



# How Middle Classes Move To Defend Their Space:

A case study of an area in Chinatown, Bangkok

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## Introduction

This study is about social and spatial manifestation of capitalism. The main part of the story began in 2001 when the 219 tenants of the Crown Property Bureau in a fabric trading enclave in Chinatown were given 30-day eviction notice. All together, it affected 229 units of row houses situated in this enclave. The given reason was “these commercial buildings were in deteriorating condition and we need to develop the area for a better trading environment”<sup>1</sup>. One day after this shocking event, each tenant received a letter from Nexus Property Consultants Co Ltd, a well known international management company who acted on behalf of Metro Regent Company. The later is a company which was given a 30-year lease by the Crown Property Bureau to develop a new shopping complex called the New Sempeng Trade Center. The physical plan of this shopping complex was one inclusive big building consisting of twelve floors. It was expected to be built in succession of the existing row houses mentioned above. The letter informed that the tenants in the area “could resume their normal lives” by accepting the special offers from the company including the leasing of units on the third to the fifth floors of the shopping complex with special prices starting from 130,000 baht per square meter<sup>2</sup>. As anticipated, these tenants were shocked and frustrated. They felt that if they accepted the offers, the whole way of their living not only the physical aspects, but also their economic, social and emotional bonds would be uprooted. Most of the families had been living in the area for two generations or more. They felt attached to the place. Shortly afterward, they mutually decided to work together to resist the eviction. This study focuses on the dynamism of this movement. Special attention is paid to the fact that most of the people in this movement are wealthy middle class. And the eviction that hits the middle classes is less frequent than the poor. Therefore, the question of this study would be whether their wealthy backgrounds have any influence on the pattern of the movement, and in what manner.



This study seeks to understand the social phenomena that derived from the threat of eviction of the middle classes in the study area by the Crown Property Bureau and the contracted investor.

There are two levels of investigation. The first level focuses on the interaction among the involved stakeholders. The second level focuses on the dynamism inside the movement itself. Bearing in mind that the whole matter has not yet come to an end, this study, therefore, would proceed from the beginning of the movement until its present stage.

There are two theoretical perspectives that we find useful as points of departure in analyzing the phenomena. Lefebvre's idea of social space (Lefebvre 1991) is found viable to the analysis of the relations among stakeholders, while the rational choice perspectives<sup>3</sup> are helpful in analyzing the movement formation and some of its later dynamism. Both perspectives need some elaboration here for those who are not familiar with them.

Lefebvre's analysis of social space is done under the framework of the critical theory. In essence, each epoch of a human society has its own specific mode of production. Therefore, the change from one epoch to another is the change from one mode of production to another as well. The change is largely due to the contradictions between the forces of production and production relations in the production processes. Each mode of production would produce its own spaces with specific characteristics. And at the same time, these spaces themselves, in turn, are not only influential on those same production processes, but also on their constituent social relations.

For Lefebvre, then, space is a social product. The production processes that produce spaces are composed of two main components, the forces of production and the production relations. The basic forces of production that lead to the production of space include, for example, the natural setting of that space, the labor and the organization of labor, and the current knowledge and the technology. For the production relations, in one sense he looks at them as competitions among classes or among class fractions to occupy a particular space seen as advantageous. In the other sense, he means the reproduction of those production relations which include the biological reproduction and the reproduction of the relations of production themselves. (Lefebvre, 1973: 42-91)

Lefebvre uses the dialectical method<sup>4</sup> to explain the interrelations among his three-dimension model<sup>5</sup> and, in turn, uses it to analyze the dynamic of a particular space. He also called this model the theory of moment<sup>6</sup>. The first dimension is spatial practice or perceived space. The spatial practice of a particular space has a dialectical relation to that space itself. It has a wide range of meanings from the interaction between the natural settings and social formations on





that space, to the societal expressions of power, production and appropriation from that space. These expressions work through the perceptions of meanings of that space and other related space by different groups of people. It also includes the processes that transform these meanings into social realities, as of everyday life realities of the people in a particular place of a city. One of the functions of spatial practice is the spatial reproduction of social relations.

The second dimension is the representation of space. It is the ways how a particular space is conceived by professionals, such as physicists, engineers, planners, and technocrats. These professionals understand a particular space through specific concepts or signs, by the processes of encoding and decoding. The representation of space is also a social relation in the process of space production. It is the relation that often shows domination to the other two dimensions through the use of power or knowledge.

The last dimension is the space of representation<sup>7</sup>. It is about lives as lived. It is, therefore, the space of relation, emotion, aesthetic and memory. It reflects cultural symbols, meanings and images of a particular epoch. A prime example of this category is the sense of neighborhood or community of a particular place. It is the type of space that often is subjected to the manipulation of the representation of space.

Lefebvre points out that these three dimensions have dialectical relations with one another in producing social space. This model is seen applicable to this study by revealing the dynamism of social relations among the concerned stakeholders.

The second theoretical perspective is the rational choice theories. These theories operate within the frame of utilitarianism. The analyses start from the level of actors which can be either individuals or corporate bodies. But their purposes are to see the social outcomes that derived from the interaction among these units (Coleman 1989). They are premised on many assumptions (Turner 2005). The actors are rational self-interest persons. They have intentionality to pursue their own goals. Each of their action is guided by a set of value or a preferences hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> In addition, their actions are always tied to scarce resources which are influential to the realization of their own goals. Therefore, the resource maximization is also their secondary goal. Finally, all the social phenomena are the derivatives of their rational actions.

In his study, Hechter (1987) asks why and how the rational actors build their social and cultural system. In other words, why and how people create and maintain their social norms or group solidarity. In his answers, he has come up with quite a clear model. The overview of this model is there are four main factors influencing the creation and maintenance of social norms. The goals of all





actors in the group are positively related. Actors almost always depend on other people for realizing their goals. This aspect leads to the creation of social norms. Once these norms are created, they need to be maintained overtime until the goals are to be fulfilled. That is to say, monitoring and sanctioning are required to ensure norm conformity. These last two factors are seen as control mechanisms corresponding to the assumption of a rational person.

### **The Historical Development Of The Study Area**

From the macro perspective, the growth of Bangkok during the reign of King Rama V was due to the expansion of international trade and the processes of modernization. Looking more closely, we see that the growth pattern of the city during this reign was very much under the royal patronage. Many roads were built not only to ease the congestion of the commercial areas, but also to increase the royal income. Most of the land along these roads belonged to the Privy Purse Bureau. It was in charge of the construction of row houses along these roads and collecting rents for the royal income.

The row houses in the study area were built in the same period for the same purpose.<sup>9</sup> Up until now the physical structures of the study area, especially the structures of the row houses have remained much the same as in the time when they were initially built.

The historical, social and economic development of the study area can be best explained by its functional interdependence with the surrounding areas especially Sampeng. Before 1957, the major economic activity in the area was ready-made clothes cottage industry using the material mainly from Sampeng. The products were sold by wholesale to other parts of Bangkok and other provinces.

After 1957, the national economic development plan had given rise to the expansion of textile industry. This happening had a changing impact to the study area. While ready-made clothes firms moved elsewhere for more spacious location, the people in the wholesale fabric trading moved in and took over the area. They were the Chinese and the Indian Sikh who tried to get away from the more congested areas of Sampeng and Pahurad without having to lose their economic networks. From then on the area has remained the enclave of the wholesale fabric trading ever since.

### **Present Population Characteristics**

Within the study area, there are 196 families with the total members of 425 occupying 229 units of row houses. These numbers of people do not include the migrant workers or office personals working in each store. The ethnic components





consist of 80% Chinese and 20% Sikh. About 80% of the firms in the study area are in fabric trading and the rest are of related business. Many of the families do have other businesses elsewhere and can be said to have high to very high incomes. While about 10 families do small business, own only one house and have much lower incomes. Therefore, they are in the lower middle class. By and large, this area is the area of business owners or middle class people.

The use of space has a close relationship with the pattern of familial development. It has been about fifty years since the families of these people came to establish their businesses in the area. This time span covers about three generations. Starting from the father generation, their family lives and their business lives were in one place. Most of the families lived in one unit of two-storey row houses. Many elder informants have their flashbacks that during that time the area was full of life than it is today. As time had passed to the children generation, the families had accumulated enough wealth while the living quarters became crowded. They started looking for new space. Many patterns of change can be detected. They might move out of the area completely to do business and live elsewhere. They might buy more units of row house in the area when available and extend their business and residence to those new units. They might buy a new house in the suburb for residence, but still keep the unit in the area for business. Those with much wealth might keep and extend their business in the area and at the same time open up new businesses and buy new houses elsewhere. Many people of the father generation still live in the area because they feel attach to the place. Many of the children generation have become commuters. Many of the grandchildren generation have grown up and attended schools in suburbs. Through these descending generations, one can see the declining involvement and perhaps attachment with the area. This aspect might have some effect on the level of commitment to the people movement which later will be the focus of this paper.

### **The Changing Role Of The Crown Property Bureau (CPB)**

The economic crisis in 1997 has had definite impact on the policy orientation of The Crown Property Bureau (CPB). Before the crisis, the main income sources of CPB, about 60%, came from stock holdings. CPB was the major stock holders of The Siam Cement Public Company Limited, The Siam Commercial Bank and many others. The rest of the income, about 40%, came from the rents of real estate holdings. CPB has been the biggest real estate holder in Bangkok and in the country (Auyyanont, 2006). One interesting aspect of CPB, the rates of CPB rent before the economic crisis had been lower than the market prices. In the study area, the CPB rates ranged from about 500 to 1500 baht, while the





market rates were at least 10,000 baht or more. The lower rates can be interpreted as CPB has taken welfare orientation towards its tenants.

This orientation has had some concrete consequences for the study area. Firstly, the lower rents had made it possible for the poorer people to survive in the study area, in other words, at the heart of the city where land prices were very high. This has resulted in population heterogeneity, which in turn has had some effects on the people movement which will be discussed later. Secondly, the tenants felt they are being protected by the royal patronage. That was, they were not subjected to the profit seeking motivation like other landlords. Thirdly, from the CPB viewpoint there were some misuses of the rental units such as subleasing and using units as warehouses.

After the economic crisis, CPB has lost a lot of capital and incomes owing to the collapse of the stock market. It has sought to mend itself by changing their investment policy putting focus on real estate development as the main sources of income. The consequences of this new policy have been as follows. The rents have gone up. It has given shorter time span for rental contracts because of its speculation of the possibility of mega-project development. Hence, one would expect that the eviction will be more frequent. Along with the probability that people of the middle class status will be evicted will increase due to their better capabilities of renting the real estate of good urban locations. Since these locations have higher risk to be seen as the locations that can induce higher return from investment.

The last point relates to the processes of eviction that will likely to occur more often in the future. The ambiguous legal status of CPB has brought disadvantages to the tenant counterparts in the law court. CPB is not the governmental unit though it belongs to the government. The court treats it as a private organization. Therefore, by legal term, CPB does not have to take as much responsibility as the government in the case of eviction, such as the relocation and the care for occupational security of the people who are being evicted. For that reason, the people who are being evicted by the CPB are legally likely to be in the worse off situation.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Rise Of The People Movement**

Metro Regent Company Ltd. is a real estate developer company set up in September 2002, by 4 Thais 2 Indians and 1 Japanese. One of the Thais is a rich merchant from Pahurad who has some relatives of the same lineage in the study area. In October 2002, the company quietly signed a contract with Wangsinsup Company which is the representative of CPB. In the contract, CPB allows Metro





Regent to develop a project called the Sampeng Trade Center in the study area with 30-year lease. In returning to this grant, the company has to pay CPB 450 million baht. On the 12 of February 2003, CPB notified the people in the area that it had to terminate the lease to “upgrade the area for better commercial environment” and issued a 30-days move out notice. Immediately after, on the next day the people in the area received letters from Metro Regent informing that they had been given priority to lease units in the Sampeng Trade Center Project for living and trading. The rate of rents would start from 130,000 baht per square-meter for 15-year rent. Frustrated by the information, they formed into small groups of next door neighbors discussing the situation.

At this point, these people were analyzing the situation from their own cost-benefit perspectives. The threat of eviction was seen as negative externality to the people in the area. It put new costs on them, the costs of having to move out. These moving out costs included: firstly, the costs of transferring the rights to use the units in the areas. In coming to occupy the housing units in the area, they had to pay sizable amounts of money to the previous owners before they could succeed in. If they were evicted, they would lose them. To some of the people, if they could get these sums of money back they would not mind moving out. However, CPB would not be willing to pay them these amounts either. Secondly, they criticized the offers of moving to high rise building by Metro Regent Company as inappropriate for their living and trading. The rents were also too high. They saw the high rents as all the financial burdens had been transferred to them by Metro Regent Company. Furthermore, they would have to move out for 3 years for the project construction. It was another set of costs they had to bear: They had to find other places to live, and they would lose their networks of customers. Thirdly, there were also social costs attached to the deprivation from their present residences. To some of them, the residences were seen as familial heritages handing down to them from their ancestors. They wanted to keep them. To the elders, their places were full of personal and social memories, together with the lively social groups of acquainting neighbors. These were important for their meaningful lives. All of these would be gone if the buildings were to be demolished. Living in high rise building, their lives would be much worse off than before.

Realizing that the costs of moving out were too high, they would be much better off to remain in their present row house units.<sup>11</sup> Even if nearly all of the people in the area shared this same goal of wanting to remain in their present residences, there was no spontaneous process that bound them all together as one group to mobilize toward this goal. Their immediate reactions, as mentioned before, were to take their serious concerns to discuss with their neighbors in small







groups, and no further action seemed to be about to happen. The unification of the people from the whole affected area was made possible by one man, an elderly medical doctor who had been very well respected by all the people in the area. He had come to open a small clinic in the area for more than thirty years. He charged his patients with very low fees, and helped them in all matters as he could. He absorbed the altruistic thinking and behavior from his beloved medical teacher.<sup>12</sup> It can be said that this doctor has been accumulating his social capital (Portes, 1998) in the form of esteem and trust, for a long period of time through a particular structure of doctor-patient relationship.<sup>13</sup> The grievance of the people in the area led him to decide to use his social capital to help solve the problem.

It was this doctor who organized the first meeting which the people from all the affected units turned up.<sup>14</sup> In this meeting, after a long discussion, they all came to an agreement that they wanted to keep their own housing units and they would work together toward this goal. They also selected their representatives consisted of six persons as a working committee. The doctor acted as an advisor to this committee.<sup>15</sup> In effect, the people movement against the eviction was eventually set up.

To conclude on this part, the external threat of eviction or negative externality had forced these people into the same fate, creating new needs of wanting to remain in their own housing units in the area. They realized that each of them, individually, could not save his housing unit independently. Nevertheless, this movement does not rise spontaneously out of goal dependency alone; it also needs leadership of a person with high social capital especially trust.<sup>16</sup> The next issue will be on the relations between this movement and other stakeholders.

### **Dialectical Relations Among Stakeholders**

After the local resident movement was established in March 1993, its efforts to resist eviction have drawn many other stakeholders into a series of interactions with one another. Lefebvre's model of the production of space is helpful to understand the structure of these interactions. The dialectical relations among the triad were clearly applicable to the patterns of interactions at the stage prior to the set up of the movement. Nonetheless, the nature of the interactions among these stakeholders, in the later stages, has changed from the dialectical relations among the triad to the creation of their own versions of representation of space to respond to one another and to assert the parts of their rights over this space. The following is the series of dialectical relations among these stakeholders.

The local residents have been doing their spatial practices in the area for two or three generations. In this space, they have created and maintained their







wholesale fabric trading enclave. This specialized enclave has been made possible because its location is in close proximity to Sampeng, once the biggest fabric market in the country. At its beginning, this enclave received the spill over effects from Sampeng. But now, because of its own central location together with easy accessibility has made this market important to the wholesale fabric trading by itself. While these local residents have been doing their spatial practice in this space, they also have created their own spaces of representation. That is to say, their spatial practices have been related dialectically with their spaces of representation all along. These spaces have symbolic meanings for their lives. It is the space where they spend most of their time. It is their social worlds of every day lives: their occupational well beings, families, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, passers-by, events and activities. This space, for them, fills with lives, stories, memories, imaginations, sense of belonging and emotional bonds.

Since 1992, the spatial practice and the space of representation of the local residents have been threatened by eviction initiated by Metro Regent Company. After seeing the commercial potential of this space, the company created a schematic plan of the New Sampeng Trade Center, and used this schematic plan together with a financial offer<sup>17</sup> to make a business negotiation with Wangsinsap Company, acting on behalf of CPB. Wangsinsap Company accepted the offer, the contract was signed and 30-day notice was issued out to the local residents. This schematic plan was a representation of space created for the expected high profit. Therefore, it could be called “the space of big capitalist investment“(see Picture 1). If the company was succeeded in putting this representation of space into spatial practice, this action would have dissolved the spatial practice and the space of representation of the local residents.

Threatened by the actions of the two partners, the local residents united and sought outside help. They sent a letter to the member of the district council of Sampantavong to notify their grievance and asked for recommendation. This member of the parliament recommended them to consult a famous law firm. It advised them to put their case to Department of Fine Arts (DFA), requesting to register the row houses in the area as historic buildings and the national heritage<sup>18</sup>. By this way the row houses could not be demolished and the New Sampeng Trade Center project could not proceed. The local residents did accordingly. And in doing so they had tried to turn the row houses in the area into a representation of space by using the concepts of historic buildings and the national heritage. They hope that the new space they created, “the space of conservation”, would have the power to deter the shopping center project.

In response to the local residents’ request, officials from DFA carefully scrutinized these row houses. It also held a meeting with other related stake-





Picture 1: The space of big capitalist investment.

holders. They came up with a resolution that these row houses be registered as “the historic buildings”. The significance of these buildings was in their history, but not much of their design. Legally, it meant that the conservation of these buildings could go hand in hand with the development of economic activities under the supervision of DFA. Theoretically, DFA created its own version of representation of space which could be called “The space of conservation and development”. Both the local residents and Metro Regent Company reacted to this representation of space differently.

On the part of the local residents, they came up with four measures as their proposals to CPB. These measures were; firstly, they requested CPB to let them take action in the conservation of the row houses in the area by following the DFA’s conservation rules, along with the improvement of the physical environment of the area. Secondly, the residents would make the financial contributions to set up a fund for the row houses conservation and renovation. Thirdly, they would set up a legal administrative body to take care of all the activities in the area. And lastly, the local residents offered CBP the same amount of financial payment that CPB would receive from Metro Regent Company together with appropriate monthly payment in return for 30 year rent contract. Alternatively stated, the local residents had created their own version of representation of space. This space can be called “the space of conservation by local people”. Nonethe-





less, it was disappointing for the local residents that CPB refused to accept this proposal. It explained that it had already signed the contract with Metro Regent Company.<sup>19</sup>

On the part of Metro Regent Company, it came up with 5 new schematic plans (see the picture of schematic plans A to F) hoping that one of them was to be chosen. These plans were forward to DFA by CPB. DFA then chose the schematic plan F with some additional corrections. This plan was the new representation of space of Metro Regent Company which could be called “the space of capital adaptation to conservation”.

After learning that DFA approved the new schematic plan of Metro Regent Company, the local residents sent an official letter in which they proposed the same measures of what they wanted to do with the row houses in the area to DFA. Nevertheless, DFA still went on with its approval of schematic plan F, and asked for the detail plan of construction. At this point, this representation of space of Metro Regent Company was in the position of nearly being able to be put into spatial practice. As a result, the local residents sent another official letter to DFA to oppose DFA's approval of the schematic plan F of Metro Regent Company and to reaffirm their own proposals once more.

At this point in time, a sense of despair overwhelmed the local residents. It was the doctor's recommendation and help that brought the sense of hope back to them again. They decided to sign their petition to the Crown expressing their grievance and explaining what had happened in their own perspective. The Office of the Secretariat to the Crown acknowledged the petition. The people were informally informed<sup>20</sup> that the Secretary to the Crown had proceeded to ask for information from many stakeholders. The local residents, then, stopped their further action and waited for the answer.

There had been another set of incidents which went on in favor of the local residents. The office of Natural Resources and Environment in the Ministry of Science and Technology, acting as the Secretariat to the Krung Ratanakosin Committee<sup>21</sup>, was notified of the resolution of DFA (conservation together with economic development). The task of this committee was also to give guideline on implementation of the conservation of historic buildings. For that reason, it appointed a professor of architecture from a university to do the study of the area for setting up the implementation guideline. He examined the row houses, interviewed and brainstormed ideas from the local residents. After that he organized a grand seminar which all the stakeholders and people of interests were all invited. In this seminar, a lot of people expressed their ideas widely. The New Sampeng Trade Center Project was strongly opposed and the processes of people





The space of conservation by people

participation were strongly encouraged. Subsequently, the Secretariat to Krung Ratanakosin Committee held a meeting in which this professor reported his study. He stressed that since Thailand had signed the international agreement on historic building conservation<sup>22</sup>, then it should be followed. This agreement stated strongly that people participation should be respected. Nevertheless, there was still no clear conclusion on the implementation guideline from this meeting.

It was some members of the working committee who further put this study into more concrete configuration. They hired an urban design company to create a schematic plan for conservation by using the study as database. This schematic plan could be called “the space of conservation by people” (see picture). It was the representation of space of the local residents. But this space has never been disclosed to the public for reason that will be explained later.

Feeling the pressures from various directions, Metro Regent Company made a big change in its plan of their project. In the new schematic plan G (see picture) the height of the shopping complex was reduced from twelve to two storied and the environment was carefully designed. This big change clearly meant that at this point the company was willing to abide by all conditions just to put the project through. The important reason was the contract was expiring. This schematic plan G was handed over to DFA by CPB.







With anxiety, Metro Regent Company reflected upon its risking position. According to the local residents' petition to the crown, there was no definite answer that whether or when the local residents would have to move out. It also took some time for DFA to make the decision about the schematic plan G<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, the construction of the shopping complex could not proceed and would not likely to finish on time to meet the agreement in the contract. Negotiation to extend the time in the contract was also unlikely because Wangsinsap Company, at that time, was not sure about how to go on with the case either. The whole situation looked dismal and indeterminate for Metro Regent Company. Finally, it decided to make a request to Wangsinsap Company to cancel the contract and asked for the return of the deposit<sup>24</sup>. Wangsinsap refused the request. Thus, this brought about the conflicts between them.

Metro Regent Company then decided to sue CPB for a breach of contract not to clear the space for construction. It took two years before the court made the judgment that it was Metro Regent Company itself that violated the contract. The company had created a plan of the project that exploited the local residents. The company also poorly equipped with expertise in handling big project and in historic building conservation. As a result, CPB took hold of the deposit. Not satisfied with the judgment, Metro Regent Company went on to the Appeal Court. Moreover, it sued Wangsinsap Company for bribery. These actions led CPB to sue Metro Regent Company back in order to cancel the contract. And Wangsinsap Company also sued Metro Regent Company for slander. Up until now there has been no further action on the court cases reported and the conflicts among these partners still linger on.

It should be appropriate to conclude this section by pointing out how Lefebvre's triadic model can help us make sense of the above conducts of these stakeholders. Firstly, apart from their present spatial practices of earning livings in this space, the space of representation or lived space has also helped comprehend why these people resist eviction when they are just "the tenants" not "the owners" of the row houses. It is because they are emotionally tied to this space. This space contains their lives experiences and memories. In their minds this space is theirs. As a result, this space is full of symbolic meanings. These meanings are probably as important to a life of a person as other things such as wealth and fame. As a few informants mentioned about the deliberate cruelty of the eviction notice had shocked many elders in the area. These elders love their homes and want to remain in the area for the rest of their lives. Understanding their feelings, their children also want to keep their houses.

Secondly, as commented earlier, Lefebvre's triadic relations are relevant for the stage of movement formation. But when it comes to the relations among





stakeholders, we have found that they dialectically interact with one another through the creation of their own versions of representation of space. By doing so, they have not only expressed the parts of their spatial rights, but also hope that they can put them into practice. These representations of space, then, have become the symbols of power which are used to negotiate, compete and control among one another. The local residents have learned about this too. They have realized that by using their space of representations alone it would be hard for them to win this game. Consequently, they have to create their own version of representation of space. This type of space helps them to negotiate more effectively with other stakeholders. At the moment of this writing, when CPB and Metro Regent Company are still in conflict, there is a positive sign that CPB's new partner would probably be the local residents.

Analytically, the relations among these representations of space are clearly dialectical. Since each new representation of space that emerges is the product of dialectical relations of the old ones. That is to say, by looking at the series of these representations of space, one can not only see the historical development of the relationships of the involved stakeholders, but also the risk of the possible failure for putting each of them into practice.

### **Inside the Movement**

This section is a probe into the internal affair of this movement. It focuses on two questions. The first question is what factors affect the solidarity of this movement, since they are important for the movement's success. In the view of the fact that the people in this movement are mainly middle classes, it is interesting to ask the second question how wealth produces the uniqueness of this movement.

In answering the first question we start from Hechter's model. The first factor is goal dependency. It is the main cause for the rise of this movement. The local residents unite together because they want to keep their own row houses and they have to do it together.<sup>25</sup>

The second factor is the quality of group norms. Most norms that have been created so far are financial norms. There are two occasions when the members of the movement are asked to follow the group's financial norms. On the first occasion 15,000 baht per one contract is collected for lawyer expenses. There are a few members who do not pay. These free riding behaviors have gone unsanctioned. For Hechter if the free riding behavior is let go unsanctioned, it affects the norm conformity thereby lower the level of solidarity of the group.





On the second occasion when the local residents propose their conservation plan to CPB and offer to pay CPB the same amount that Metro Regent Company would pay. This implies that each local resident has to pay 2 million baht per contract. The majority of them agree with the offer and are ready to pay. Nevertheless, there are some who do not agree and ready to make over their rights to new tenants. This amount of money is too great for them. Lucky or not, this proposal was refused by CPB on the first time. From then on, these people have taken no more interest in the movement. This event, therefore, reduce the level solidarity of the movement.

From these empirical data of the two occasions, what is understated in Hechter's model is the quality of the group norms. What has been neglected by the people in the movement is how to deal with its internal diversity. For the first occasion the norm of payment is a uniform rate, therefore, insensitive to many types of contract that people have made with CPB. The application of this norm has been more advantageous for some people than for other. On the second occasion, the norm of payment is also a uniform rate and the amount of money is too large for the less wealthy ones and for some of those who have held more than one contract<sup>26</sup>. That is to say this norm is only well fitted for the wealthier. Hence, it can be said that the uniform rate of payment has discouraged poorer members to participate in the movement. Despite these people are the most dependent on the movement to realize their goals. The row houses in the area are the only houses they have. If the movement proceeds by using uniform financial measures as their principal norms, it can be said that this movement operates on the individual basis not the group basis. The lack of care for each individual member's specific needs indicates the lack of group ideology. Herzfeld (2006: 142) has a corresponding observation "Middle-class space has its own imperatives, but these do not include the same degree of collective self-deployment. The growing individualization that accompanies economic and social mobility has largely dispelled that capacity." Hence, how to gain this capacity is a big question for this movement and also for other middle class movements in the areas nearby such as the people movements at the Wat Sakate and Prang Phuthorn. The invention of non-financial social norm is probably necessary to enhance social bond among the members. Only as a whole group defending their space together, would distinguish them from other developers.

The third factor is trust. This factor is also understated in Hechter's model. In quite a few events in the movement, trust has played decisive roles. In the first event, trust has helped the doctor facilitate the inception of the movement. In the second event, the rather large group size and most of the members are busy







earning their livings; the members have decided to select a working committee to work on their behalf. A closer look at the members of the working committee shows that each of them represents a cluster of closer neighbors. This reflects its heterogeneous nature. Accordingly, there are two ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Indian, in this committee. But the majority of them are Chinese. The point is that one of the Indian members in this committee happens to have the same surname as one of the owners of Metro Regent Company.<sup>27</sup> This Indian member is unofficially accused as a spy. This incident illustrates one way in which trust becomes problematic here.

In the third event, even though most of the committee members are reputable for their honesty, there still are rumors about their dishonesty when dealing with financial issues. And it is again the doctor who can stop these rumors. In other words, they trust him. Trust can dissolve suspicion and maintain group solidarity.

In the last event, trust has become the most critical issue in the mind of many committee members when the movement as a whole has tried to compete in bidding for the contract with CPB. Comparing Metro Regent Company's schematic plan G with the schematic plan created by some of the committee members, one can see that they are very similar in many aspects. Therefore, it can be understood that why some fear has arisen. According to a member of the committee, there are 1 or 2 rich businessmen in the movement itself interested in becoming the developer themselves. Even Metro Regent Company has not yet turned back from this project. This indicates that these people are acting as potential rational actors; each is trying to add more to his individual gain. This is the reason to explain why the schematic plan created by some of the members of the committee has never been disclosed. Nevertheless, it is a matter of who CPB will choose to be its partner. As mentioned earlier that there is positive sign from CPB that its future partner would be the movement as a group. If CPB wants the movement to be its partner, it clearly means that it wants more than an ordinary developer. It wants to work with a real civil group. The reason for doing this is not hard to see. It needs to gain the image of standing with the people. As a result, it is up to the movement whether it can live up to its own role.

With the second question, how does wealth produce the uniqueness of this movement? They come in many forms. Firstly, it works through education. A few members in the committee have very high education. One of the committee members put a lot of his effort in doing his own research by reading a great deal about urban development and related issues. He also learns by attending seminars and other movements both within and other countries. His knowledge has been transformed into the content of the development plan proposed by the





local residents to CPB. Secondly, it works through social networks. They can gain access to high celebrity which ensured that their petition is well attended. Thirdly, certain approach in expressing their demands is refused. As the doctor has put it, “We are not going to demonstrate in the street. It is not our way. We use negotiation.” They see certain practice as inappropriate to their statuses. Lastly, it works through wealth itself. Nonetheless, wealth manifests itself in contradiction in this case. It is both strength and weakness for the movement. With wealth the movement can hire a very good law firm and get essential advice. With wealth the movement can make a financial offer on equal terms to the big capitalist. In the opposite, wealth can turn its insiders into potential competitors and hence weaken the solidarity of the movement.

It will be very interesting to investigate the running of this movement through its future stages. Especially if CPB decides to make a contract with it, there certainly will be many more things for both the movement’s members and investigators to learn from.

### **Conclusion**

During the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century we have experienced that capitalism has major role in urban expansion. Putting the matter in David Harvey’s perspective (Harvey, 2003), we have witness the urbanization of capital in terms of financial and property investment and speculation. Urban space has been commodified ever more intensively. That is to say, urban space is increasingly the product of capitalistic forces. These strong forces have pushed urban space into contestation between the use value and the exchange value of that space. This is how the movement has arisen. As one can see from this case, capitalism even intrudes into the lives of the capitalist classes themselves. Fortunately, Lefebvre has noted that the pluralistic nature of powers in urban society has made it possible for “the de-commodified existence” (Goonewardena et al., 2008, pp. 250-263). Alternatively stated, these pluralistic powers can possibly bring about the space of hope for the urbanites, as happening in this case. Even though the structure of urban society is open up for the possibility of success, it does not mean that it will come with an easy course. This paper has tried to reveal the uniqueness as well as the potentialities and weaknesses of this middle classes movement.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wangsinsap Company, acting on behalf of the Crown Property Bureau, sent an official letter to the tenants in the study area on the 12<sup>th</sup> February 2004. The above passage is some of the main content in the letter.

<sup>2</sup> From the financial document that was attached to the above letter.

<sup>3</sup> This paper would focus only on the works of two theorists, Michael Hechter and James Coleman. For both of them have their works on the topic of solidarity.

<sup>4</sup> Dialectic is important to Lefebvre's theory of space: therefore, it needs a closer look. Clusters of words as assertion, contradiction and resolution are more or less well known to any social sciences student. But dialectics itself is more complex and contains many meanings than the above general understanding. Ritzer has explained its multiple meanings quite extensively (see Ritzer 2002: 42-49). To understand this word one should start with the recognition that social reality is marked by contradictions. Schmid explains that "The contradiction tends towards its resolution, yet since the resolution does not simply negate the old contradiction, it also simultaneously preserves it and brings it to a higher level. Therefore, the resolution bears in it the germ of new contradiction. This understanding of the dialectic is characterized by a deep historical and dynamic interpretation of development and history." (Schmid 2008: 31) At the core of the word dialectic is the word sublation (*aufheben*) which signifies a creative activity, a realization, a becoming which cannot be explained by clear Cartesian thinking. "In sublation there is always a risk, a possible failure and at the same time a possibility – a promise." (Lefebvre 1968: 36). That is why Lefebvre explains that his dialectical triad is an approximation.

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre has created his own original triadic dialectical relations wanting to get away from the dialectic of binary opposition, such as structure vs. agency or discourse vs. practice. (Savage and Warde, 1993, p.129). He derived his triad from the works of Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche (Schmid 2008: 32)

<sup>6</sup> As Hegel explains "Something is sublated only in so far as it has enter into unity with its opposite, in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a moment." (Hegel 1969: 107).

<sup>7</sup> There is a variation in translation. Some use representational space while others use space of representation. This paper prefers to use space of representation.

<sup>8</sup> The rational choice theorists are not interested in what these values are or where they come from. What they see as important is there are actions occur because there are certain goals to be realized and these goals are correspond with the preference hierarchy that has been ordered by actors.

<sup>9</sup> The Privy Purse Bureau gained this plot of land from a female aristocrat who sold it to King Rama V for personal reasons. The local people named the area after her





and her husband.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on CPB see, Auyyanont, Porpan. (2006). *The Crown Property Bureau and the role in Business Investment*. A Research Report in Economics. Sukothaidhammathirat University. In Structure and Dynamic of the Thai Capital After the Economic Crisis Research Project. By Prof. Pasuk Pongpichit The Office of the Fund for the Support of Research: Cheamthirasakul, Somsak. What is the Crown Property Bureau? *Fa Deaw Kan*. Vol. 3, July-September, 2005: Kongnirandonsuk, S. *Open the Twilight Zone of the Crown Property Bureau*. In Puchatkarn Monthly Magazine. (November), 1992 pp.192-198.

<sup>11</sup> They created cost-benefit structures in their reasoning.

<sup>12</sup> From the interview he told us that his life has been fulfilled and it is time for him to live for others. He was in a very high position at Siriraj hospital before he retired. Even now he still has his office hours at Siriraj hospital twice weekly during the day.

<sup>13</sup> Portes gives the main characteristics of social capital as follows; it is an individual asset; it has positive consequences of sociability; it is a potential in occupying a network relation for a long period of time until it becomes more or less institutionalized; it is embedded in a structure of social relationship (Portes 1998).

<sup>14</sup> From the interview with the people in the area, they said that this unification was possible because they all trusted the doctor.

<sup>15</sup> From an interview with one of the committee members, he pointed out that to have the doctor as an advisor to the committee has increased its credibility.

<sup>16</sup> Hechter's model of solidarity that emphasizes the control aspects of a social movement alone seems inadequate in explaining the movement formation. In the case of this study area, trust seems to be an important factor for the success of the formation. As Coleman has pointed out that trust is often the decisive factor in the decision of to go through or not to go through (Coleman 1990: 177-188).

<sup>17</sup> It should be pointed out here that the domination of representation of space, as Lefebvre has put it, in order to be effective, might have to go with other resources, such as 400 million baht within 30 years in this case.

<sup>18</sup> According to the National Heritage law, any old building which was built in the reign of King Rama the Fifth and beyond is entitle to be registered as the historic buildings.

<sup>19</sup> Another interpretation from an informal source was Metro Regent Company had offered to pay more than the official offer in the contract.

<sup>20</sup> They have an insider network.

<sup>21</sup> It was set up by the government in 1978. Since then it has been responsible





for assigning the dominant policies and regulations on conservation and development, or the master plan, of the old town area of Bangkok.

<sup>22</sup> The Washington Charter, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> DFA later approved of this plan.

<sup>24</sup> The amount of the deposit is 250 million baht.

<sup>25</sup> Looking closer at the local residents, even though almost all of them want to keep their own row houses, there are about 9 or 10 who do not mind getting compensation money and leave and about 2 or 3 who do not want to join the group. Nonetheless, it is only small numbers and does not affect the running of the movement at that point in time.

<sup>26</sup> Up until the present time CPB rent rates have been much cheaper than the market rates. This encourages some people to hold more than one contract. Looking from different angle these cheaper rates have helped the poorer people to survive in urban core areas and also have helped maintain population heterogeneity in these areas.

<sup>27</sup> They are of the same kin and doing the same business. .

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