



**“No Way Out”:
The Middle Class’s Portrayal of the Urban Poor in Chart
Korbjitti’s Novel**

Khajornsak Sitthi

Asst.Prof. Dr., School of Political Science, Sukhothai Thammathirat University, Thailand
Email: khajornsak.sit@stou.ac.th

Abstract

This paper aims to examine Chart Korbjitti’s first novel called *No Way Out*. The novel was first published in 1980 and has been published for twenty-four editions ever since. By employing reader-response theory, the paper argues that the story of the main characters could be read as the representation of the urban poor by the middle class, arguably the Bangkok-centric middle class. Although the novel is usually acclaimed as critics as a critical novel which renders critiques of the social facts, the novel seems to reenact and reproduce the conventional portrayal of the rural people in Thailand. While the urban poor in *No Way Out* were originally from rural areas and later migrated to live in the city of Bangkok, they are predominantly characterized as “silly (*ngo*), poor (*jon*), pitiful (*jeb*).” Such representation could be encountered in several parts of the novel, but the most vivid and yet controversial ones could be found in the discussion of home, debt and spirited fight of the urban poor. This paper concludes that such representation is an unconscious reflection of the conventional discourse on the urban poor circulated in Thai society. In this regard, the writer seemingly recreated and yet reproduced the representation further. Even though the representation of the urban poor was nothing new, it has continued to be portrayed until the present time. This representation could potentially play a role in shaping the perception of Thais and possibly in undermining the sense of agency of the poor in Thai society as well as Thai politics.

Keywords: rural-urban divide, representation of the poor, politics and novel



1. Introduction

Chart Korbjitti's *No Way Out (jontrok)* is typically acclaimed as a critical novel in a sense that it renders "aesthetics based on bare truth" which other novels opt to omit (Seni Saowaphong 1997: 6). But the novel has rarely been evaluated and interpreted from a political perspective. *No Way Out* is one of the novels with ironical plot and genre. Such irony revolved around the notions of life hardship, economic exploitation and moral dilemmas. While Chart seems to illustrate cruelty experienced by the poor migrating and living in an urban circumstance, he also seems to juxtapose such cruelty with examples of a spirited struggle by the poor. On the other hand, arguably his novel might reflect a conventional discourse. This is demonstrated, for instance, at one point of the novel when the main characters called "Boonma" who just lost his son, Dam, was instructed "Stand up to life and fight. Fight with all you've got. And you'll be a winner,"¹ In this regard, the problem of poor people was that they had not put enough effort for survival. If they had put enough effort, they would have been the winner.

This paper attempts to explore the representation of the urban poor in Chart Korbjitti's *No Way Out*, and to evaluate the main causes of the tragedy encountered by the urban poor. Precisely, it aims to assess that what are the main causes leading to the tragedy for the poor; be they the lack of a spirited fight for their survival or the unjust, merciless structure of the Thai urban environment. This author argues that while Chart's urban poor have demonstrated a spirited fight in several parts represented by, *inter alia*, industrious work, the main characters are frequently portrayed as irrevocably poor and yet "losers" who, instead of putting effort to overcome problems and difficulties, surrender to their misfortune.

While at times the urban poor demonstrated the spirited fights, they were represented as unsophisticated, ignorant and helpless "preys" in a violent system. To be fair, in a given social-economic entity, there are deep compliments and mutual inventions between social structure and individual agents. However, in this case, several parts of the novel seem to illustrate the situations where the poor's life is demolished by the urban environment, while the tragedy is further exacerbated by the poor's own decision and deed. In this regard, the paper contends that while the emergence of the poor's life calamity, economic exploitation and immoral actions is created the unjust, unkind urban environment or what Johan Galtung has calls "structural violence", the deterioration of the situations are the poor's responsibility. For Chart, as demonstrated by the novel, the poor seems to be irredeemably irrational, illiterate and impoverished.

The paper can be divided into four parts. The first part, before embarking on the main argument and to ground common understanding, the paper will discuss the main context and contents of the novel. In the second part, *on home*, focusing on the acquirement of the house of the main character's family as the rooted cause of their poverty. This part will examine life hardship and economic hardship engendered by the urban environment. By interpreting environment as urban physical area, it argues that the poor life was victimized by social problems, including crime, drug and prostitution, made possible by marginalized areas of the city. Second, *on debt*, the merciless aspects of the city environment represented by the cruelty of businessmen will be explored. It is intended to illustrate how the poor were economically exploited as a laborer in factory and fishery. Last, *on spirited fight*, the paper attempts to discuss that, at certain points, the members of Boonma's family inconceivably shifted from the virtue of hard working to simply and

¹ Chart Korbjitti, *No Way Out*, David Smyth (trans), (Bangkok: Howling Books, 2003), p.134.

easily blame on the destiny, environment and even an intangible notion, like karma. Their misfortune, thus, might be arguably brought about by the urban environment, but, for Chart, seemingly at the poor's behest.

2. Context and Contents

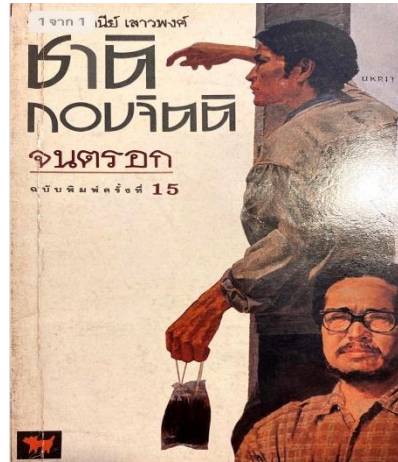


Figure 1: The Front Cover of No Way Out, 15th edition, published in 1997.

No Way Out, first published in 1980, was Chart Korbjitti's first "short" novel and has been published for 24 editions ever since. The novel later was also made a movie called "Ban." No Way Out was held by a progressive writer as a progressive novel at the time (Seni Saowaphong 1997: 6). Chart attempts to present a story of an urban poor family which has so little choice. The family comprises six members; Boonma (the main character), grandad (Boonma's dad), Sida (Boonma's daughter), Ort (Boonma's oldest son), Dam (Boonma's youngest son), and Boonma's wife. This family was originally from Ubon Ratchathani. But because of famine, hunger and hardship, they moved to live in Bangkok as the urban poor by renting a very small room. However, upon arriving in Bangkok, they encountered a series of hardship which starting from Boonma's decision to make a loan from his employer (*towkay*) in order to build a very small, yet new house. Due to his very low wage and family expense, Boonma faced difficulty in repaying the loan and the debt interest had kept piling up. Even though he had done almost everything, including selling himself to work as a laborer in *Mahachai* fishery boat. Far away from the very house he intended to build, Boonma still could not repay his debt. Every family member had to help out. While grandad helped by sharpening knife for hire, Sida became a prostitute and Ort a thief just to earn some money to help out and take care of the family. On return, Boonma only found himself made at his fortune. Eventually, his family collapsed. Throughout the novel, the Chart's "urban poor" have demonstrated a fighting spirit. However, every step their made seem to be a mistake. Despite of good intention and spirited attempt, they seem unable to change anything.

Another interesting point is the dialogues among the family members. Linguistically speaking, generally people in the north-eastern region of the country speak Isan dialect. Although it is understandable from the point of view of writing system in using the Thai alphabets, there is absolutely absence of the pronunciation in Isan, even between the family members who travelled from Ubon



Ratchathani. This not only pointed to the fact that chart's main readers were those in Bangkok, but latently and arguably signified the cultural triumph of the capital hegemony at the very profound level.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 On Home

“The cramped rented room in which they lived, almost on top of one another, served as kitchen, living room and bedroom...And without anyone intending it, the room would come to resemble pigsty.”

The first considered issue is the attainment of a “new house” of the main character; Boonma family, originally from Ubon Ratchathani, in a new Bangkok environment. Because Ubon Ratchathani is plagued by poverty, disease and famine, they “have to” move to live in Bangkok as the marginalized as portrayed in Chart's discussion of Ubon Ratchathani province that;

“And what about starvation on top of that? It wasn't just about people having food to eat, either; even the buffalo could find no grass to eat. Some of the children had matchstick arms and legs, and heads as big as ghouls...His village was full of disease, poverty and debt that you could hardly say which was the more serious.”²

In chart's work, the notion of home for the poor is defined by “proper” material construction. Thus, while already having a room which can be lived for all the family's members, Boonma decides to build a new house. For him, the possession of a “house”, not a “room,” would not only bring happiness, but can be properly called “home”. Such residence acquisition can be interpreted as a problem between the urban poor's struggle for better life or the misleading to misfortune.³

It is seemingly rational to struggle to escape from such persistence of poverty, disease and widespread famine, and to move to live in the city. Bangkok was projected as a place not only where they will be able to earn a living but as “the city where their future lays.”⁴ Boonma family first lived in a very small room. As the novel puts it that **“The cramped rented room in which they lived, almost on top of one another, served as kitchen, living room and bedroom...And without anyone intending it, the room would come to resemble pigsty.”** However, interestingly despite the limited space of the room, the members of the poor family seemingly stayed afar from misery and the situation was not so unbearable. Actually, for some members of the house, like Boonma's father, the room even better than their previous house in Ubon Ratchathani since the old man felt that “...he could eat and sleep a bit better than in his old home.”⁵ Living in a small room, therefore, was not a problem. The attempt to acquire a new house seems to be ill-informed for the

² Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.33.

³ Home is rendered in Thai as, among other things, *ban* (บ้าน) and *viman* (วิมาน). It is noteworthy that *viman* might connote a more perfectible notion of ban. It is usually employed to satire those who desire the impossible or possible only in imagination.

⁴ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.31.

⁵ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, (p.33).



poor. The novel seems to show that the poor do not know what is economic suitable or “sufficient” for them.

Closely related is living in the city environment of Bangkok as the marginalized at the margin of the society was not suitable for the poor. Living as the urban poor will lead to problems. Thus, it is possibly that if the poor had stayed in Ubon Ratchathani, thing would not have gone from bad to worse. According to the novel, Bangkok’s marginal areas were plagued by severe social problems, including crime, drugs and prostitution.⁶ Within such circumstances, the immigrants were exposed to vulnerability in many respects. A fine example would be when Boonma’s dad; Granddad, who had been working hard all day long intending to give the money earned to add to the sustenance of the family was robbed and outrageous harmed. It was a dark corner of the city when he was violently hit led him to the point of almost paralyse. The city environment for Chart, hence, was perilous, insecure and harmful for the poor. In fact, it is the urban poor who indeed seemed to be most severely affected.

The misfortune was further pulverized poor’s decision and deed. It was when Boonma decided to build a new house, the tragedy started to occur for all the family’s members. The effort to acquire a new house as an assembly of dream and happiness was indeed a dissembling point of his dad, wife and children. After the attainment of the new house which looked merely like a “shack,” in fact a “ramshackle shack,” Boonma’s son; Ort, started to observe that those who left the house seemingly never missed it and did not want to return to it.⁷ For him, everyone who left home just never came back. From the Beginning, before Boonma built a new house, there were no signs of readiness for the family to acquire a new residence. The novel demonstrates that, given unmanageable living expenses and financial difficulties, it was not a rational idea to make a loan to build a house. Actually, the main reason given by Boonma in order to build a new house was simply that it was “like other people,” In addition, the newly built house did not give him a full ownership. Located in his *towkay* land, the house had no, *among other things*, title deed, registration, electricity and tap water. The house was also exposed to vulnerability by being opposite to a place of prostitution symbolized light hoardings. Boonma himself admitted to the fact that the ambition to build a new house led to the family’s tragedy. As it was written that;

“Boonma would have liked to return to those days, even though they were living in a cramped rented room like a rat’s hole...It was because of his desire to have a house of his own, a real home, that these wretched events had happened;”⁸

Thus, the decision to build a new house was not suitable based on financial capability and rational decision. For Chart, the poor do not know their ow status, and only imitate other people (supposedly the rich). Because of this lack of “self-knowing”, the poor have to face what they face; tragedy.

⁶ While the mention of marijuana could be found on page 34, Heroine and prostitution were on page 95.

⁷ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.19.

⁸ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.127.



3.2 On Debt

“Were debts the only things he had left? Life! What a life! What was it, this thing they called happiness?”

Another relating issue to be considered revolves around the “3,000-baht” debt incurred by Boonma. Debt of the poor was employed by Chart both literally as financial bondage and metaphorically, in accordance to the Thai belief, as *karma*. Both were what the poor had to repay. As it was described in a pinnacle of the novel, that

“Were debts the only things he had left? Life! What a life! What was it, this thing they called happiness? What was it like? Hardship and bitterness were all he had ever tasted, so that he had grown accustomed to their flavor.”⁹

According to the novel, on the one hand, it was obvious that debt represented economic exploitation of the poor by city businessmen. Although abiding by the law, the interest rate had dramatically and cruelly usurped to the point that the poor could not cope with and repay. For Instance, the amount of debt and its interest collectively were so substantial that Boonma “himself” was sold in favor of the debt value. It was argued that “only a year later the loan had gorged itself on Boonma’s sweat.” That the interest of the debt had relentlessly accumulated in a massive scale seems to reflect a cruel capital logic of the city. Even by the time he had to move to a new career, on a boat, the debt was not repaid a single bath despite industrious work of the family members. Actually, it proliferated to 4,000 baht. As exemplified by Boonma family;

“At first it was agreed that interest and loan would be deducted from his salary. After a while it became interest only. Then he paid some months and not others, so that in the end there was interest to be paid on the interest.”¹⁰

Also due to the debt bondage, Boonma had to encounter another economic slavery on a boat in *Mahachai* sarcastically far away from the very house built by a loan. There the fact that the urban poor were further crushed and exploited by the existing structure of the rich had been succinctly portrayed. The economic slavery could be explained in Boonma’s monthly wage, half of which was deducted to repay to the debtor. As Chart wrote; **“His monthly wages of six hundred baht didn’t include the percentage he received from the catch, which on some trips came to four or five hundred baht. It ought to have been enough for one person who neither gambled nor drank. But there wasn’t just him. And on top of that, four hundred baht was deducted each month as interest repayment...”¹¹**

Such situations of the poor seem to confirm the dictum on the rural population that their position is “that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water. So that even a ripple might drown him” (Tawney cited in Scott, 1976: vii). Yet, this time his new job was also dangerous. For instance, a scenario was narrated that a seriously ill crew was not allowed to be taken back to the hospital in land since it was not financially worth. Eventually the poor crew died. In this sense,

⁹ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.125.

¹⁰ Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.68.



labour exploitation of the poor was a rule rather than an exception. They were crushed by the city environment, here by the city businessmen, was argumentatively valid.

However, from a different perspective, the novel also harboured sceptical views towards the poor behaviour and attitude. Poverty might not be about the lowness of income, but it was a deprivation of ability and freedom (Sen 1991:89). They, thus, became impoverished by their own making and enslaved themselves in a financial bondage. It was portrayed that the poor were often prone to undisciplined money using and resorting to loan. They were worsened by bringing themselves into the financial trap and economic difficulties. In other words, their failure began when Boonma first successfully made a loan, it seemed that he did not use money for the sake of its originally purpose.

In addition, in Chart's work, among the most obvious characteristics of the Thai poor are their addiction to liquor and gambling. Ironically, after successfully making the loan for building the new house, the first thing to do for Boonma was getting himself drunk before. The poor was also portrayed in *No Way Out* as being addicted to gambling. They loved "playing with their fortune", expected in "certain uncertainty" and eventually, if things went wrong, blamed their misfortune rather than their own fault as the reason for the impoverished life. Bangkok businessmen seemed to know and abuse this fact well. This significantly constitutes the representation of the poor as "helpless" victims of both *towkay* and *tigong*.

3.3 On a Spirited Fight

"Or was it that his karma was catching up with him."

Although Chart's urban poor's fighting spirit could be found in different parts of the novel, they are eventually portrayed as losers. Based on the novel, the poor metaphorically fought physically and financially. Apart from Boonma's youngest son; Dam, who was too little, every single member of the family put up for hard work. The Boonma's dad; grandfather, despite his ill, deteriorating health conditions and ageing, went out for knife sharpening. While his wife and his oldest son; Ort, folded paper bags for their entire day time, Boonma's daughter; Sida, went out for car's window wiping at the expense of her education. Boonma worked in a Chinese businessman's factory and, later on a boat. Everyone seemed to work hard for every single baht. They were parsimonious in living expense and food. This picture culminated in a context when Ort, Dam and granddad were dining with a duck neck, granddad despite wanting to eat more and being mouthful with saliva "...had to swallow it [saliva] back down quickly," telling himself he ate enough.¹²

However, in several occasions, Chart seemingly rendered that the poor not only disregarded a spirited struggle, but also surrendered to their misfortune and even entangled themselves with further problems. Every fight they gave up seemed to invite more unrealizable troubles. Like chain effects, surrender in an event led to another defeat and other misfortune. In other words, if one "wrong" decision had not been taken, the following situation would have been better. Surprisingly,

¹² Chart Korbjitti, *ibid.*, p.15.



the poor made all wrong decision based on the novel. Thus, the novel seemed to suggest that the urban poor's mistakes accounted for their own persistent poverty, starvation and debt.

The collapse of Boonma's family; the breaking up with between Boonma and his wife and the death and leaving of his children metaphorically symbolized the idea that Boonma was divorced from life struggle and married with problem. This began by the departure of Boonma from the ability to listen and vehemently hit his wife, by the separation of Boonma's wife from the house, by the granddad's departure from the world by hanging himself at the neck and Ort's separation from the morality, turning to be a thief. If one separation had not occurred, the result arguably would have been different.

The character of the poor in the novel reached the climax in the attempt not to fight but to blame. They began blaming on almost all their surroundings and even an abstract notion of *karma*. For Chart, these behaviours allowed the poor to reject responsibility for their own deeds as portrayed by three members of the family, including Ort, granddad and Boonma. When Ort was running around selling newspapers at a traffic light the novel said;

“Why Ort kept wondering, hadn't he been born into a rich family,.. Lots of kids sitting there in cars were the same age as him. Why wasn't it him, too? Why was he born into a family whose life was like this?”¹³

It could be read that this was because Ort thought was still very young, but he had to carry irresolvable burdens. Granddad also felt that misfortune was due to certain unexplainable causes. Believing that all tragedy was because of *karma*;

“The old man lay in his mosquito net with his eyes wide open. As he lay there, it struck him that this house was so full of intrigue. Or was it that his karma was catching up with him.”¹⁴

For Boonma, the cause of their life being crushed was not so different. Since **“he was angry only with himself for being born poor. He didn't know why poor people such as him always encountered such misfortune. All he knew was that life was a matter of karma, paying off the debt for the sins of past lives.”¹⁵**

Indeed, for Chart's urban poor, life *itself* was already a debt of past lives' **“sin”** and they had to repay in the present time. Ill-fated events were in consequence of the poor's lack of merit. Lacking merit from previous lives led them to be impoverished in the present lives. Therefore, to overcome the difficulties in life was not to put a spirited fight but to make more merit.

From these three sub-sections, a question should be raised is that the novel did not go further to ask why the urban poor had such a “misfortunate life”. Despite hard work and tremendous effort, the poor seemed to fall in trap and could not escape their “destiny”. The writer did not mention the structural problems why the poor were poor and why they were so different from the rich. It seems that all the misfortune happened because of a simple reason that the poor born poor. Over the years, the write also seems to pay less attention to changes which occur in rural areas in Thailand. Which

¹³*Ibid.*, p.97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.129.



some have argue the rural people are no longer “grass roots” but “grass tips” (Prapas 2011). Some argue that they are “urbanized villagers” (Naruemon and McCargo 2011). Some have argued that they are “cosmopolitan villagers” (Keyes 2014).

Therefore, it is quite surprising that the novel has still been popular as it has been published for twenty-four editions. The latest one was published in 2018. With such popularity, although there is no outright evidenced linkage between the perception of the urban poor in the novel and the portrayal by the novel. This representation seemingly continued to exist with very few questions. As an author has described such a story as a so-called “tale” entitled the “love of Siam, despotic patron, and native rural people”. In the tale there are two types of people; the urban and the rural. “The urban people are sharply smart, bright. They have ethics and morality. They know what is going on. Hard to be deceived. Independent. Fully capable of knowing what is right or wrong. Although the urban is selfish sometimes, the are so just because they love progress and success in life. For the rural, they are brunt, naïve, and obedient. Easy to be deceived. Unfree. Unable to make decisions by themselves because they are under guidance of a patron. Thus, at times they did immoral or unethical doing because they are unable to know what is right or wrong” (Prajak 2015: 397). This is a tale for “it is difficult to tell the source of origin or the first teller of the story. It is unclear when the tale was first produced. Some argue that it was first produced in the Sarit era, but some argue earlier than that (Prajak Kongkirati 397).

The tale has led to a creation of a myth of rural people who are “silly, poor and pitiful”. The tale is used to undermine democracy and over the last decade the tale has been emphasized and reproduced by the urban and middle class. This story has become “a national story.” The rural are easy to be deceived. Their actions are the result of being hired or deceived. They are greedy. Bangkok as the capital city is not a place for the rural who are “*bannok*” (hillbilly). They are not supposed to be in Bangkok, but they are expected to work in a farm. As the novel has shown, there is no place in the novel that the main characters seemed to do well in Bangkok. At one point, he questioned his own family why they had to come to Bangkok in the first place. Despite undergoing several changes, Thai society still lives with the world of an ancient tale. We tell a tale to ourselves over and over again every single day until being addicted and misunderstood that the tale is the truth, the one and only truth (Prajak 2015: 399).

4. Conclusion

Therefore, the representation of Chart’s urban poor seemed to be irrational, foolish and helpless. While the urban poor in Chart’s *No Way Out* put up a spirited fight, they were mercilessly crushed by the city environment and their destiny. The urban poor encountered life hardship, was exploited by the city environments, and navigated their life into storms and immoral actions. Why they were also the ultimate sovereign for their own life, they are indelibly impoverished. It eventually their own decision to move to live in Bangkok, to build a new house despite several signs of uneasiness, to fall into the debt slavery despite already being in poverty, and eventually to surrender from the spirited fight and began to blame on almost all surroundings, especially karma. Thus, the poor should stay where they are, and do not try to change their life. It will be unsuccessful. Every person was already destined. The rich have to be rich, and the poor have to be poor. These are “facts.”



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