

Ulasan Buku/ *Book Review*

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A Meeting of Masks – Status, Power and Hierarchy in Bangkok
by Sophorntavay Vorng, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2017, xii+194 pp.
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A Meeting of Masks is an ethnographic study of middle class consciousness and practices cast in the structural hierarchy embedded in the everyday city lives in Bangkok. Vorng conceptualises middle class culture in terms of practice, production or performance, as ‘something that happens in human relationships’ (p. 88). Middle class identity is understood as a social identity negotiated inter-subjectively through the mobilisation of economic resources and cultural practices deemed as appropriate to the aspired status, and not merely as part of a ‘structure’ or ‘category’.

Vorng delicately incorporates emic conception of status and inequality in her exploration of social differentiation and interaction located in the prestigious and opulent Siam-Ratchaprasong district in Bangkok. The emergence of this new city centre of fashion, commerce and entertainment took place in tandem with the expansion of the Thai class structure engendered by capitalistic accumulation. For Vorng, the rise of Siam-Ratchaprasong district which symbolises a modern, neoliberal ‘new order’ need not eclipse the traditional locale of Rattanakosin which remains the embodiment of the ‘old order’ of the monarchical power. Instead, the new material inequalities build on ‘pre-existing contours of social differentiation’ (p. 39). The changing configurations of urban space nonetheless ‘represents a shift in the axis of the city, and in the idiom of power and status in Thai society’ (p. 38), from perceiving power as represented by the monarchy and aristocracy to the emphasis of power as represented by material wealth (p. 63). In her words,

“The ascension of Siam-Ratchaprasong as a rival centre to Rattanakosin speaks of the increasing influence of new upper and growing middle classes that have been able to amass power through wealth, education, and an engagement with capitalist modernity. ... This newer class manifests itself as both distinctively Sino-Thai and cosmopolitan in consumption, taste, and lifestyle, as opposed to the older aristocratic elite classes” (p. 70-71).

Vorng’s study of Thai middle-class identity and lifestyle happened to begin in 2005 just before the mass protests against the then Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was subsequently ousted from his office. She demonstrates how the everyday life in Bangkok was marked by ‘intense social competition and hierarchical divisions’ due to a pervasive ‘preoccupation with status, power and prestige’. Vorng argues that the resultant sense of societal injustice and widespread discontent had lent ‘a great deal of force and meaning to the social movements that have emerged in the past decade.’ (p. 35)

The ensuing waves of political conflict and social rift have generally been described as a “class war” attributed to the ‘urban-rural divide.’ Vorng finds such dichotomic characterisation too simplistic to capture the complexity on the ground. She points out that many ‘urban middle class’ people are actually white-collar rural migrants. Within the more elite classes, there is also further status distinction between those with differing levels of wealth, and prestige associated with those issued from traditional societal status such as nobility and aristocrats may also serve to distinguish them from those who are merely affluent, the *nouveau riche*. The mobilisation of the Red Shirt movement is oriented more to demanding a fairer share of the economic pie rather than questioning the legitimacy of the existing model of development.

The book is an attempt at articulating the daily conditions and challenges as experienced by the Thai urban middle-classes and reproduced through a culture of consumerism and materialistic status display. Vorng demonstrates how their worldview and behaviour incorporates both the traditional notion of code of conduct known as *kalathesa* and the new modes of marking status differentiation through consumption in downtown Bangkok. Moral discourses such as *ruchak kalathesa* (‘to know the time and place’) are translated into the construction of what is deemed ‘status-appropriate behaviour’ in exclusive spaces of middle- and upper-class enclaves such as expensive restaurants or malls.

Vorng argues that Thai middle-class consciously or unconsciously aspires to establish their claims to *hi-so*, or ‘high society,’ status (p. 91). *Hi-so* is used in Bangkok to refer to the rich, successful and famous people, as well as objects, places and activities associated with such people (p. 80). In her words, the

“hi-so represent the apex of middle-class aspirations, possessing all the aspects of elevated position in the social hierarchy that many members of the middle-class find desirable, whether it is wealth, power, fame, or connections. For the vast majority, these things are unattainable. However, this does not prevent many middle-class Thais in Bangkok from attempting to emulate the hi-so, in appearance, mannerism, and lifestyle”. (p. 91).

In this context, being well presented in accordance with 'status-appropriate' behaviour is largely about being 'appropriately wealthy' (p. 65). Vorng also illustrates how acceptance or rejection from a status level may affect one's access to education or employment as well as other opportunities towards success in life. Violation of *kalathesa* brings about a loss of 'face' and respect, or embarrassment in the presence of someone of higher status (p. 53). Conforming to the rules of *kalathesa*, on the other hand, is not only just about showing respect, but also commanding respect (p. 56). Wealth and connections play a more crucial role for success rather than one's merit and ability. This hierarchical positioning of the *hi-so* and urban middle class is replicated between the latter and the rural people and places perceived as inferior, hence perpetuating social prejudices and exacerbating social tension and resentment.

As a whole, the ethnographic account presents a compelling case grounded on well-informed familiarity with the everyday lives of her informants and a systematic analysis of their discourses and perspectives. Vorng also integrates intricately previous studies and relevant theoretical articulation on the subject in a critical way. The book provides valuable insights into the social dynamics of urban middle-class formation in Thai society.

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