Sophorntavy Vorng

A Meeting of Masks: Status, Power and Hierarchy in Bangkok. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017, pp. xii + 194 pp. ISBN 9788776941963, price: USD 75.00 (hardback), 9788776941970, USD 25.00 (softcover).

Over the past fifty years, the Kingdom of Thailand has experienced unprecedented economic growth accompanied by the rise of an influential middle class. *A Meeting of Masks* is an interesting ethnography of a certain prominent side of Bangkok middle class behavior, which aspires to social status, wealth, and power. The study focuses on how this type of middle class consumer behavior in Thailand forces people to position themselves within the echelon of the Thai social hierarchy and power through conspicuous consumerism, mimetic identification with social superiors, and the subtle construction of social inequalities in the main shopping malls of Bangkok. The ethnography is based on keen observation and on interviews conducted with Bangkokians. The book provides revealing quotes from interviewees explaining the ethos of hierarchy, power, and wealth, and the practice of seeing and being seen as modern and wealthy Thais.

The concern with keeping up an appearance of high status informs the social construction of those segments of the Bangkokian middle class who are involved in conspicuous consumerism. The way people comport themselves accordingly through dress, language, and gesture, Vorng calls 'status-appropriate behavior' and relates this concept to general Thai notions of how to present the self (body) in everyday situations. The practice of providing the appearance of wealth and of the right status, she tells us, can be understood through an ancient and traditional concept related to the moral hierarchic maintenance of the old *sakdina* (feudal) system and court etiquette. Vorng connects modern Thai notions of status-appropriate behavior to the multi-meaning concept of *kalathesa* (which she translates as 'time and place'). Each individual has to know how to behave and present themselves accordingly in relation to the hierarchy of time and place. They have to 'respect the place' by 'knowing who is high', 'who is low', and through these spatial symbolic relations people constitute the dynamics of power, class, and status. The *kalathesa* 'knowing of time and place' and acting accordingly serves to order the spatial power relations in specific places of distinction, such as royal courts, temples, and government offices. Vorng argues that the consumer middle class have extended the fundamentals of this notion to the shopping mall, which according to her, also demands a certain level of *kalathesa*.

Vorng explores a number of Thai words and expressions within the middle class discourse of consumerism. Two common colloquial words in Thai she

mentions are 'hi-so' and 'lo-so' (from the English, high society and low society). These two terms, though very common within the social context of what she is studying, are ambivalent in meaning, as she shows. The term hi-so is somewhat similar in meaning to the British English word 'posh' and is used accordingly, although Vorng does not make the connection. As with 'posh', the word hi-so can be applied to people, behavior, things, and places considered to be of higher status or aspiring to higher status. But as Vorng tells us, those to whom the adjective hi-so can be applied would refrain from using it. It is those who aspire to, or those who have been rejected by, 'the hi-so' who do.

The opposite term lo-so is used negatively to mildly admonish a person's behavior, thing, or place, as the author tells us. But, and from my own experience not mentioned by Vorng, people also use it to comically self-depreciate themselves as in 'I am not hi-so but I am lo-so' sometimes adding with a smile 'lo-so *mahk mahk*' (very very lo-so). But in so saying the speaker has in effect defined themselves as part of the middle class through self-depreciation and word usage! Vorng critically shows how mimicry of class and hierarchy pervades everyday middle class aspirations, aspiring to be hi-so. She critically portrays this side of middle class Thai society as a parvenu class of people. As she shows, Thais themselves talk about other Thais in such a moral manner, but what she does not mention is that this issue is also a main subject matter for laughter in all forms of popular Thai comedy.

Vorng also makes a very important point about the urban and rural divide in Thailand. The Thai countryside is incorporated to the urban through a structure of hierarchy, with Bangkok at the apex. When people from the countryside come to the city they are seen as outsiders and relegated to inferior positions unless they can show they are familiar with the etiquette of public *kalathesa*. Thus using Bourdieu's concept of 'distinction', these consumer practices, which reflect middle class aspirations for social mobility, have created spaces of symbolic exclusion of people who do not display 'status-appropriate behavior'. This was once nicely expressed to me by a woman from a provincial town who said that 'when she is in her home town she is hi-so, but when in Bangkok she becomes lo-so'. An important argument in Vorng's book, and the theme she opens it with, is that the development of middle class hierarchy and its forms of power and exclusion underscored the politics of Thailand between the years 2005 and 2014 where the nation was seen to be divided along certain social and economic fault lines crisscrossing the center/periphery, urban/rural, and class divides.

Vorng's argument in which she extends *kalathesa* to the shopping mall is interesting but a bit awkward. She toys with the claim that social mobility in Thailand was due to the Buddhist merit complex, but then agrees with earlier

commentators that it is too reductionist and simplistic. Likewise, using an emic term such as *kalathesa* taken from a specific domain of traditional Thai thought and practice to explain a complex phenomenon such as middle class status-appropriate behavior in shopping malls only takes us so far. I cannot imagine that the people strolling about in Siam Paragon department Store with hand bags on their arms and waving their smart phones are thinking about *kalathesa* or even anything remotely like it. Vorng also admits that her informants were ambivalent about the connections she was making and presenting to them about *kalathesa* and the shopping mall. It would seem that what she claims to be an emic concept, the '*kalathesa* of the shopping mall', is in fact an etically theorized one.

Although at the outset Vorng tells us that the social category of 'middle class' consists of diverse groups nested in a hierarchy of their own depending on background, education, wealth, experience, ethnicity, and gender, it is not really clear who are the people she is writing about in the ethnography. Is she writing about the elderly, youth, women or men, the transgendered, the wives of wealthy men, or those who have made a lot of money from the sex industry—or all of them?

A second challenging issue concerns the notion of 'mask'. Vorng's account is about maintaining appearances or keeping face. As she clearly shows, some of her interviewees mentioned that when they walk through the shopping mall they feel like everybody is wearing a mask. The concept of 'mask' (*nakak*) is also the central word in the title of her book, *The Meeting of Masks*. But the concept of 'mask', a negative concept in Thai thought, is conceived of differently from 'face work' and 'keeping up appearances', terms that refer to practices that are generally allowed and expected in Thai moral practice. Vorng fails to elaborate on the differences between maintaining appearances and notions concerning 'mask'. At which point does maintaining appearances morph into the putting on a mask? Nevertheless, her work is a step in the direction of unraveling this issue.

Notwithstanding these critical points and some others that can be made, *The Meeting of Masks* is an inspiring book. It is a pleasure to read, and for those familiar with the country, can be read in one take. Further, Vorng's ethnography should inspire not only more research on the middle classes and their consumer inclinations, but could be developed in relation to the other Thai middle class, which is preoccupied with the imagined idyllic countryside as a moral symbol of the very opposite of the capitalist consumer ideology held by the people Vorng is describing. Finally, some of the concepts of Vorng's study could also serve a comparative frame for discussions of middle class formation in other Southeast Asian countries.

The Meeting of Masks is a welcome and important contribution to Thai studies, but is also valuable to studies concerned with class consumerism, social hierarchy, spatial inequality, and the presentation of self in public places.

Nathan Porath

CESD Chiang Mai University

nathanporath@yahoo.co.uk