

## **Reply to Murakami’s Commentary on “Social Capital in Thailand: Unraveling the Myths of Rural-Urban Divide”**

Surichai Wun’Gaeo<sup>†</sup>  
Surangrut Jumnianpol<sup>††</sup>  
Sayamol Charoenratana<sup>†††</sup>  
Nithi Nuangjamnong<sup>††††</sup>

We wish to thank Murakami for giving us a number of very thoughtful and generous comments on our paper. In his commentary, he raised a couple of points regarding which further dialog and discussion would certainly be fruitful. We divide our following reply into two parts, according to Murakami’s comments. First, we address issues related to the so-called rural-urban divide in Thailand. Next, we provide further clarification regarding the seemingly oxymoronic term we used, “state-directed voluntary organizations.”

First, we have to concede Murakami’s point that the “difference between the urban and the rural” in our case studies, Panusnikom, Chonburi and Bangkruai, Nonthaburi, is not clear. However, the lack of distinction between urban and rural is a characteristic that applies not just to Panusnikom and Bangkruai. Instead, based on a new generation of work in the disciplines of rural sociology and social geography, it can be said that the countryside in Thailand has undergone a gradual but drastic transformation which, in turn, has rendered the rural-urban dyad seemingly irrelevant (see for example Rigg and Ritchie, 2002; Gödecke and Waibel, 2011; Mills, 2012; Tubtim, 2012; Sangkhamanee, 2013; Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra and Pawakapan, 2013; and Gullette, 2014). Compared to urban areas, the Thai rural countryside may be less developed in terms of modern physical infrastructure and living standards. However, this does not mean that rural people still live under poor conditions and depend solely on a small income from the agricultural sector. Indeed, rural people in Thailand today earn most of their income outside of the agricultural sector and go to work in urban areas. Moreover, under better economic

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<sup>†</sup> Research Fellow, Center for Social Well-being Studies, Senshu University; Professor of Sociology and Director, Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, Chulalongkorn University

<sup>††</sup> Researcher, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute

<sup>†††</sup> Researcher, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute

<sup>††††</sup> Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Naresuan University

conditions, they are now able to possess some symbolic goods traditionally associated with the urban middle class, such as cars, smart phones, and tablet computers. Most likely for this reason, some scholars have characterized Thai countryside people in a hybrid fashion, applying terms such as “urbanized villagers” (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011), “cosmopolitan villagers” (Keyes, 2012) with and “polybian or grass tip community” (Pintobtang, 2011).

In this regard, our main point in the article was that we should rethink or reconceptualize the rural-urban distinction and develop new standard criteria in order to better grasp the nature of the changing social landscape. However, Murakami is certainly right in pointing out that the two areas chosen for the case studies may not be sufficient. In fact, we already acknowledged this limitation in our original article. We realize that more case studies representing the geographical and cultural diversity of Thailand are needed.

As for the second point related to the so-called “state-directed voluntary organizations,” we have to admit that the term we coined is oxymoronic in the western sense. But it does accurately reflect the actual situation in Thailand. A study by Jumnianpol (2001) revealed that the Ministry of Interior, which has the most wide-reaching and well-established bureaucratic organs situated in almost every local area around the country, has been the major state actor in building civil society organizations and promoting voluntary activities in local areas. It is noteworthy that the policy to promote civil society and social capital originated in international academic discourse in the early 1990s. With support from international partners, the Thai government eagerly and hastily adopted and modified these popular concepts into policy. This “Thai way” of consuming and probably distorting foreign concepts is not limited to the notions of civil society and social capital, but also includes other popular concepts such as governance (see Orlandini, 2003 and Bowornwathana, 2007).

It is, however, too early to conclude firmly that state-directed voluntary organizations can perennially impede the growth of the spirit of volunteerism or the bottom-up force of civil society. In the early period, state-directed voluntary organizations might be able to act as a major channel in mobilizing local people to participate in activities supported by the government. Nevertheless, the recent phenomenon corresponding to what Pintobtang (2011) has referred to as the grass tip movement and what Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011) have characterized as “urbanized villagers” reveals the dynamic transformation that has taken place in state-society relations in Thailand.

In conclusion, the points raised by Murakami suggest that more in-depth studies are needed to solve some of the mysteries that remain in the wake of our original article. These further studies could be done in a number of ways. On the one hand, they could be oriented toward comparative research, especially among Southeast Asian countries that share the same phenomenon of having so-called “state-directed voluntary organizations.” On the other hand, they could focus on the impact of state-directed voluntary organizations on various dimensions of society, such as social well-being, social justice, and state-society relations.

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