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# Chapter 10

## Urban Cosmopolitan Chauvinism and the Politics of Rural Identity

Eric C. Thompson

### 10.1 Introduction

Across the globe, urbanism structures feelings of place and subjectivities associated with place. Urbanism, as I am using the term, is a structure of feeling of place in which cities are central—and privileged sites in contrast to non-city spaces, usually figured as “rural.” The term, urbanism, can be and is used in myriad other ways. I am using it to signify an ideological field, in contrast to “urbanization” as an associated but analytically distinct set of social processes. My use parallels Ulrich Beck’s (2002) distinction between “cosmopolitanism” and “cosmopolitanization.” A common correlate to urbanism is cosmopolitan chauvinism, that is, the identification and reification of values deemed to be “cosmopolitan,” asserting those values and the people who hold them as cosmopolitans, to be superior to a non-cosmopolitan other. These cosmopolitan values are commonly (though not always) discursively associated with the space of cities and the subjectivity of city dwellers. In this process, subaltern subjectivities of rurality are born—the “stupid, ignorant hillbilly” in America, “*orang kampung*” (village people) in Malaysia, “*ba za*” (country bumpkins; Lei 2003, p. 614) and “*lao ta’er*” (smelly hicks; Yan 2003b, p. 493) in China, or “*kon ban nok*” (outer village people) in Thailand.

The discursive structuring of subaltern rural identities provides a basis for political mobilization. In this chapter, I compare four cases of the politics of rural identity. The first case is based on fieldwork conducted in Malaysia during the 1990s. During political campaigns in the 1990s, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) rhetorically mobilized the figure of “*orang kampung*” (village people) in rural Malaysia.

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27 Comparing the discursive positioning of PAS and its main rival, the ruling United  
28 Malay National Organization (UMNO), a main point of difference is their divergent  
29 approaches to Malay rural identity. Under Mahathir Mohamad, rural *kampung*  
30 Malay identity was positioned as a figure of backwardness and ignorance. As part  
31 of a program to create “*Melayu Baru*” (New Malays), a program of urbanization  
32 was called for, and rural Malays were treated with rhetorical contempt. In response,  
33 PAS used rural-urban difference as a point of political leverage, positioning them-  
34 selves as defenders of rural Malays against urban forces. In many respects, this  
35 point of difference was more prominent in PAS rhetoric than that of the more  
36 charged rhetoric of “*kafir-mengkafir*” (charges of religious infidelity). I demonstrate  
37 these arguments through an analysis of cassette recordings of PAS political speeches  
38 from the 1995 general elections at the height of the Mahathir era.

39 Reflecting on this rhetorical mobilization of rural identity, I compare three other  
40 cases—those of America, China, and Thailand—to the field of political discourse  
41 I found in Malaysia. In each case, the hierarchy of urban cosmopolitan chauvinism  
42 has political consequences, though the specific consequences play out differently,  
43 relative to the different political landscape of each country. Early twenty-first century  
44 urbanisms of Malaysia, America, China, and Thailand each possess unique charac-  
45 teristics, configured as they are within radically different cultural and social fields.  
46 Yet, in each case—and many others to be sure—the specter of rurality haunts the  
47 urban, cosmopolitan imaginary. In each case, urban cosmopolitanism constitutes a  
48 subaltern rural subjectivity as its other. And in each case, this rural subjectivity has  
49 identifiable (though often discursively sublimated) political consequences—from  
50 the struggle between “red” and “blue” states at the ballot box in America to rural  
51 unrest accompanying the growing dissonance between communist ideology and  
52 capitalist practice in China to populist politics and battles between “red shirts” and  
53 “yellow shirts” on the streets of Thailand.

54 In the first case of Malaysia, urban cosmopolitan chauvinism engenders a racialized  
55 rural subjectivity in the form of “*orang kampung*” (village people). Here, I will  
56 outline the political conditions in Malaysia that make “*orang kampung*” relevant to  
57 national politics, the constitution of “*orang kampung*” in popular and political  
58 discourse, and the mobilization of “*orang kampung*” in political rhetoric. I argue  
59 that “*orang kampung*” forms one important, but largely overlooked, aspect of political  
60 subjectivity in Malaysia that is mobilized by opposition politicians.

## 61 10.2 Malaysia: The Received Wisdom

62 The dominant discursive frames used to think about Malaysia, both in everyday life  
63 and politics, as well as by scholars, do much to conceal the salience of rural identities.  
64 In subsequent sections, I discuss how such identities are mobilized by PAS in its  
65 political rhetoric. In this section, I address the frames of reference more commonly  
66 used to conceive of the Malaysian population as a whole (racial framing) and Malay-  
67 Muslim politics specifically (nationalist-religious framings).

Malaysians see themselves and are seen by outside observers, particularly academics, overwhelmingly through the rubric of “race.”<sup>1</sup> Race in Malaysia is codified in a scheme of “Malays, Chinese, Indians, and ~~othe~~ race shapes nearly every aspect of public and private life, from the micro-bureaucratic requirement that all Malaysians carry an identity card (IC) baring their official race to racial quotas and targets in education, housing assistance, and initial public offerings of publicly listed companies. The federal government, which has, in essence, not changed hands in the 11 nationwide general elections held since independence in 1957, is controlled by a coalition of race-based political parties, dominated by UMNO. All social interaction, from the quotidian to the macrostructural, is construed as flowing from a logic and discourse of race.

Census data reports that the nation consists of 58% Malays (and other indigenous groups), 24% Chinese, 7% Indians, and 11% others (Pejabat Perdana Menteri 2000). The “Malay” category is alternatively construed as “bumiputera” (literally, “princes of the soil”), which expands its constituency to include a variety of Orang Asli (aboriginal) communities on Peninsular Malaysia and a complex array of indigenous groups in the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo. However, UMNO and the UMNO-led government are, in practice, anchored in a Malay-Muslim identity of (mainly peninsular) Malays.

The received history and structure of politics in Malaysia is that it is first a struggle of Malay-Muslims to maintain political hegemony in the face of an immigrant influx of Chinese and Indians ~~from~~ the late nineteenth-century British colonial administration of the territories that now comprise the nation-state. Singapore’s entry into Malaysia, for example, was untenable (and short lived, from 1963 to 1965), as it denied Malays an outright popular majority at a national level. Second, ~~Malays having~~ secured and maintained racial political hegemony since 1957, Malaysian politics is about Malay politics and the politics of the Malay community. It is a struggle for the rural “Malay heartland” of northern Peninsular Malaysia (made even more powerful in the electoral system due to substantial rural-biased gerrymandering). There is much to be said (and criticized) about this received wisdom of the political landscape of Malaysia, but my objective here is to focus on the issue of *intra-Malay* politics, which, if not the only grounds for political control of the Malaysian state, is certainly an important site of political struggle.

The dominant discursive framework for understanding the battle for Malay “hearts and minds” is between the nationalist and relatively secular UMNO, which protects Malay interests while working together with the representative parties of “other races,” and ~~the~~ PAS, which champions an Islamic state and institution of Islamic law. Dominant themes in Malaysian politics and political analysis include Malay rights and privileges (guaranteed by the constitution), the role of Islam in politics and society, and questions surrounding political patronage, money, politics, and corruption. Rural-urban tensions, or any substantial analysis of rural conditions

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<sup>1</sup> I use “race” here (rather than ethnicity) because this is the term commonly used in Malaysia (*ras* in Bahasa Malaysia).

109 whatsoever, are remarkably absent from most political analysis in or about Malaysia.  
110 During the 1990s, PAS and UMNO were the main contenders for Malay votes. With  
111 the expulsion of Anwar Ibrahim from UMNO and the rise of Parti Keadilan Rakyat  
112 (People's Justice Party) around Anwar as well as the retirement of Mahathir in 2003,  
113 the political terrain of Malaysian and Malay politics became more complex and  
114 contested in the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet, the role of urban cosmo-  
115 politan chauvinism remains largely unexamined and sublimated within other  
116 issues.

117 This absence is apparent in the most significant academic assessment of the  
118 Mahathir years spanning 1981–2003 (Welsh 2004). As the editor of the volume  
119 claims, it is a remarkably diverse reading of this period with over 40 authors from  
120 more than half a dozen academic disciplines as well as a number of journalists and  
121 public intellectuals. Its topics range from party politics to economics to foreign  
122 policy to high-tech super-corridors to the experience of transsexuals. As valuable as  
123 these contributions are (and my critique here is not meant to disparage the work),  
124 the volume, as a whole, reflects the very urban-oriented concerns of Malaysian  
125 elites and professional middle classes. Only one chapter, analyzing the political  
126 struggle between UMNO and PAS for “the rural Malay heartland,” mentions rural  
127 issues in anything more than passing. The author's approach to the issue focuses on  
128 ideological positioning between the two parties over a range of issues and policies,  
129 especially the sacking and treatment of Anwar Ibrahim, the *reformasi* movement,  
130 and Islamization. The author concludes that UMNO's lack of support in rural  
131 Malaysia appears “paradoxical, given substantial benefits rural Malays have gained  
132 during the period of Mahathir's rule” (Funston 2004, p. 175). The lack of rural  
133 Malay enthusiasm for UMNO is credited primarily to relative deprivation, com-  
134 pared to urban counterparts.

135 This conclusion seems unconvincing on at least two counts. First, it seems to  
136 imply (and reiterate the discursive assertion so common in Malaysia) a sharp urban-  
137 rural divide between city and village folks. In fact, there is substantial movement  
138 between rural and urban. In particular, those born in rural areas over the past 20 or  
139 even 40 years almost inevitably migrate to live in cities for substantial periods of  
140 their lives. Second, and related to the first, relative deprivation per se is not a powerful  
141 political lever. In my own fieldwork during the 1990s, while there was a wide range  
142 of opinions about development, the dominant attitude toward observable changes in  
143 infrastructure and the like was that life was better and easier in *kampung* than it had  
144 been in the past; in other words, people expressed a sense of satisfaction, even gratitude,  
145 with regard to expansion of education, health facilities, water and power supplies,  
146 and telecommunications and the like, not a sense of relative deprivation, compared  
147 to cities (Thompson 2002, pp. 57–59).

148 I would suggest, instead, that a persistent and pervasive urban cosmopolitan  
149 chauvinism is one of the main sociocultural forces lending strength to PAS's bid for  
150 rural Malay votes and undermining UMNO's legitimacy with the same constituency.  
151 It is a powerful hidden force missing from Malaysian political analysis, which  
152 focuses on Islamization, interracial politics, globalization, political economy, and a  
153 number of other important issues. Urban cosmopolitan chauvinism is missing from

this analysis of the Malaysian political struggles and landscape, or, more accurately, it is dealt with as “landscape,” but not part of the “struggle.” Urban-rural difference is naturalized, and rural dwellers—*orang kampung*—ascribed all the familiar characteristics of anti-cosmopolitanism: backward, stupid, close-minded, racist, and religiously conservative. I argue in the following that rurality is a sociocultural phenomenon that should not just be taken as a given but understood in terms of the social and cultural conditions structuring rural identity, which, in turn, lends itself to mobilization in the realm of Malaysian party politics.

### 10.3 Constituting “*Orang Kampung*”

The Malay world is a world of frontiers, long-distance trade, and radical mobility. Yet, in the wake of European colonialism, Malays came to be seen and, importantly, to see themselves as a backward and largely rural community (see Alatas 1977; Kahn 2006). The “*orang kampung*” (village person), in particular, became a figure of pity if not contempt. The pervasiveness of this image and discourse in contemporary Malaysia can be found everywhere from television programs to primary school textbooks; I will forego a detailed discussion of these media here, which I deal with at great length elsewhere (Thompson 2007).

In the political realm, Malay rurality has formed a central pillar of the analysis of the “Malay dilemma” by the long-serving Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. As he wrote in his classic work, *The Malay Dilemma*,

The *kampung* dwellers’...will to progress, never great because of lack of contact with the outside world, became negligible. Soon they were left behind in all fields. The rest of the world went by, and the tremendous changes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries took place without the rural Malays being even spectators. (Mahathir 1970)

Mahathir drew a distinction, rooted in part in social Darwinist eugenics, between progressive “town Malays,” with a “vibrant” admixture of Malay, Indian, and Arab blood, and “village Malays,” who were inbred and slow-witted. This critique dated to the 1950s and 1960s, when Mahathir was branded a “Malay ultra” and marginalized for sometime within UMNO for his radical “Malay chauvinist” views (as he argued that government policy needed to favor Malays). By the 1990s, this position had evolved, under his premiership, into championing a “New Malay” industrial, capitalist class. In 1993, a book authored by a leading UMNO politician appeared, outlining the political program for engendering “New Malays” (Muhammad 1993). Its first substantive, programmatic chapter calls for “Malay urbanization” (*memandarkan Melayu*), repeating, in somewhat updated language, the same ideology that rural-dwelling Malays will inevitably be backward and lazy and that Malays need to be “urbanized” both physically and mentally.

This urban-based discourse is consumed in rural places (through television, schooling, and other media) and engenders a negatively valued rural subjectivity of the “*orang kampung*.” For rural dwellers, this sense of being the rural subject of

194 urban cosmopolitan chauvinism produces a subjectivity ripe for political mobilization  
195 in opposition to UMNO's urban-centered politics.

#### 196 10.4 Mobilizing "Orang Kampung"

197 The political mobilization of *orang kampung* in rural Malaysia is apparent in the  
198 rhetoric of the PAS. To illustrate the deployment of "*orang kampung*," I draw, here,  
199 on a number of cassette tape recordings I collected in the run-up to the 1995 general  
200 election. I am citing, here, instances from three taped speeches of one of PAS's most  
201 popular orators, Mohamad Sabu, popularly known as "Mat Sabu"; similar instances  
202 are found in a dozen other taped speeches that I have reviewed. These cassette tapes  
203 are sold at PAS rallies and circulate through PAS networks. They are an important  
204 part of PAS's "alternative media," given that mainstream newspapers and television  
205 are largely controlled by the UMNO-led government.

206 In his speeches, Mat Sabu addresses his audience as "*Muslimin dan Muslimat*"  
207 (Muslim men and Muslim women). He stresses his struggle (*perjuangan*) for Islam.  
208 Rural-urban divides are not his only avenue of critique of the ruling UMNO party;  
209 in fact, that dimension of division in Malaysian society is rarely if ever elaborated  
210 in great detail in Mat Sabu's statements. However, based on an analysis of his  
211 speeches, placed in a wider discursive field in which rural-urban divides are ubiquitous,  
212 there is abundant evidence that his rhetoric plays to the oppressed subjectivity of  
213 "*orang kampung*."

214 Mat Sabu frequently aligns UMNO with the realm of "*korporat*" (corporations).  
215 UMNO, he tells his audience, is overrun (*dilanda*) by "*korporat*" interests (Sabu  
216 1995c). The wealth of UMNO leaders, the millionaires among them and how they  
217 use their political positions to become millionaires (*jutawan*), is a constant theme of  
218 his speeches, (for example, Sabu 1995b). UMNO is no longer the representative of  
219 the people, but the representative of the *tokay*—a term derived from Chinese to  
220 mean business owners or people with capital (Sabu 1995a, c).

221 In contrast to the *tokay* and *korporat*, whose interests are served by UMNO, in  
222 Mat Sabu's analysis, "*orang kampung*" are the victims of development. UMNO, he  
223 argues, for the sake of development "sacrifices the local people, the original inhabitants  
224 of the land" (*mengorban penduduk tempatan ataupun penduduk-penduduk asli*  
225 *bumiputera*) (Sabu 1995a). PAS must fight for justice so that "*orang kampung*" are  
226 not the victims of development (Sabu 1995b).

227 UMNO and PAS engage in a discursive and political struggle over a vast terrain  
228 of unresolved issues—the place of Islam in Malaysia, the way in which to develop  
229 the nation, and standards for interracial relations. Observers of Malaysian politics  
230 have highlighted many aspects of this struggle. The increasing emphasis and asser-  
231 tiveness of Islam in Malaysian society is attributed, in part, to the battle between  
232 UMNO and PAS to outdo each other in a field of competitive piety (Who is more  
233 Islamic? Who does more to promote Islam within Malaysia? Who is the true Muslim  
234 and who is the infidel?—each party accuses the other of being non-Islamic and



“*kafir*”). PAS urges implementation of Islamic (“*Hudud*”) law and accuses UMNO of promoting sin (*maksiat*). UMNO accuses PAS of being fanatic and chauvinist, thereby undermining Islam by causing non-Muslims (and perhaps some Muslims) to fear it.

PAS emphasizes Muslim identity and portrays itself as the champion of the Malays and *bumiputera*, “indigenous people.” The latter is, in theory, a more inclusive category than the first; in practice, especially though not exclusively in PAS’s rhetoric, the two are almost completely conflated. However, UMNO, of course, also stakes a claim to being the champion of the Malay community and, therefore, of Muslims. Again, in Malaysian discourse, the two are almost completely conflated; in multiple contexts, speakers and writers switch back and forth between the two, Malay and Muslim, as if they are essentially the same thing, and all evidence suggests that most people in Malaysia, most of the time, think of Malay and Muslim as one and the same.<sup>2</sup>

Mat Sabu and other PAS leaders try to distance UMNO from the constituency that both parties are battling over. The *kafir-mengkafir* (labeling each other infidels) rhetoric calls UMNO’s Islamic credentials into question; UMNO is claimed to be weak in its support of Islam and to sponsor parties where alcohol is consumed, where young people (especially girls) are naked or half naked and follow their “boy-friend” home (Sabu 1995a), and of aligning itself with “immigrant capitalists” (*pendatang-pendatang tokay-tokay*) (Sabu 1995b). UMNO is also accused of forgoing Malay interests in favor of the interests of other races, foreigners, and businesses (again, *korporat* interest).

However, it is in their rhetoric and deployment of figures of rurality where one of the most obvious substantive divides between PAS and UMNO is to be found. In discourse on Islam and Malay identity, for example, both parties fully claim the ground staked out by those positions, that is, both claim to be the ultimate champion of Islam and Malay interests. UMNO, however, during the Mahathir era, followed a rhetoric of urban-based, future-oriented development. The “*kampung*” mentality was claimed to be a key problem standing in the way of the birth of a “New Malay”—a figure explicitly described as a corporate leader.

Mat Sabu’s rhetoric plays precisely to the subaltern “*orang kampung*” subjectivity engendered as a negative, backward identity in the rhetoric of UMNO. He warns his audience that the enticements UMNO offered at election time are only for their own benefit so that they can enrich themselves by winning political office. “*Orang kampung*” are only a tool that they use to win elections while their true interests are in their own wealth and the interests of corporate elites (Sabu 1995b).

As Mat Sabu’s speeches illustrate, PAS positions itself as the defender and champion of the “*orang kampung*.” UMNO, in following the Mahathir’s long-standing analysis of the “Malay dilemma,” tells “*orang kampung*” that they are a problem, that they

<sup>2</sup>Malay, Muslim, *bumiputera*, *pribumi*, and *orang kampung* are all associated (used as synonyms) discursively in Mat Sabu’s speeches, for example, “[*k*]ita kena membantu *orang kampung*, *orang Melayu*” (we have to help *orang kampung*, Malay people) (Sabu 1995b).

275 need to change who they are and need to “urbanize” (*membandarkan*), and that their  
276 “*kampung*” mentality is holding them and Malays in general back in a competitive,  
277 rapidly developing world.

278 In his 1995 speeches, Mat Sabu returns to a trope that Mahathir himself has long  
279 utilized, that is, that the fate of the Malays will be like that of the “Red Indians” in  
280 America, that they will be driven off their land into the jungle and disappear from  
281 the face of the earth, leaving only traces such as “Chicago” and “Alabama” in  
282 America (Sabu 1995a). However, while Mahathir, as a “Malay ultra” within UMNO  
283 in the 1960s and 1970s, was urging aggressive pro-Malay policies, in the 1990s, Mat  
284 Sabu’s rhetoric aligned UMNO with corporate (and foreign/immigrant) interests  
285 that would “in the name of development, sacrifice indigenous Malays, forcing them  
286 to leave their *kampung* homes (*kampung halaman mereka*)” (Sabu 1995a). UMNO,  
287 he argues, is “Robinhood” in the reverse, that is, “UMNOhood” robs from the poor  
288 to give to the rich.

## 289 10.5 Comparative Cases: America, China, and Thailand

290 Before reflecting on the significance and politics of discursive urban-rural differ-  
291 ences in Malaysia, particularly in the more recent post-Mahathir era, I will lay out  
292 three comparative examples. My purpose is twofold. First, I seek to demonstrate  
293 that far from Malaysia being an isolated or peculiar case, the sort of discursive pro-  
294 duction of subaltern rural identities is a very widespread phenomenon. Second, and  
295 closely related to the first, while similarities are apparent in these three examples,  
296 especially the ways in which urban “cosmopolitan” identities tend to dominate rural  
297 “backward” ones, the ways in which these play out in electoral or other sorts of poli-  
298 tics are not simple, straightforward, or easily predictable. In America, these identi-  
299 ties are mobilized in support of a Republican Party deeply committed to a neoliberal  
300 economic agenda, which would not seem to favor the rural, lower-middle-class vot-  
301 ers to whom they are appealing. In China, the ruling Communist party maintains an  
302 ambivalent relationship to a rural, peasant base. In Thailand, appeals to a rural  
303 underclass have been effectively mobilized by Thaksin Shinawatra to create a pow-  
304 erful political base. The response by Thaksin’s Bangkok-based elite opponents is to  
305 abandon democratic rule and principles, resorting to a military coup in the face of  
306 Thaksin’s popularity.

## 307 10.6 America: What Is the Matter with Kansas?

308 The choice of television news networks in the United States to color states red to  
309 signify Republican Party victories and blue for victories of the Democratic Party in  
310 national presidential elections has captured the geographic imaginary of the nation  
311 and come to represent a great cultural divide in the country. On the worldwide web,

alternative mappings of the country appear, such as one that depicts the entire nation in clines of blotchy purple, through a finer-grained analysis of voting patterns, rather than the stark, bordered contrast of red and blue (Gastner et al. 2004). However, reiteration and extension of the red-blue contrast is much more common, as in a ranking and red-blue labeling of states by supposed average IQ scores, and in keeping with a distinctly leftist cosmopolitan chauvinism, displaying the red states disproportionately occupying the lower rankings (Evans 2004).

The cultural anthropology of Boas, Malinowski, and others, which have struggled mightily to assert the cogency of *cultural* difference and relativism in opposition to social Darwinist theories of *racial* difference and hierarchy, now sees the collateral damage of these battles in such theories as this of the great “cultural divide” of the red states and blue states. While academic anthropology has largely moved on, to champion theories of discourse over and against its own theories of culture, this central organizing idea of twentieth-century anthropology—*culture*—has become widely accepted as explanatory of difference. Culture, in this popular incarnation, is conceptualized as a form of groupthink. Every group of people has its own way of thinking, and any member of that group will, more or less, think in that way. Thus, the red states and the blue states are different (and vote differently) because the people in those states just think differently. Inhabitants of red states are stereotyped as conservative, Christian, and ignorant. Residents of blue states are stereotyped as arrogant, atheist, “latte liberals.”

However, it is as much the myth of the cultural divide, *not* cultural difference itself, which produces the effects of the color contrast on television screens and, more significantly, the now solidly entrenched Republican Party dominance in rural America. The force at work is not cultural difference, but rather a *shared*, that is, cultural, knowledge of urbanism and cosmopolitan chauvinism. Insofar as rural-urban differences account for a conservative lock on rural American politics, it is not because urban and rural subjects are operating from within different cultural systems, but rather because they are operating in the *same* structures of feeling, but positioned very differently in relationship to the ideas circulating within that structure.

Thomas Frank’s popular analysis of this supposed cultural divide, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), is remarkable in that it succeeds in simultaneously identifying and exemplifying the crux of cosmopolitan chauvinism. Frank (2004) correctly identifies a subjectivity of victimization and marginalization motivating a “backlash” mentality of conservatives against liberals.<sup>3</sup> He provides abundant examples of Kansans “performing

<sup>3</sup>I use the terms, conservative and liberal, here in keeping with their American political usage, even though this usage is radically out of synch with the explicit meaning of the words themselves; conservatives have been working to radically *re-form*, not conserve, government structures since at least the ascendance of Reaganism in the 1980s, and liberals are much more inclined to champion both social and economic policies at odds with ~~both~~ traditional liberal models of individual rights, for example, affirmative action, and economically rational markets, for example, social welfare and curbs on corporate activities.

348 indignation” in varied discursive moments, from political rallies to a rural sculpture  
349 garden of radically right-wing artwork crafted from discarded farm equipment.  
350 Yet, for Frank (2004), all of this sound and fury is nothing but the ranting of  
351 ignorant hillbillies. His argument is that Kansans and others from the “red states”  
352 have been deceived by corporate capitalist interest. The latter has, for Frank (2004),  
353 successfully foisted onto Kansan consciousness an idea of “the *latte liberal*...  
354 identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences...[which] reveal the essential  
355 arrogance and foreignness of liberalism” (pp. 16–17). The shortcoming of Frank’s  
356 (2004) analysis is that he fails, as one reviewer of the book succinctly notes, “to  
357 consider the idea that there might be such a thing as legitimate cultural grievances”  
358 (Chafetz 2004).

359 Frank highlights precisely the source of the “cultural grievance” of red state  
360 subjectivity:

361       Its averageness has...made Kansas a symbol of squareness in the vast world of commodified  
362       dissent, the place that actors announce they’re ‘not in anymore’...Recall the late-eighties  
363       T-shirts that sneered, ‘New York—It Ain’t Kansas’. Or think back to those teen-rebellion  
364       movies in which the stern Kansas elders forbid dancing and all the bored farm kids long to  
365       escape to Los Angeles, where they can be themselves and adopt the lifestyles of their  
366       choice. (Frank 2004, p. 30)

367       Yet, Frank (2004) fails to take the consequences of this sneering urbanism  
368       seriously. For him, a politics not grounded in “something hard and ugly like eco-  
369       nomics” is deeply suspect (Frank 2004, p. 27). His analysis reiterates the sneering  
370       urbanism that it highlights by ultimately identifying the “problem with Kansas” as  
371       located in the “dysfunctional” attitudes and voting patterns of people who appar-  
372       ently vote against their own self-interests because they have been misled into believing  
373       that “*latte liberals*” of the Democratic Party treat them with contempt whereas the  
374       Republican Party treats them with respect. In other words, the problem, for Frank  
375       (2004), is that Kansans are “stupid.”

376       In fact, the “problem” is that urbanism’s structure of feeling and implicit cosmo-  
377       politan chauvinism is a much more significant force than Frank (2004) will admit.  
378       In Frank’s (2004) account, Kansas becomes a singular entity populated by largely  
379       undifferentiated masses, “described as ‘deranged’ and ‘lunatic’, people who live in  
380       a ‘dysfunctional’ state” (Chafetz 2004). This fits easily into the structure of feeling  
381       that configures America’s imagined geography of bicoastal cosmopolitanism  
382       divided by the rural, mid-Western “flyover.” By contrast, William Least Heat-  
383       Moon’s (1991) thickly descriptive, “deep map” of Chase County, Kansas, reveals a  
384       place and people not so easily counted among the Evangelical lunatics of Frank’s  
385       (2004) account. However, of course, sound-bite politics is much more favorable to  
386       Frank’s (2004) stereotyped view of the world than a nuanced one such as Least  
387       Heat-Moon’s (1991). In trading on such stereotypes, the Republican Party has  
388       largely captured the field of rural identity in America, throwing up political “heroes,”  
389       such as George W. Bush (the guy you would most like to have a beer with) and  
390       Sarah Palin (who extols the virtues of rural and small town “real America”), in  
391       advancing an agenda of neoliberal economics and neoconservative foreign policy.

## 10.7 China: Smelly Hicks and the Peasant Class

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Cosmopolitan chauvinism is, if anything, more starkly expressed in China than in either America or Malaysia. In newspaper accounts and everyday conversations, rural subjects, especially when they appear in the space of cities, are discursively constituted as “*ba za*” (country bumpkins; Lei 2003, p. 614) and “*lao ta'er*” (smelly hicks; Yan 2003b, p. 493). Writing from the perspective of both personal autobiography and extensive ethnographic research, Mobo Gao testifies that rural villagers are considered to be “by nature stupid” and “treated with contempt and callousness” by urbanites (Gao 1999, p. 108, pp. 252–253; see Lu 2002; Potter and Potter 1990, p. 303).

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Villages in China are represented as “cellular,” self-sufficient social spaces, (for example, DuBois 2005 and Gao 1999, pp. 9–10). Mobo Gao’s sensitive, rich portrayal of *Gao Village* is remarkable in this respect. While Gao (1999) portrays the village as a “cellular,” self-sufficient social space (pp. 9–10), the text belies a simple reading of the village as a closed corporate community. The village is the site of intensive national education (pp. 92–121) and health systems (pp. 72–91), as well as circulation of consumer goods (pp. 67–70). Urban-bound migration, more than any other force, is changing and reshaping village life. Notably, Gao’s (1999) account begins and ends by citing urbanization and rural-urban interactions (particularly, though not exclusively, with regard to migration) as the foremost issue in the near-future transformation of rural China (Gao 1999, pp. 1–2, pp. 261–264). The cultural expectation that the course of life for young people will inevitably take them out of the village and into urban spaces echoes the expectations of Malay *kampung* dwellers:

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The ‘push and pull’ factors are such that a young Gao villager is considered odd if he or she stays in the village. In fact, virtually all the young people in Gao village have gone. The very few who remain are considered to be incompetent. (Gao 1999, p. 216)

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Yet, this severe Chinese cosmopolitan chauvinism is of relatively recent derivation. According to Faure and Liu (2002), it was not until the end of the nineteenth century, and more substantially in the twentieth century, that the sharp, hierarchical contrast between a superior city and inferior village or countryside took shape. Moreover, through the twentieth century, complex interactions between political-economic forces (at inter-articulated local, national, and international levels) and shifting ideological winds (Imperial, Republican, Maoist, and post-Maoist) have seen the moral hierarchy of city and countryside within representational practices flip more than once.

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Prior to the twentieth century, a rural-urban continuum prevailed in the social geography of China. Villages, towns, and cities were not sharply demarcated social and cultural spaces. While walled fortifications marked boundaries and urban spaces operated as nodes of commerce and government administration, these features of the socio-spatial landscape were not generally emphasized and elaborated in Chinese cultural geographies as markers of contrastive difference between urban and rural.

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434 Rather, the articulation and interpenetration of villages, towns, and cities appears to  
435 have been the hallmark of, for example, ritual practice and literary imaginations  
436 (Faure 2002; Harrison 2002; Zhao 2002). This is not to say that cities and villages  
437 have never been marked by contrast and hierarchy in pre-twentieth-century China,  
438 (for example, Berg 2002), but this was not generally a principal trope of Chinese  
439 cultural geography in the Qing period (1644–1911).<sup>4</sup>

440 Chinese urbanism in the early twentieth century centered especially on Shanghai,  
441 which figured not only as urban (in contrast to rural) but also as foreign (in contrast  
442 to Chinese) and as the epitome of modernity (in contrast to tradition). Shanghai and  
443 “Shanghainese” developed a distinctive port city identity. In the view of Faure and  
444 Liu (2002),

445 [I]n the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai taught the rest of China to see China through the eyes  
446 of the Shanghainese. While in imperial China, the emperor held centre stage, the  
447 Shanghainese viewed the metropolis as the centre of society. (pp. 1–2; see also Liu 2002;  
448 Lu 2002)

449 In the late-Qing and Republican era, “the urban-rural continuum was gradually  
450 replaced by an urban-rural gulf.”

451 The political and military triumph of Maoist communism did not see a submersion  
452 of this urban-rural gulf, so much as its ideological inversion: the heroic peasant  
453 emerged as the central figure of moral superiority in juxtaposition to the decadent,  
454 urban, Westernized bourgeoisie, in other words, the Shanghainese. Of course,  
455 Maoist cultural geography was more complex than only this and importantly ambivalent  
456 with regard to the rural peasantry and village. While the peasant was an important  
457 revolutionary class, the decidedly modernist doctrine of Maoism was, at the same  
458 time, suspect of the village as a site of tradition and backwardness. Moreover, given  
459 the Maoist ideological commitment to development of an urban proletarian class,  
460 the Communist Party instituted a strict, classificatory, residential system that divided  
461 China’s population into a higher status “urban personnel” and lower status “rural  
462 personnel” (Potter and Potter 1990, pp. 296–312). The relationship between the  
463 Communist Party, based in Beijing, and the bulk of the population, still located in  
464 areas thought of as rural, would seem to remain ambivalent up to the present.

465 The political consequences and mobilization of rural identities are somewhat  
466 harder to discern in China than in Malaysia or America or, perhaps, should be  
467 viewed as a particularly rich field for further research. China does not have the same  
468 sort of electoral politics in which mobilization of rural voters might play a role.  
469 The most significant challenges facing China as a whole are those around the transition  
470 from the Maoist era to the Deng (and post-Deng) era, in which a capitalist, market

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<sup>4</sup>The rural-urban continuum is not a timeless Chinese cultural geography upset only with the coming of twentieth-century modernity. Rather, it is better understood as specific to the context of the predominantly agrarian orientation of the later Ming and Qing dynasties after the sudden end of the early-Ming age of exploration in 1433. The history of urbanism and structures of feeling around cities, towns, and villages is undoubtedly as complex in Chinese history as elsewhere (see Williams 1977).

economic ideology is ascendant. It is in this context that Yan Hairong and others have pointed to the emergence of theories of human value in which rural “smelly hicks” (Yan 2003a, b) are given a very low status. At the same time, media reports seem to indicate widespread, yet hard to interpret, unrest in rural areas around China. Given that Mao’s communist, revolutionary mobilization has centered on a rural, Chinese peasantry, the politics of rural places and of rural identities, in contemporary China, make them a site from which we may well expect future changes or social movements to emerge.

**10.8 Thailand: Rural Politics from Red to Red**

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, nowhere among the cases reviewed here has the politics of rural identity and urban cosmopolitan chauvinism been more explosive than in Thailand. Politics of Thailand over the past decade has been dominated by a power struggle between Thaksin Shinawatra and his political opponents both in the Democrat Party in parliament and among what Duncan McCargo has described as the “network monarchy” surrounding the Chakri Dynasty (McCargo 2005). Whereas in Malaysia, the discursive role of subaltern rural identity is largely sublimated within idioms of Islam and development, in Thailand, expressions of both urban cosmopolitan chauvinism and subaltern rurality, in similar ways to both America and China, have become increasingly explicit throughout the course of the evolving and still unresolved struggle between those aligned with Thaksin and his opponents.

Thaksin came to power in the elections of 2001 as the head of the newly formed Thai Rak Thai Party and, in 2005, was reelected with a dominant showing in the polls (Kasian 2006 p. 5). Although it was clear, from the outset of Thaksin’s rise to power, that his political strongholds were in his hometown of Chiang Mai and the rural north and northeast of the country, the urban-rural dimension of politics came more sharply into view from 2006 onward, in the wake of Thaksin’s ouster by judicial and military coup.<sup>5</sup>

In describing the development of democracy, or rather, electocracy, in Thailand 1973, Kasian (2006) summarizes the “tale of two democracies” (see also Anek 1996, quoted in Kasian (2006); Walker 2008; Giles 2009, pp. 88–89). As Kasian (2006) puts it,

Rural Thais’ numerical superiority, coupled with their unofficial ‘right’ to sell their votes, was experienced by urban middle-class voters, especially in Bangkok, as ‘the tyranny of the rural majority’...Meanwhile, the liberal principle of property rights and the city’s greater purchasing power and undemocratic freedom to trade, invest, consume, overspend, exploit, and pollute were in turn regarded by rural folk as constituting an ‘urban uncivil society’, which dispatched hordes of avaricious government officials to plunder the countryside. (p. 15)

<sup>5</sup> Kasian (2006) and Walker (2008) detail these events up to 2006 as well as their aftermath.

509 On the strength of this felt exclusion and oppression by urban elites, the history  
510 of rural Thai politics, at least in the north and northeast of the country, has seen a  
511 transition from support for leftist communism to rightist populism.<sup>6</sup>

512 In his essay, "From Red to Red," anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa (2011) recounts  
513 the political history of his natal village in the far northeast province of Nong Khai  
514 near the Thai-Lao border. When he was a child in the 1970s, the village and the  
515 province had a reputation for being "red," that is, a stronghold of the communist  
516 insurgency. In that period, the American War in Vietnam was still in its final stages  
517 (during which Thailand was a staunch American ally). In 1975, the communist  
518 Pradet Lao, took control in Laos, with tensions high on the closed and militarized  
519 Thai-Lao border. In the wake of the violent crackdown on leftist student demonstrations  
520 in 1976 at the Thammasat University in Bangkok, many students and intellectuals  
521 fled the capital to join peasant-based communist insurgents in the northeast. From  
522 around 1980, however, students and others who had fled the capital were granted  
523 amnesty and reabsorbed into the political center, where, according to Giles (2009),  
524 they largely shifted away from support for socialist politics and toward apolitical  
525 nongovernmental organization (NGO) work.

526 In the 2001 election, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party effectively mobilized the  
527 subaltern, excluded sensibilities of rural voters, particularly in the north and  
528 northeast Isan region, in order to establish a dominant electoral majority. While  
529 by no means a socialist, Thaksin-supported populist, pro-poor programs,  
530 especially universal healthcare under the "30-baht" medical scheme, so named  
531 as under this program, Thaksin guaranteed that anyone seeking medical assistance  
532 could see a doctor for a minimal charge of 30 baht (less than one US dollar). Poor  
533 and rural voters came to see him as their charismatic champion in the domain of  
534 national politics. This image was only bolstered in the second half of the decade,  
535 when Thaksin was deposed and the battle lines of Thai politics became ever  
536 more clearly defined between "yellow-shirt" opponents of Thaksin and his "red-  
537 shirt" supporters.

538 Giles (2009) argues that the clash between the "yellow shirts" and "red shirts" is,  
539 fundamentally, a class warfare between the traditional elites and privileged middle  
540 classes, who support the royalist yellow shirts, and the urban and rural poor, who fill  
541 the ranks of the red shirts with Thaksin as their charismatic leader. While casting the  
542 conflict in class terms is not unreasonable, the rural-urban dimension of the conflict is  
543 also important. The "urban poor" are not easily distinguished from the "rural poor."  
544 Overwhelmingly, Bangkok's poor underclass has rural roots and is first-generation  
545 rural-to-urban migrants. Moreover, many migrants are involved in frequent seasonal  
546 migration between rural and urban areas. In my own recent research among such  
547 migrants from the Isan region in Bangkok, for example, among 130 interviewees,  
548 all but a very small handful have expressed strong emotional and social ties to the

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<sup>6</sup> In the rural south, another important region of political opposition to Bangkok, such opposition has centered around a subaltern Malay-Muslim identity within a Thai-Buddhist majority country.



countryside. They speak of their “homes” (*ban*) not in Bangkok, but as located in their natal village or, for some men, their wife’s village. The “urban and rural poor” are, in many respects, not two groups, but one group. Among those from the Isan region at least, they are an underclass whose ties to the rural northeast remain strong even when they have lived for decades in Bangkok.

Despite the tremendous class difference between Thaksin—a billionaire businessman (at least before his political fall from power and seizure of his assets)—and his impoverished followers, the fact that he claims Chiang Mai as his hometown allows people from the north and northeast to feel a certain kinship with him as Bangkok outsiders. The common epithet for the rural in Thailand is “*ban nok*” [house/home (*ban*) outside/remote (*nok*)]. Outside and remote ~~can~~ always ~~be in~~ relative terms; a small town can be referred to as “*ban nok*” relative to a larger town and a village is “*ban nok*” relative to a small town. However, in Thailand, generally, the “*ban nok*” can refer to all areas outside of Bangkok. Even Chiang Mai is “*ban nok*” relative to Bangkok, and “*ban nok*” is overwhelmingly a derogatory term in Thai. The phrase encompasses the most common expression of urban cosmopolitan chauvinism and its rural ~~alter~~.

Thaksin’s populist, electoral success has ridden as much if not more on this geography of identity politics as it has on explicit class politics. Thaksin has championed populist policies for the poor, but not a broader socialist or anticapitalist agenda. ~~On~~ the contrary, Thaksin has supported free-market neoliberalism globally and Keynesian economics for the poor and in rural areas (Giles 2009, p. 78). His ability to position himself as a champion of the rural poor stems, in part at least, from the disappearance of any substantial socialist or left political forces from the late 1970s in Thailand. Giles (2009) traces the complex history through which he argues how many urban-based, formerly leftist, NGO activists and leaders have come to have a patronizing attitude toward the rural poor, leading them to align themselves with the royalist “yellow-shirt” movement and against the rural-based “red shirts.” In part, this history involves the collapse of “left,” or socialist, political movements in Thailand from the 1970s onward and Thaksin’s ability to draw the loyalty of rural Thais to his political movement and away from the NGO networks that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (Giles 2009, p. 93–98).

Parallel urban-biased political discourses in both America and Thailand portray poor, rural voters as essentially ignorant, leading them to vote for the “wrong” candidates in elections. This discourse of urban cosmopolitan chauvinism expresses itself in favor of very different politics in the two countries. In America, it is voiced by those on the political “left” of the Democratic Party, who believe that the rural voters are undermining their own self-interest by supporting the “conservative,” that is, neoliberal, antisocialist, Republican Party (Frank 2004). In Thailand, a nearly identical denigration of rural voters is mobilized to explain why rural voters back populism rather than the conservative, urban-based, elite political interests (Walker 2008, p. 85). In both cases, the patronizing, derogatory attitude of urban-based political actors would appear to do nothing but widen the gap between themselves and rural electoral constituents.

593 **10.9 Malaysia After Mahathir: A Return to the Rural?**

594 As the cases of America, China, and Thailand all demonstrate, structuring of urban-  
595 rural divides in which rural identities contrast unfavorably to urban ones is by no  
596 means unique to Malaysia. In all three of these cases, rural identities play into the  
597 rhetoric of political mobilization, though most obscurely in China, which does not  
598 have the same degree of electocracy. However, the diversity of these cases also  
599 demonstrates that the specific *ways* in which a subaltern rural identity plays into  
600 politics and gets mobilized, that is, to what end, in support of what sort of politics,  
601 are flexible. Rural identities, perhaps more so than others such as class or race, are  
602 very flexible in the realm of politics. Rural peasants in China and farmers in America  
603 have been called out to support both Maoist communism and Republican capitalist  
604 neoliberalism, respectively. Due to the common tendency of urban cosmopolitan  
605 chauvinism to utilize the rural as a despised “other,” the mobilizing force of rural  
606 identities would appear to lie in a search and desire for respect more so than eco-  
607 nomics, power, or other fields. I draw on these thoughts in considering how rural  
608 identities may play out in post-Mahathir Malaysian politics.

609 In the 1995 election, UMNO and the Barisan Nasional arguably had their great-  
610 est victory since the founding of the Malaysian state. It was an election held in the  
611 latter years of a decade of rapid economic growth, prior to the financial crisis of  
612 1997–1998 and the political shock induced by the sacking, trial, and imprison-  
613 ment of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. In this case, the opposition’s  
614 attempted mobilization of the “*orang kampung*” of the Malay heartland could not  
615 be seen as strikingly successful; at the very least, it did not overwhelm the positive  
616 wave of the extraordinarily good economic tide on which UMNO and its coalition  
617 partners rode to victory. Four years later, in 1999, postcrisis and post-Anwar,  
618 UMNO experienced one of its worst election results in its history. The cause of  
619 *reformasi* and emergence of an alternative political front, the Barisan Alternatif  
620 (BA), to challenge the Barisan Nasional was the main theme of Malaysian politics  
621 in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Once again, how rural *kampung*  
622 identities might have been playing out in these elections received very little, if  
623 any, attention.

624 “*Orang kampung*,” by itself, does not explain PAS’s relative success and UMNO’s  
625 relative failure in national-level politics over different election cycles. However, it is  
626 an important element in securing PAS a perpetual base in the northern Peninsular  
627 “Malay heartland.” PAS appeals to a specific sense of Malay rurality that is associated  
628 with parallel fields of racial, religious, and class identities, but constitutes an important  
629 field of identity itself, based in a contemporary Malay cultural geography and  
630 associated sentiments. This remains important to PAS and to PAS’s role within the  
631 BA (Alternative Front), which has contested power with the UMNO-led Barisan  
632 Nasional (National Front) over several election cycles. PAS’s partner parties in the  
633 BA, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR or People’s Justice Party) and the Democratic  
634 Action Party (DAP), both appear to appeal more to an urban, cosmopolitan sentiment  
635 than a rural one. While PAS is seen mainly as a religious (Islamic) party, its base in

rural identity is just as important. Between PAS and PKR, the two parties challenge UMNO for Malay votes on both urban and rural fronts.

Notably, addressing the long overlooked interests of rural Malaysia (sidelined by Mahathir's UMNO administration) was a cornerstone of Mahathir's successor Abdullah Badawi. However, his premiership was short lived and it would not appear that his successor, Najib Razak, has similar sentiments (though here again, more attention could be paid to UMNO's attention or lack thereof to the rural population). It remains to be seen if UMNO will be successful in "recapturing" the Malay heartland that Mahathir's urban-oriented, progressive vision alienated.

**10.10 The Politics of Subaltern Rurality**

The worldwide shift from rural to urban populations is occurring in Asia, perhaps more rapidly than anywhere else. Urbanism, in this case, does not involve simply processes occurring in cities, but broader social transformation. Cities have always been leading central sites in the production and distribution of cultural ideals, one of which is the biases of urban cosmopolitan chauvinism. While the effects of urbanism play out in many other ways (see Thompson 2003, 2004, 2007), here, I have highlighted the political implications of urban-rural divides. Increasingly, in societies connected by high-speed travel over rail and highways, mass media, and sophisticated telecommunications networks, the urban-rural divide is more a matter of ideology than of substance. Rural dwellers, as well as rural-to-urban migrants, do not live in cultures separated from those of cities, but rather participate in urban-dominated cultures in which they learn that they are subjects of scorn, ridicule, and debasement by urban cultural elites. These conditions are fertile ground for the production of subaltern rural identities, which, in turn, are ripe raw materials, ready-at-hand for political mobilization.

The clearest examples of such mobilization can be found in relatively open democracies or, rather, electocracies, where politicians curry favor with a voting public. In countries governed by means other than electocratic principles, that is, where elections do not exist or are less meaningful, rural identities and the cultural discrimination felt by people of rural origins may, nevertheless, be a site of political concern and source of social unrest. The ways in which the politics of urban cosmopolitan chauvinism and rural subaltern identities play out may vary substantially from place to place, as the four cases discussed here have demonstrated. At the same time, it is a dimension of politics of significance across many diverse nations and deserves greater explicit attention in the realm of political and social analysis.

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