



A Meeting of Masks: Status, Power and Hierarchy in Bangkok

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It has been said often enough to have become something of a cliché that the old boast that Thailand was never colonized by a European power should be amended to Thailand was colonized by Bangkok to prevent European powers from doing so. As a result, Bangkok has treated the rest of Thailand as a site of resource extraction and marginalized its people, consigning them to a subordinate status. This way of thinking is usually followed with the counterpointing of the capital city with the northeastern region known as Isan, where people are strongly connected with Lao cousins across the Mekong. Every aspect of the former is considered superior to that of the latter, from dialect to height to skin colour and everything in between. The reality, of course, is somewhat more complex than this but it works as a framing mechanism for considering the nature of Bangkok vis-à-vis other parts of the country. In particular, in the case of *A Meeting of Masks*, it is a background for the study of middle-class residents in a country in which until recently there were very few middle class people outside the metropolis – that situation has changed since Sophorntavy Vorng began the fieldwork reported on in this book and now not just a second tier of cities (e.g., Khon Kaen, Chiang Mai and Chonburi) have become complex urban developments in their own right but a third tier of what were once market towns and provincial capitals such as Roi Et, where my family and I spend time, and which now boasts an airport, shopping centres, international restaurants and so forth. However, the fieldwork began in 2005 and that process was nascent. Her purpose initially was to study the nature and characteristics of Bangkok's emergent middle classes but this developed as a result of political events in that decade and so she observes:

“... I extended the scope of my analysis beyond and account of everyday middle-class practice in Bangkok and now also engage the politico-historical undercurrents that are transforming Thailand. In so doing, my goal is to critique, rather than reproduce, simplistic representations of a rupture between rural and urban Thai society (p.9).”

To achieve this, Vorng has conducted an extensive programme of personal interviews and focus groups, mostly with people who are considered to be part of the middle-class but also with quite a few of the upper-class people who Thai people call 'hi-so' or high society. As the purpose of the research denotes,

there are not many working-class voices to be found here. In general, the presentation of the findings is handled well and the secondary literature is integrated logically into the text. The best chapters are those which focus on behavioural issues, for example with respect to the calculations people make concerning which shopping centres would make them feel welcome and which are too intimidating to enter because they are clearly designed for more hi-so customers, as well as the understanding and uses of connections and privilege. Less successful are the chapters in which there is a political element, such as the consideration of the 'yellow shirt' People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupations of parts of the city and airports, ostensibly in opposition to the democratically elected government. Whether for reasons of self-preservation, which would be understandable if she plans to work in Thailand again, she displays little awareness of the meaning of these events beyond a rejection by the middle-class of the voting power of the working-classes. Even so, there is certainly space for this kind of qualitative work in exploring class formation and the social relations of that process in a specific context.

Class formation and reproduction in Thailand is different from how it takes place in the west for a variety of structural reasons. One of these is the antecedent class system and its reliance on an extensive system of slavery. This was still in full operation when the period of colonization came to Southeast Asia and it meant that Thailand, Siam as it was then known, did not undergo an industrial revolution or transformation of its own. Instead, important connections of the absolute monarchy were given responsibility for specific economic activities under the prevailing *kin mueang* ('eat the state') concept, which allowed those given authority to use the revenues due to the state for their own purposes as long as the job is done. This enabled a number of Sino-Thai merchants to create financial dynasties which are in some cases still dominant today. Secondly, Thai Buddhists have a cosmological view in which all living creatures are arranged in order on a vast pyramidal frame. The position of an individual within that framework depends on good karma (*bun*) that has been accumulated during the course of numerous past lives and manifested in the social positions of the current life. People who are born into privilege deserve the deference of the lower orders not just because of their wealth, therefore, but also because of their superior spiritual nature. People born poor or deprived in some other way, therefore, deserve to be in that position because of lack of accumulated *bun* and any attempt to move up in society is to be treated as contrary to the principles of Buddhism. In neighbouring countries which underwent a Communist revolution, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, this could only be achieved through the eradication of this belief system and, since it is Theravadin Buddhism that is involved (i.e., right doing rather than right thinking), through the elimination of the monkhood. Religious conservatism in Thailand is, consequently, an important means of upholding the existing system of social relations. Within this superstructure, Vorng identifies areas of intense competition and contestation as middle-class Thais seek to improve their quality of life and extend their own networks. At times it all seems a little pointless and resembles nothing so much as one of the many British sitcoms featuring the blundering attempts of bourgeois couples struggling to achieve recognition in the slightly more rarefied social circle to which they aspire. It may not be that important but it obviously matters to those involved because they expend so much time and energy on the struggle. This book rather celebrates that struggle.

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