Preecha 2000), leadership, identity, and networks of politicians (Nishizaki 2001, Ockey 1996 and 2004, Pasuk and Baker 2009). In addition, later works include those that perceive rural voters as an electoral support base (Anek 2009) or part of mafia/local mobster networks (Viengrat 2003, Ockey 2004, Robertson Jr. 1996, Sombat 2000). There have also been attempts to understand changes in rural areas brought about by decentralization (Viengrat 2008), migrant workers and migration (Keyes 2010), and transformations in community economy and farm industry (Rigg 1998). More recent studies focus on changes in rural Thailand in the populist and post-Thaksin era through observing shifts in rural perceptions, e.g., from traveling experiences and reception of information (Pattana 2011), participation in the Red Shirt movement (Chairat 2010, Naruemon and McCargo 2011, Sopranzetti 2012a), to much more recent analyses about renewed interest in the unwaning populist policy during the latest election.

Principally conducted by political scientists, rural sociologists, and political anthropologists,³ most of these works attempt to establish connections within the scope of electoral politics, leaping back and forth from social relations to institutions to structures, searching for clues and explanations. Despite their efforts to diversify their analysis and find different ways to situate rural people in the political context, one common denominator remains unchanged: their use of social relations formed around the electoral system as the basis to identify and figure out factors that, for instance, can influence candidates' chances, affect policy development among political parties, explain vote buying, and determine the legitimacy of elected government. In simpler terms, these studies, while looking at

dynamism of rural socioeconomic factors in political relations, are still based on their locus of a structure-based, electoral kind of politics.

Following their analyses of socioeconomic factors surrounding electoral politics has led these studies of “representative democracy” to reach two different conclusions. The first group, other than insisting on rural backwardness and attributing Thailand’s democratic stagnation to the rural areas, calls into question the maturity of rural voters, deeming their votes illegitimate. In their view, the rural electorate is uneducated or that the votes cast are simply being traded in exchange for short-term benefits, either as part of money politics or the patron-client system. One prominent work in this group is by Anek Laothamatas (2009). In his work, the political divide in Thailand is explained as a tale of “two democracies” between the urban middle class, who are policy-based voters, and the rural people, who are the electoral base. In addition to producing and setting in motion one prevailing argument used to explain Thailand’s political phenomenon in recent decades, from these studies emerged the view that vote-buying and patron-client system in rural areas are the major stumbling block to political reforms in Thailand. Nonetheless, neither “two democracies” nor money politics in rural Thailand are completely new or unique phenomena. Anek points out that patron-client relations and vote-buying in rural areas are “closely linked to the patron-client system developed in the traditional agricultural society”, and continue to “interact and fight with other new phenomena, which are the by-product of Thailand’s transition to a modern industrialized society” (Anek 2009, 23). The proposition of “interaction,” coined by Anek, is an interesting point that touches on the shift in consciousness and political praxis in modern rural society. Regrettably, he did not venture to clarify what he meant by “new phenomena” and how the interaction led to the shift in rural consciousness.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the coin are groups of academics who attempt to provide a new outlook by emphasizing the complexity of the election process and political participation in rural areas. Rather than seeing the rural electorate as being politically backward, they argue that rural election and political participation are too complex to be seen from a point of view of the middle class that is set on condemning rural people for selling their votes. Recent studies in this latter group suggest that there is a need to utilize the knowledge base in cultures as well as consider economic changes and transformation of rural livelihoods and consumption in order to investigate how the political identity and self-perception of rural people in relation to other groups in society have been influenced by

these factors (Apichart et al. 2010, Askew 2008, Connors 2007, Ockey 2004).

Therefore, apart from focusing on the rural electorate at national and local polls, the studies in this group also return to re-examine the classic argument about rural vote buying and challenge the concept of two democracies (see Anyarat 2010). Along with new suggestions about villagers' interest in political party policies, the most recent argument that has been put forth by this group is the issue of improved economic status in rural areas and global villagers. As a whole, we may classify this group as the school of "new agrarian transformation" (Apichart et al. 2010, Keyes 2010, Pattana 2011). Recurring themes from their recent works demonstrate an attempt to reclaim legitimacy of the rural votes and acknowledge rising levels of political participation among rural populations to being on par with their urban counterparts. Underscoring rural enthusiasm and participation in politics, this group of works attempt to develop new explanations for rural Thailand and its new social class that is growing out of its agrarian roots, and for rural people's political participation, which has moved into the same economic and social spheres occupied by the urban middle class. This interpretation is different from the first group's argument of urban-rural political polarization and the great "two democracies" divide.

Despite new developments and compelling arguments generated by this group of works, their explanations for political enthusiasm among rural villagers are not a far cry from those maintained by the previous group. Both of their analyses on rural people's political expression is restricted to the sphere of parliamentary-based, electoral politics. In addition to these two schools of rural politics, there is another group that views politics as being untied and not limited to representative democracy and election. For this group, politics exists in every space in which allocation of power and resources is in conflict and disagreement or when uses of authority are considered illegitimate and affect the lives of the general public, particularly the rural poor. The conflicts, arising from abuse of state authority, become the main trigger prompting rural villagers to demand and exercise their political rights by protesting against public policies or the implementation of those policies that cause disruption to their community, natural resources, and community culture. On the whole, villagers' demonstrations are counted as part of "civil politics," and their political expression as a new social process/movement born to fight back against use of power, policy, and especially state development projects that upset their livelihoods, economy, resources, and socio-cultural relations

(Chairat 2002, Pasuk et al. 2002, Prapas 2009). In part, this type of portrayal of rural civic awareness may have been fueled by the involvement of academics and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, particularly the groups who are supportive of community cultures and rights; and vocal in issues such as land, forests, rivers, and agriculture (Chatthip 2010, Prapas 1998, Yos 2003, Anan 2001).

According to studies done by these academics and development organizations, it is the effects of state development projects on rural communities that bring about rural adjustment and new modes of negotiation/struggle in the forms of farmers' networks, networks of the poor, or groups of people affected by development initiatives, for example. One of the strategies adopted by these groups and networks in calling for justice is public demonstrations,⁴ which, apart from being held in the areas affected by the development, also spread to provincial halls, the streets, and outside parliament. Furthermore, in addition to making demands, picketing, or submitting a letter to responsible agencies, there are "cultural" demonstrations such as forest ordination, performance of a river life extending ceremony, and other land rites and rituals designed to represent the villagers' bonds with resource bases and community culture. In this sense, the villagers's expression of their political identity through demonstration is altogether physical, verbal, and symbolic (Chairat 2002, Prapas 2009, Somchai 2006, Missingham 2003). It is worth noting that in most studies about demonstrations of rural villagers, the relationship between the villagers and authority of the state is often portrayed as hostile and adversarial, showing state interventions invading and crushing people's rights, cultures, and traditional moral economy. In this way, if the villagers do not stand up and push back, the ultimate result may be the eventual collapse of local community and ruralness. Put simply, according to this second group's view, a very important clue to help in the unraveling of rural Thai politics and its development is the understanding of villagers' political expression or civil politics.

To briefly summarize what I have discussed thus far, previous studies of rural people's political expression over the years can be categorized into two factions, with the first group directing their attention to *representative* politics and the second group adopting a *civil* politics standpoint. For the first group, their main argument centers on whether rural people have the capacity to be competent members in an electoral democracy and which social, economic, and political factors are obstacles or key to rural Thailand's progression to the desired state of representative democracy. The rural areas, in this regard, become merely a part that is latched onto the state

and capitalism, marching alongside government-led economic and political development and policy. Throughout the years, there is hardly any discussion that focuses on rural electorate “voting no” and rejecting government. As such, the arguments produced by this group remain anchored in and restricted to an analysis of rural election in the framework of institutional politics. Meanwhile, the proposed argument from the second group, whose view is based on civil politics, indicates that the political movement of rural people, more often than not, is a crusade against state authority and impotent representative democracy. The second group perceives rural society to be more tied to and dependent on ecological resources and customary social order rather than on patron-client relationships between rural people and politicians, and influential local businesses. In seeing rural areas as a harmonious and stable village society, outside forces—specifically, the state, corrupted politicians, and vicious capitalism—become threats that will annihilate subsistence agriculture and community stability. In this respect, the underlying objective of rural people’s political expression is then to safeguard their community rights from external interventions.

The Concept of “Everyday Political Praxis”

By and large, both types of studies on rural politics discussed above are extremely valuable to developing an understanding of social phenomena and rural politics in Thailand. In these scholarly works, the dynamic nature of rural political agency is addressed and acknowledged through monitoring and analyzing the constantly changing economic, political, and social dynamics in rural areas. However, due to their inclination to view rural community and rural people as one being co-existing in harmony and sharing one voice in expressing their political views and praxes, these studies come to see rural society as free from any internal conflict. Conversely, the argument proposed here is that at present, the political life of rural people has already transcended the boundary of representative and civil politics, rendering them both insufficient and inadequate. As such, in addition to observing significant political milestones such as elections and social movements, occurrences in the everyday life of rural people must also be considered.

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, a political scientist whose academic interest is in peasant society in Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam (2002, 2005), has suggested that we take into account the mundane and informal political phenomena in rural society instead of

simply concentrating on official politics and advocacy politics. By “politics,” Kerkvliet is referring to Harold Lasswell’s (1958) pithy definition of the word—it is about who gets what, when, and how. In other words, politics revolves around “the control, allocation, production, and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities” (Kerkvliet 2009, 227). When using this definition as a theoretical base for political analysis we will immediately grasp that politics is indeed everywhere and is not tied to any public institution, government or political grouping. As previously discussed, studies on electoral and advocacy politics are generally fixated on who gets what, when, and how in activities that are related to the state and its policy, politicians, eligible electorate, development organizations, and other interest groups. In the battle for political power and influence, changes and transformation in rural people’s political roles and their relations to rationality, ways of life and aspiration may have, at times, gone unnoticed or may not be recognized or understood.⁵

Kerkvliet’s framework of everyday politics focuses on how “people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources” and “doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organized or direct” (Kerkvliet 2009, 232). Put another way, the study of everyday politics zeroes in on other praxis that occurs outside the political structure and come in many forms other than interest groups being backed by development organizations or civil networks. Everyday political praxis includes seemingly uninteresting or mundane behaviors, which at times even agents who perform them may not be consciously aware. From support and compliance, adjustment, modification, or avoidance, to everyday resistance such as hostility, resentment, ridicule, gossiping, or being uncooperative—these are only a few examples of the many modes and outcomes of everyday political praxis (Scott 1985, Walker 2008).

Despite receiving little attention from political scientists—not to mention very unlikely to be featured or discussed by newspapers or other types of media where coverage on rural politics remains dominated by the subject of vote buying—there are at least two benefits from observing the everyday political praxis of rural people. First, it shows that rural villagers do not readily accept or succumb to exploitation, subordination, authoritarianism, or any lack they are experiencing.⁶ Instead, they always attempt to negotiate, create options, and configure new relationships, defining who should get what, when, and how, or how resources should be produced, allocated, and used (Kerkvliet 2009, 234). Second, this

approach may serve as a path to decoding the “desire/aspiration” and “politics of desire and entitlement” of the rural people. In the next section, the concept of rural desire and entitlement will be further explored through the eyes of the villagers living in the Community of Desire to illustrate how everyday politics can serve as a portrait of rural people’s political agency.

I chose the Community of Desire as my case study for three reasons. First of all, it is a typical rural community in Thailand in terms of economy. Most rural communities in Thailand are now middle-income communities (Walker 2012). The people in the Community of Desire are largely farmers, but they have also diversified their incomes based on multiple economic activities both in and outside agriculture. This is similar to other rural communities in Thailand, where market economy and state-based development have been part of the livelihood for the past few decades.

Secondly, the Community of Desire is a rural space where the political ideologies are multi-faceted and the domination of NGOs’ anti-development discourse is not well at work. Here, the villagers are exposed to different opinions in terms of government policies, political parties, as well as having different criteria in electing candidates for political positions at different levels. The complexity of political opinion is also not dominated by the narrow ideology of some advocacy NGOs in the country, which see state development as an intrusion to community culture and resilience. In other words, we can observe a wide range of political expression in the community where there is no single paradigm dominating the voice of the others.

And lastly, while I will not claim that the Community of Desire can represent every rural community in Thailand, it can be a good mirror, reflecting and making criticism toward the urban-based discourse and mainstream political science studies that look at rural politics based crudely on behavioural aspects of the rural populace. What the Community of Desire can offer here, which is not different from others rural communities in Thailand, is a case study for showing how everyday politics and political aspirations have played a key role in shaping local political cultures, political institutions, as well as electoral based policies at the national levels.

The Modern Thai Rural Capitalism

Since the mid-1980s, the mode of production in the Community of Desire has been influenced by the arrival of new commercial crops. Villagers—who in the past mainly grew rice and a few other commercial crops such

as jute, cassava, peanut, eucalyptus and corn—began to try planting rubber. Although there were some villagers who had moved to the south to work in rubber plantations during the early 1980s, the purpose of such journeys was to become laborers rather than farm entrepreneurs in commercial agriculture themselves. After spending some years tapping rubber trees in the South, Uncle Somsri and Aunt Banjong were one of the first people in the village who brought back rubber seedlings and started rubber planting in the Community of Desire. At that time they each bought 400 seedlings for 25 satang a piece. Within a few years, they realized that returns from rubber farming were good and the risks lower than other cash crops in rotation. Still, these pioneers of rubber farming were saddled with high costs because they could not sell their rubber to the local marketplace. With only a small number of growers in the community, the rubber farmers had little negotiating power and limited access to obtain technical support from the government.

In 1996, the Office of the Rubber Plantation Supporting Fund (ORPSF) was set up in Ubon Ratchathani province. Projects to support rubber cultivation were launched and implemented in many areas of Ubon Ratchathani as well as the neighboring provinces. During that time, there were many villagers who heard the news about the supporting fund while listening to a radio program hosted by *ajarn* Thaworn, a provincial agriculture academic. Uncle Wan, one of farmers in the Community of Desire, who had an interest in starting rubber farming, recounted his feeling at that time:

I knew that Uncle Somsri and Uncle Kamphao had gone on a study tour to see how rubber was tapped and traded. They made it into raw sheets and sold each one for 18 Baht and I thought, ah, that's 30,000-40,000 Baht per batch. I was already wavering. When I heard *ajarn* Thaworn announce on the radio that anyone who had 5-10 *rai*⁷ of unused plots could apply for rubber plantation aid, I leapt on my bike and rushed to see him. The *ajarn* asked if I wanted to grow rubber and I asked him to help take me to the Office [ORPSF] and inquired about where it was. Then he said he'd take me there and that was what he did.

Uncle Wan is an example of rural villagers bursting with desire and aspiration, always willing to take chances, and likes to learn and acquire new knowledge. When he arrived at ORPSF, an official told him to prepare and get all the required documents for the aid application, as well

as help spread the news and persuade other villagers to form a group in order to apply for the support:

He told me to go back home, get seven to eight persons to sign up, and come in groups because the agency required us to work together as a team. And when they handed out seedlings, funds, and fertilizers, they wanted to do it in one day. I brought the project document home and started asking people around. They just laughed and said that why would anyone want to grow rubber. Where would they sell it [they asked,] and then they brought up Uncle Somsri's case. He was selling his for 10-20 Baht a kilo. The other villagers said that there wasn't a market for rubber and I replied, "whatever, it'd get better." Of course, that last part I was saying it to myself. Still, I begged them saying that we just needed five to seven to make up a team like when they were looking for people to grow eucalyptus. Back then it was the eucalyptus boom so people just wondered why would they ever want to grow rubber since eucalyptus buyers were knocking on their doors everyday. Fortunately, I was able to convince eight people to join me and we went straight to the Office.

In 1997, in addition to his *50-rai* rice farm, Uncle Wan started growing rubber on his land and the total number of his ORPSF rubber group was thirteen. In 2002, rubber prices had gone up to 30-40 Baht. More farmers in the village became interested in rubber cultivation. By that time Uncle Wan was already in his fifth year of rubber planting and was approached by the head of Ubon Ratchathani's ORPSF to be the leader of the rubber group, and sent to learn rubber cultivation and production methods from seedling, breeding to budding, and fertilizer application in the province as well as in Bangkok and other provinces in the southern and eastern regions. The new farming techniques captured Uncle Wan's attention and he tried to write down everything he learned. He brought the training materials home and pored over them again and again. In the past, whenever Uncle Wan encountered a problem about rubber planting, he would ride his motorcycle to the city center to seek advice directly from the ORPSF head or any officials there.

It had been fifteen years since Uncle Wan first began growing rubber. The experiences and knowledge he had gained from his own rubber farming and attending trainings in many places prompted the village abbot to ask him to host a radio show at the station housed at the village temple. On the

radio show Uncle Wan was to play music and share his knowledge with other farmers about rubber farming. During a few of his earlier broadcasts there were some hiccups as Uncle Wan was still not used to speaking on air. Later, to inspire his audience, he started telling his personal journey as well as his stories of determination and willpower to learn and take chances in rubber farming. Soon, more listeners began phoning in to ask questions and discuss problems about rubber farming with Uncle Wan. This motivated him to keep searching for answers and applying his own experiences to respond to his audience's inquiries. Apart from being broadcasted on the community radio station, Uncle Wan's show could also be listened to online, which meant that the audience of his show was not limited to only local listeners in the community. Uncle Wan revealed that he had received calls from farmers in Kanchanaburi and Taiwan. These listeners were laborers who had left home for work but hoped that one day they could return to their hometown and grow rubber to generate income for themselves and their families. His radio program's popularity grew and finally attracted a number of sponsors who wanted to help fund the show:

Now, we have sponsors like Thai Kanueng Sangkaphant, which sells all kinds of monk supply, some farm produce stores, and a couple of fungicide, organic and bio fertilizer shops. A police captain in another district also came to meet me in person after listening to the show. He comes every month to give me 1,000 Baht as sponsorship. A few building material businesses and even silk stores are also the show's sponsors.

Uncle Wan is the epitome of the modern rural farmer. He has turned to cash cropping—growing rubber—and joined a state agency's project with ORPSF. He started a network of rubber planters, hosts a community radio show, and has built a base of support among state officials and local businesses. All of this reflects how modern rural villagers choose to place themselves where they can draw support and benefits from other actors surrounding them. Forging connections serves as a significant political practice that makes it possible for villagers to link and make use of multiple channels of social and economic power as well as capital to raise their quality of life. In one respect, some scholars may consider the connections of these social and economic power and capital networks as a kind of "patronage" or "dependency" (Amara and Preecha 2000), and ultimately mark it a major obstacle to the development of democracy in rural Thailand. However, I would argue that the practice is a way of making an investment and building social capital. Without a doubt, by connecting

oneself to the system or rules, villagers are tying themselves to the state, the market, and multiple patrons that essentially can pose risks, require reciprocation, and may lead to forsaking their traditional resource base. An example of this would be converting rice farms to rubber plantation and shifting from subsistence farming to cash crop production. Nevertheless, connecting oneself to sources of power and investment in this mode of production is a thought-out deliberate practice that at its core underscores calculation, struggle, and most certainly desire and aspiration.

As we come to consider this common practice a type of social investment, what follows is an understanding that rural villagers would have an “expectation,” a product of their investment and risk management in choosing to attach themselves to these different actors. This expectation is the key ingredient in transforming political landscapes and relationships in rural society. Surely, structural economic and social changes in past decades have truly helped to accommodate the construction of new rural identities (Apichart et al 2011, Pitch 2003, Walker 2012, Yos 2003) but at ground level, certain movements are often overlooked in the dominant discourse by political scientists. Each actor has an expectation of each other in the increasingly overlapping plane of relationships. The dynamics is local but at the same time has transcended beyond it. Ultimately, these expectations become major determinants of political changes. Aspects of desire and expectation are projected and expressed differently at different levels of authorities and political relationships. One of the forms taken is reflected in their different expectations placed upon the candidates standing for different elections at the local, district, and national levels (Jakkrit 2011).

Hidden “Desire” in Capital and Everyday Politics

As the community’s livelihoods transformed over recent years, Uncle Wan, was keen to express his desire and the expectation he had of other actors in his community. Nowadays, in addition to rubber, Uncle Wan continues to grow rice and cashew as well as host the community radio program on rubber cultivation. He is also a “rubber doctor,” working with ORPSF as a trainer to help other rubber-growing farmers who live in different areas. With increasing commitments, Uncle Wan wished to buy a pickup truck so that he could travel for work and transport ribbed rubber sheets faster and more conveniently. He described the day he went to buy the pickup truck at a car dealer in the city center of Ubon Ratchathani province:

I rode my bike to the dealer. I was wearing shorts that day. The salesmen teased me and said, “Uncle, what are you doing here?” because they saw me wearing shorts and a faded black long-sleeved shirt. They must have thought that I’m just a poor farmer. Then one of them said, “Old man, are you here to buy a truck or what? Go park over there. Over there.” That was what one of them said. So I parked my bike. But that guy just sat there near the trucks on display, he didn’t bother to ask me why I was there. Then another salesman came. He walked by and grabbed my arm to ask me why I was there, if I planned to buy a truck, and if I was being serious. I told him to show me the models and colors they had. Even then he still didn’t believe me and I had to repeat myself again that yes, I was there because I wanted to get a truck. Finally, he began showing me around. The first truck he showed me was [an] Isuzu Platinum, the second one was [an] Isuzu something but I didn’t like the color and then there was another one, [a] Highlander.

Contented after having inquired all the truck specifications, prices, promotions, and payment options, Uncle Wan decided to get the Isuzu D-max model from the salesperson.

I said I’d get that one and he put a red license plate on the truck. Just then my daughter called to ask if I had already seen the trucks. I told her that I already did and she replied that she was at the bank, not far from the dealer. All that time the first salesman kept eyeing me, probably still wondering if this old man was really going to buy the truck. The moment he saw my son, my daughter, and son-in-law walking in that salesman dashed right to them and said, “Sis, are you here to buy a truck or to pay the monthly installment?” When my daughter answered that she’s there to get a truck, he said, “Oh, Let me help you with that, Sis,” and kept touching her arm. So my daughter told him that her Uncle had already reserved one, just a short while ago. He then asked her which one she meant and she pointed right at me. That guy was stunned. The one that took care of me got the commission but that other guy who totally ignored me had to sit and watch from afar. Talk about bad luck at nine in the morning.

The indignation, resentment, and dissatisfaction with this kind of treatment as well as social rejection Uncle Wan experienced from the interaction on that day served as a critical catalyst in building up bitterness

and exasperation and leading to the recognition of his entitlement in modern Thai political society. Put another way, everyday politics of the modern rural Thais is no longer the politics of resistance or struggle against state authority (Walker 2012). Neither does it oppose commercial farming, the market, capitalism, nor creeping technological advances. Rather, it has turned into a politics of securing recognition and access to sources of capital and power, and expectation for equal treatment warranted to any individual in a democratic society. The structural change and a rise in levels of incomes and livelihood diversification in rural areas in addition to Uncle Wan's ability to link himself to different entities of power—from state agencies to local capitalists as well as the media and wider network of farmers—has played a part in shaping the worldview, perception, self identity and new needs in rural society. Still, everyday politics is not limited to structures, channels, and responses concerning physical needs. It is a politics of relationships and how relationships are managed in order to secure wider social recognition in society.

Uncle Wan's story is an example that clearly illustrates the social friction between the urban middle class and rural villagers who are able to improve their livelihoods and standard of living in pursuit of opportunities and means to improve their lives. The confidence in one's potential for self development and the need to be socially recognized and respected are the crux of everyday politics—it is what is yearned by rural people. Being recognized for one's potential and showing and receiving respect and social acceptance carries a much larger implication and is not only concerned with construction of identity, self positioning, and relationships in modern society. More importantly, it is the beginning of the political recognition of the rural. Social expression that exemplifies or is the manifestation of political recognition remains a seldom-discussed issue. One reason for this is that it is difficult to analyze and explain this particular issue by using any of the popular frameworks in political science. In reality, an understanding the link between the pursuit of political recognition and social practices is the key to revealing one of the most crucial areas in rural political practices—vote buying, a practice that prevails in the rural Thai election system until today.

Electoral Capitalism and Politics of Recognition/Entitlement

When politics is a pursuit driven by desire and aspiration, a study of politics has to extend beyond investigating merely “behavior”—it must involve a study of “practice” (Prajak 2009), examining how people in society

construct and give meanings to each of their actions. In an article by Yukti (2012) on the relationship between money and election, he argues that money is no longer a decisive factor that can determine rural elections and proceeded to explain the new “meaning” of money in rural election, which is quite a departure from the dominant discourse on vote buying. Yukti challenges our understanding of vote buying and asks us to consider money not to be a currency used in ordinary exchange or transaction, but a gift, and simply one of the factors that is socially bounded, which at times may not have the full power to buy villagers’ votes or support, and in many cases is viewed to be of lesser value than community ties (Yukti 2012). In this essay, I would like to look at some of the issues raised by Yukti and further explore his argument on the construction of “meaning” and what money in election comes to represent in rural politics. However, before delving into analysis, I would like us to revisit the Community of Desire to hear from the voices of rural villagers and observe the cultural context in which meanings are constructed.

Both before and during the July 2011 general election campaign, villagers in the Community of Desire had been approached to attend “seminars” organized by the political parties. In these “seminars,” villagers listened to campaign policies and accomplishments, joined study tours in other provinces, gathered information on community development, and received travel allowances for various social functions held in important venues or at fancy hotels in the province. In my interview with Mother Buasai, a member of a housewives group, she said,

Since the beginning of the year, all the parties had started mobilizing the mass and tapping into their networks to gain the upper hand. For example, the Democrat Party focused on sufficiency economy while Pheu Thai Party got ten to twenty villagers from each village to join their training on organic farming. Mostly, they would reach out to village headmen and their networks of canvassers to help recruit attendees. We already had that training on seedling propagation at the start of the year. Really, it was just pretend. The training wasn’t to help improve farming or get real results. It’s the type of training where they give us 300 Baht each for our ride home. It’s all hidden and disguised.

Villagers of the Community of Desire were fully aware that while the money they received was a gift to compensate for their time and travel expenses, the true purpose of the activity was a veiled attempt of the political parties to campaign via a new form of “vote buying.” Nevertheless,

an economic shift in the Community of Desire or the villagers' political perception, which has been completely altered by state administration in the past decades, now frames their electoral decision making, i.e., as regards which political party they would support. A shallow understanding of vote buying—often employed to make a sweeping conclusion that vote buying is the only deciding factor in securing election victories in the northeast—cannot produce a full and accurate picture of rural people. As we can see from the residents of the Community of Desire, to some degree, their decisions to give trust and their votes for the representatives at different levels of government were connected by the complex relationships and underscored their concern with everyday security. By taking into account all aspects of the issue, it can be said that this type of political decisions are a reflection of rural people's rationale, i.e., how they weigh the benefits, rights, recognition, and opportunities to obtain access to resources in a context that is beyond an occasional transaction or gift.

Besides participation in seminars and activities organized by the political parties, another strategy to secure votes is giving cash to villagers through canvassing networks. However, to assume that cash payment is an attempt of mass vote buying would be an oversimplification, as money distribution in the Community of Desire is not a blanket political strategy but a validation of a system in which political recognition holds great value, as explained by one of the canvassers:

Using “flat rate” vote buying is not really effective. It's easy because you just have to check the number of eligible voters in a house registration and multiply it with the amount set per person. For example, if the rate is 300 Baht per person and there are three members in the family that's 900 Baht in total. But here the common practice of vote buying isn't like that. Canvassers have to go through the area to find out who and how much should be paid. Some households have the same number of eligible voters but each would receive a different amount. Mostly, we give the money to people we know personally and individually. But more important, each canvasser may work for more than one politician at the same time because he or she is well-connected.

Instead of winning votes in the Community of Desire, flat-rate vote buying will likely cause more problems for the candidates as this form of vote buying fails to acknowledge the status and value of individual villagers. On the other hand, nonlinear-rate vote buying through networks of canvassers who have personal relationships with the villagers is perceived

as an acknowledgement and recognition of each individual villager. The money given to each person will need to be at a rate that the receiver is satisfied with, a rate that may depend on personal economic and social status, level of closeness, professional responsibility, as well as number of family members. As most of the voters receive money from nearly all of the candidates, an extremely crucial part to win over their support lies in the canvassers' calculation of a suitable rate for each person. For the villagers to come to a decision they would not only consider the amount of money they receive. More important is whether the money reflects acceptance of the individual value and shows an understanding of the village's social landscape.

Politically, the Community of Desire is relatively diverse and their voting decisions at different electoral levels are hard to predict. Once, during the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) election ahead of the general poll, a party was tipped to secure the highest votes in the village. One of the two leading candidates in the TAO election was a member of a large political party that since its inception had been the most popular choice. The other leading candidate was a provincial politician from a medium-sized party who was also a relative of a national politician. This provincial election was very important for both parties as it served as part of their efforts to vie for local support and gain control over a portion of state officials, in preparation for the upcoming national election. As such, both candidates' strategy was to use their parties' policies, which had been popular and effective in the past, as well as give money to villagers who attended seminars and meetings. Compared side by side, the candidate from a large party appeared to have an edge over another candidate as his party had a proven track record in winning over voters with its crowd-pleasing populist policies as well as the fact that he offered more seminar allowances—200-300 Baht higher than his opponent's rate. But when the election result came, the exact opposite happened. The provincial politician from the medium-sized party, which had a stronghold in the province where the Community of Desire was situated, won the election. The poll result did not surprise the villagers of the Community of Desire because it accurately mirrored their desire to have a provincial representative who had sound understanding of the locality as well as knew the specific areas of development that needed attention at the provincial level. Below is a comment from a fiery young man who lives in the Community of Desire on the situation and what being the community's representative (*phuthan*) may entail:

I often say we have to think about who to vote for. The word, *phuthan* means a person who represents our group. How can we get someone who will understand and act in our interest? When they become a [minister of parliament], they become our representative, so we have to see who we can count on. Their canvassers may hint to their people whether this or that candidate would come and help when we have a problem or whether he or she will bring in any projects to the community. You can't just elect someone and later not even get a single development project. Or when villagers visit them and they never open their door, do you still think that you can rely on them? If I were a canvasser or a core leader, I'd say something like this, do what you want, run with whoever you want to, but when it's time to make the decision you have to be yourself.

Meanwhile, politicians are drawn to the Community of Desire on a regular basis because of its networks of relationships, especially the ties to national and local politicians, canvassers, and villagers. Also, as the community is home to an important temple that functions as the community center, its location plays an important part in attracting streams of political guests. Politicians at all levels would pay a visit to the temple, partly to make merit and pay their respects, but at the same time they are also there to build support as they mingle with the villagers. There is one national politician who regularly visits the temple. He is one of its major patrons and always gives his support whenever a religious ceremony is organized either for the village or nearby communities. From their perspective, the villagers have always felt close to this politician and hold great respect for him, although in the national election this politician is not a member of one of the larger political parties but in the single-member constituency system. The residents will most likely give their votes to this candidate. However, when they vote for a political party in the party list system, the residents will mainly look at the party's policies and their performance.

The respect and recognition the villagers show to the previously described politician through their votes reflects the value villagers place on giving and gaining political recognition. This insight brings attention, on one hand, to the change in rural people's view on politics and illustrates that their decisions are not entirely based on or tied to canvassing or the requests from local leaders such as subdistrict headmen, teachers, village headmen, or chief executives of the TAOs. On the other hand, the villagers are taking an active part in politics in their everyday life—i.e., outside of elections—as well, which underlines that they do not submit to the old-fashioned rhetoric of vote selling and buying. In this light, to render

populist policies and stimulus promises designed to please rural electorate as the only determinant of the rural voting decisions would be an inadequate set of explanation that in its analysis excludes rural everyday political practices in Thailand. As exemplified by the Community of Desire, any of the determinants from networks of relationships between the politicians and communities to the time period of valuation, mutual respect, candidate's sincerity, as well as close ties with the community, can be one of the decisive factors in elections.

If money is not the deciding factor in "vote buying," then why is cash still being given to villagers, and why does the practice hold significance until today? In the eyes of the Community of Desire's villagers, the cash they received from politicians either through canvassers or directly from attending "seminars" with the political parties was not in an exchange of each person's vote. To view it in this way means that we are using a political behavior framework that concentrates on observing different behaviors in politics rather than trying to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying implications to analyze rural political practices and expression. When cultural implications of political practices are left out, it is easy to generalize and conclude that "vote selling" is a transaction for quick benefits, comparable to any regular purchase. The stories from the villagers, however, indicate otherwise. The money, in fact, has a symbolic function and represents the recognition of each villager's existence and identity.

Rural political society today is no longer a traditional patron-client society wherein clients would be satisfied with minimal provision of fundamental security. The members in modern rural political society, such as residents of the Community of Desire, yearn for recognition of their existence, whether as friends, networks, group members, or household members, and want to be acknowledged that they are equal actors in the political system. In this context, money is not a "bribe" that is devoid of any socio-cultural meaning. It is an "affirmation" or a "gift" that symbolizes the acknowledgement of the recipients' existence and political recognition by politicians, canvassers, or candidates in local elections.

An important question that should be asked is, "why is cash payment rarely seen in urban areas?" One explanation for this absence is that urban areas have always been a priority in state policy-making and administration. Studies on government budget allocation for development have shown that despite efficient budgeting and administration, rural areas have always been overlooked (Walker 2012). The enduring imbalance in funding and resource allocation between urban and rural areas has created negative attitudes among the rural people who, for a very long time, have been

made to feel inferior and second rate in the eyes of the government and public policies. In the past, the money and support for the community festivities and family activities such as funerals and ordination may have been considered to be a small return that villagers felt they were entitled to get back from society. Getting a few hundred Baht during election period may have had significant value when rural people were still living in poverty. But villagers in modern rural society have grown into middle-income farmers, landless laborers and local business entrepreneurs (Apichart et al. 2011, Jamaree et al. 2012, Walker 2012). Receiving a few hundred Baht will not make any difference to their standard of living. And yet, the practice persists and remains almost indispensable in rural politics (Callahan and McCargo 1996) precisely because the perception of money has been transformed from financial aid to poor villagers to a symbol that represents an awareness of the rural votes and voters' existence as well as the recognition of their political agency.

In addition, rural society is a community that is deeply connected and tied to different and overlapping networks of social relationships—from kinship systems to group members, dependence on production systems, and reverence for temples together with resource allocation—all of which have a hand in establishing and shaping the context of rural communities and how rural people make their political decisions. Interwoven with and inseparable from the politics of the electoral system, these social relationships are manifested in the existence of canvassing and cash payment where the value of cash is more cultural than economic.

To be clear, in writing this article, it was not my intention to deem whether circulation of money in these networks of relationships which we loosely characterize as “vote buying” is right or wrong. What I am trying to do is simply to point out that to make a blanket discourse and declare that rural voters do not understand the concept of democracy or assume that rural voters are either morally corrupted, myopic, poorly educated, or easily manipulated and exploited by politicians because they accept money is an oversimplification that dismisses both the agency of the rural electorate and the political meanings they give to money. Through a cultural perspective, we will find that rural voters are in fact not different from other (urban) voters. They look at a pool of politicians or representatives and use multiple sets of criteria to decide who they will vote for. Rural voters' acceptance of a few hundred Baht or gifts and assistance from politicians ahead of an election is only one of the steps in the long and vast process of their deliberation of politicians and representatives. To develop

an accurate understanding of rural people as one of the actors in Thai politics, we cannot afford to take shortcuts and look at “vote buying” in exclusion from its connections to other relationships, as doing so would be no different from studying political practices in a vacuum, completely divorced from social and cultural contexts. Not only will this prevent us from understanding rural people’s reasoning and desire, but it will also lead to inadequate resolutions and misguided political reforms (see Callahan 2005a, 2005b).

Rural Aspiration and Changing Thailand’s Political Landscape

In tracing rural political expression from examining the transformation of social, economic, and political relationship systems to exploring rural political practices through elections, we are able to identify the following issues that have arisen in our mapping of Thailand’s political landscape.

First, everyday politics of desire and aspiration has transcended the system of politics that is tied to particular individuals based on personal relations with politicians, village canvassers, local mafias, or even the leaders of social/community movement. Rural everyday politics gives importance to the study of villagers’ political practices that are related to villagers’ self positioning to access resources and wide-ranging benefits from their extensive and flexible networks of relationships—a social phenomenon that has been happening for generations (see also Walker 2012). Put simply, current rural aspiration is a political expression that has not recently emerged as a result of, say, Thaksin Shinawatra or other politicians, local canvassers, or one leader’s populist policies or social movement alone. These “structural” political relationships based on individual attachment are merely components of the rural networks of power and not the creator or regulator of the everyday politics of local people. Most of the “political actors” studied in conventional political science—such as those attached to electoral and social movement politics—are not the sole actors in the networks of countless actors in rural Thai politics.

Second, “structural” economic change and capitalism in rural Thailand are not the only factors that bring out rural people’s political desire. The expression is a result of long-term economic and social “interactions” in the dynamics of everyday life between rural people and other actors. The interaction of everyday politics concerns the management of relationships and social capital with new actors, the basis of which is not limited to economic gains. Such activity is also connected to and overlapped with

the political desire to manage social landscape and other political units including religion, media, state agencies, private capital, the masses, and fellow villagers who possess different desires and benefits. It is true that economic changes have been the contributing factor that increases rural people's opportunities to meet and interact with all kinds of actors. Nevertheless, we cannot claim that desire, political expression, and awareness of rights, policies and political participation, resulted solely from the recent change in structural economy.

Third, through observing villagers' everyday political practices, we have found that determinants and meanings constructed in relation to election are made in response to local aspiration. The machination of politics to respond to local aspiration or "engine of aspiration" (Chairat 2012a, 2012b, 16) is deeply connected to economic and social status and desire/aspiration of individuals whose livelihoods are not exclusively tied to the farm sector or rural space. When elections are priced and their meaning continuously redefined by actors who have different statuses and positions, the villagers' valuation system may consist of different sets of criteria—a set for each level of politics. However, it is not possible to decode this valuation system in order to create a formula that can explain which criteria or determinants are applied and used in each level of elections. Rather, the system functions as a response to the new form of relationships that I have termed the politics of desire and entitlement (Jakkrit 2011), within which villagers are well aware of opportunities and their entitlement in a country's economic liberalization and democratization processes. As a result of this awareness, rural villagers have attached their power as voters to various political systems simultaneously in their everyday life beyond elections.

Lastly, money in the electoral system has been redefined and its function now exists outside of the traditional patron-client system. It is not simply an exchange of voting rights and money; it has metamorphosed into a social symbol that responds to the rural aspiration—the desire to be recognized and for their entitlement to be acknowledged. To dismiss everyday relationships and focus only on transactions of cash when analyzing elections and considering money to be the one and only decisive factor in deciding who to vote for is a colossal misunderstanding. Such understanding turns a blind eye to the fact that money in the electoral system has been given a cultural meaning by rural villagers. The rural villagers in their current circumstances have other choices and sources of incomes, which enable them to become much more secure, socially and economically. A few hundred Baht received from politicians and canvassers will not

change or transform the rural electorate's livelihoods and clearly will not spur them to exchange their rights for money. Money, in cultural context, is only a ticket to mutual recognition between politicians, canvassers, voters, and villagers, a factor in relationships that will be developed and connected to other forms of relationships during campaigning and election times as well as beyond. Indeed, continuously growing and expanding everyday relationships serves as the context of politics and the crux that determines how well politicians, political parties, and policies respond to the dynamics of rural aspiration.

Notes

1. One obvious example is the reaction of the Thai middle class who often regard rural people in the Red Shirt movement as "buffalos," "uneducated," and "for hire."
2. For a thorough study of the "desires" of rural migrants in urban setting of Bangkok, see Sopranzetti 2012b.
3. For political anthropologists, the study of politics in terms of structures, party systems and organized political activities poses immense limitations. Seen through the lens of anthropology, politics often falls between two broad frameworks (Paley 2002). The first is the study of political forms and activities, e.g., polls, political gathering, sourcing of political news and information, and creation of political connections. The second examines political imaginaries and the effects a cultural value system in a particular society has on how its people manage social relations in addition to cooperation, discord, conception, and acquisition of political ideology, as well as political struggle (See Paley 2002).
4. An article by Pitch Pongsawat (2003) called "The Relationship Between Economy and Politics in the Transformation of Farm Society and Farmers' Movement in Present Thai Society: Critical Analysis" (translated by Chanida Chitbandit, Kanokrat Lertchusakul, and Chaithawat Tulathon) provides one of the most inclusive analyses of the transformation of the farmers' movement. Pitch points out that the farmers' movement is not limited to demonstrations and protests, but comes in many forms, and is linked to socioeconomic factors. Nonetheless, the article's view of the farmers' movement remains mostly limited to focusing on the formation of the movement, class belonging, or the movement as part of a broader social movement.
5. To further explore this idea, one important study that invites us to examine rural rationality and cultural trends in relation to rural people's political understanding and expression is a work by Nidhi Eawsriwong (1991) and a study by Andrew Walker (2008).
6. The middle-class perception of rural people as succumbing to immediate economic benefits and the power and influence of local politicians, as well as their willingness to sell their votes for a small amount of money, is clearly illustrated in the excerpted paragraph on page 10.
7. Rai is a Thai measurement of land. One rai is roughly equal to 0.4 acre.

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