

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Review of Vorng, Sophorntavy. 2017. *A Meeting of Masks: Status, Power and Hierarchy in Bangkok*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Near the Ratchaprasong intersection in downtown Bangkok, at the entrance to Central World, the mega-mall that consumes more electricity than an entire Thai province, there is a guard who seems to do nothing. The man stands by while crowds of people enter the building, passing through – and setting off – the metal detectors. I first noticed these functioning and staffed but seemingly useless gates after the intersection had been occupied by “Red Shirt” protestors in 2010, protests that ended with nearly 100 killed and Central World in ashes. But the guard didn’t seem to be guarding anything. I imagined that the idea for the guard had come out of the emptiness of corporate bureaucracy: someone in a Central Group boardroom, full of memories of his mall in flames, had announced that he wanted a guard at the entrance, but the actual business of screening shoppers was untenable. So the compromise was reached: a guard killed time in what David Graeber (2018) would certainly call a “bullshit job,” watching people go past and listening to the monotonous buzz of a metal detector detecting metal and doing nothing about it, and the Central Group executive could say, “we have a guard.”

But, as Sophorntavy Vorng notes in her *A Meeting of Masks: Status, Power and Hierarchy in Bangkok*, the guard is actually doing a job. He does indeed stop people coming in, just not people who set off the metal detector. Instead, the guard is alert for individual appearances, reading “masks” of wealth and status embedded in someone’s shirt, handbag, or written on a “Lao” face (meaning someone from Thailand’s less wealthy Northeast). It is a careful reading of appearance and distinction that runs through Thai – especially Bangkok – society. Seeing, navigating, and negotiating these distinctions is central to the experience of being “middle class.”

A concern with images has always been important in the anthropology of Thailand. For Lucien Hanks (1962), images were outward expressions of karmic merit and moral value. Later work took a more dynamic view. Peter Jackson, in his look at the Thai “regime of images” (2004) looks at how different images are foregrounded depending on different social spheres. Similarly, Penny Van Esterik notes the tyranny of time and place over what is appropriate behavior (2000). Finally, and most recently, Michael Herzfeld (2016) gives a riveting example of how urban villagers facing displacement strategically position themselves as either loyal clients or egalitarian co-ethnics, drawing upon conflicting but equally powerful discourses in Thai history.

Vorng’s contribution here is to show how we need not discard a historically-informed, cultural approach (as Hanks does) while taking Bangkokian mass consumption and the cosmopolitan reality of Bangkok seriously. Here are the masks that meet: systems of prestige based upon feudal divisions are transformed and, in some cases, accelerated by the hyper-consumption of images that characterizes Bangkok’s mass capitalism. Middle-class women in Central World and its neighboring malls carefully read not only the brand of the handbag that others carry, but exactly how they carry it (gingerly, as though it is the only expensive thing that they own; or casually, but still allowing for the glint of a brand label to show), a police officer treats a stopped motorist rudely but, upon seeing the driver’s last name, changes his demeanor entirely. Vorng’s interlocutors are trapped within a certain kind of panopticon, one where subtle presentations of class, consumption, and language fix one within a network of hierarchies: rural and urban, noble and common, rich and poor, Thai and Lao; these are different ways that status is read, constructed and contested in Bangkok, especially for the Thai middle class (a term that she rightly contests). And, because consumption becomes the means to create these self-presentations, Ratchaprasong and its shopping malls – the site of consumption, display and, in 2010, destruction – are key to the data. Ultimately, Vorng sees this last act not as an act of rebellion against the hierarchy of status in Bangkok, but rather a demand for inclusion.

The book is organized around examples of these interlocking “masks,” and notes the transformations that these hierarchies undergo. Class, for instance, is not static but emerges both in terms of feudal *sakdina* as well as new networks of elite schools and economic status. Space and place (*kalathesa*) dictate how individuals must comport themselves and what individuals are

permissible (and who is excludable), as does the division between “Thai” center and “Lao” periphery. The necessity to consume conspicuously not only forces individuals to adhere to expectations, but also allows for a certain degree of fluidity, providing one learns the correct *habitus*.

Vorng’s research is based upon interviews with a wide variety of interlocutors, most of which (with some exceptions) identify as “middle class.” This is a category especially salient in Thai political discussions, as the Bangkok “middle class” often is pointed to as the heart of movements both democratic (as in 1992) and reactionary (as in the “Yellow Shirt” opposition to the Red movement). Indeed, it is upon divisions within the newly-urban, newly-Bangkokian middle class that Benedict Anderson (1977) places the blame for the political violence that scarred the city in the 1970s. But the category of “middle-class” is, as Vorng points out, both overly broad and not particularly meaningful to her interlocutors. Instead, middle-class-ness is based around moments when status is enforced or distinctions are made along certain axes. These examples stick with the reader: a child told that she must not play with domestic workers, as “we are of different classes;” a woman with a darker complexion who forgets to wear the proper shirt entering a shopping mall is stopped by the ordinarily lackluster guard; an endless search for luxury goods and, more importantly, how to properly hold and display them (i.e. casually, without much possessiveness, but obviously).

Some room for improvement exists. Vorng is reflexive about her own Thai-language abilities, and the reader gets a good sense of her presence in the field, but I wonder about how her interlocutors read Vorng’s own “mask.” Her interviews are detailed and relevant, but interviews have their limits, and the book would benefit at times from a more ethnographic or phenomenological perspective. Finally, it is up to the reader to expand Vorng’s analysis outside of the context of Bangkok.

This said, *Masks* is a nuanced read of space, place, gender, race and class. It would pair well with work by Wilson (2004) on the same malls a decade before, with Sopranzetti’s study (2017) of those who would become the Red Shirts (and who would regularly face the kinds of barriers that the mall door guard represents), or Ünaldi’s (2016) look at space and place in Ratchaprasong.

Beyond Thailand, *Masks* provides a perspective that challenges a simplistic notion that economy leads to new social formations, or, on the other hand, those culturological ways of dividing space and place.

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